Mutiny in Russia: Assessing the Implications of Prigozhin’s March on Moscow

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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Disclaimer: This transcript is based off of a recorded video conference and breaks in the stream may have resulted in mistranscriptions in the text.

A video of the event is available: https://www.hudson.org/events/mutiny-russia-assessing-implications-prigozhins-march-moscow

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Hi, good afternoon and welcome to Hudson Institute. My name is Peter Rough. I'm a senior fellow here and the director of our Center on Europe and Eurasia, and it's my pleasure to welcome three colleagues today from Hudson to this discussion on breaking new out of Russia, Rebeccah Heinrichs, Can Kasapoğlu, and joining us from vacation, Luke Coffey. For those of you, dear viewers who are wondering why Luke Coffee is wearing a polo shirt, he in fact is on vacation. It's not a sign of disrespect, but the utmost respect because he's taking a break from work and now being dragged back into events, has determined to do this event and just posted a piece on foreign policy, which I'm going to recommend to all of you on what the United States should look for and how it should prepare for Russian disorder. The events of the last 48 hours I think, have taken the breath away of a lot of analysts around the world.

There's a lot of speculation on what is actually taking place in Russia. But what is clear is that in the last 48 hours, the war of words between Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the private military company, Wagner Group, and the military brass in Moscow in particular, the Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu metastasized into open conflict with Prigozhin, taking control of Rostov-on-Don, the major Russian city, also the headquarters of the Southern Military District and the nerve center for Russian operations in Ukraine. And then as everyone watched over the weekend launching a march on Moscow with his troops traveling hundreds of kilometers north on their way towards Moscow, some sort of uncertain, indeterminate unclear deal was reportedly struck between Vladimir Putin and Yevgeny Prigozhin and that is where things stand today. We'd like to talk about what happened, how to make sense of it, where it might be heading, and most of all implications for American policy.

For that, let me begin with Can Kasapoğlu and a non-resident senior fellow of Hudson's. A military analyst who you might know from his weekly update the Ukraine Military Situation Report. If you don't know that product, that urges you to subscribe to it on hudson.org because Can, more than most analysts actually saw this in the making. He's been writing about Wagner as a organization challenging the political leadership in Moscow at least as much as it was a force fighting in the trenches of Bakhmut. So Can rather prescient, you've been following private military organizations, the sub-state security level for quite some time. Tell our viewers who might not be as familiar with the Wagner Group, just burst onto the scenes in a major international headline sort of way over the last few days. What is the Wagner group? How is it financed? How should we think about it?

Can Kasapoğlu:

Thanks, Peter. Well, actually putting the Wagner group in the private military contractor business is kind of a predicament for a net intelligence analysis on them. I rather call them the Russian Hezbollah, or they show resemblance to the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces to some extent. Why? First, they run a wartime economy and the central gravity for that is not Ukraine. That's the major point, a major intelligence indicator to understand. As to is Wagner finished? Wagner is not finished. What they going to do next? Ukraine has never ever been the central of gravity for Wagner for generating resources. They're playing a smart game in Africa. They are taking advantage of security problems, especially in the Sahel region with mounting Islamist insurgencies. So they're offering security services and a few thousand, even a few hundred Wagner fighters are tantamount to a big boost in terms of war fighting capabilities there, given the fragile and even the failed state or the national governments.
And they're not getting paid in return in millions of dollars, but they're trying to secure mining, diamond, gold and critical infrastructure businesses. So they're embedding themselves in the national economies and especially west resources in Africa. So the key word to understand Wagner is not Ukraine, is not even Bahkmut, but is Africa. The second thing that I call them, the Russian Hezbollah is because let's look at how Wagner operates militarily. Square 24 frontal bombers, square 25 attack aircraft. They have their own combat aircraft arsenal. When they were marching to Moscow, they fill that main battle tanks. Two different... I don't want to turn it into a defense geek speech, but they fill the two advanced main battle tanks and the Russian National Guard was able to spare some armored personnel carriers to stop that. And the Moscow Metropolitan Police was cratering the highways. So that's more or less the horizon there.

In Ukraine, we saw that the Wagner fighters were better equipped than the Russian ones, but most important that they have a very capitalist economy theory. They better pay. Because they better pay, they attract Russian generals, fighters from Ukraine's, breakaway regions, Luhansk and Donetsks. They attract fighters from the Russian armed forces and also foreign fighters. But they did something... This is the core Wagner. And this core Wagner, like the Syrian Arab army, there is the core Alawite military surrounded by the Sunni masses. There is the core Wagner surrounded by what you would call cannon fodders. And those cannon fodders are not coming on from streets or Russia, but also prisons of Russia.

So Wagner has direct recruitment outreach to Russian prisons. Although 70%, maybe 80% of those convicts died in Ukraine on the Ukrainian battleground, still thousands of them did their six months in Wagner, got paid really well, get pardons and pulled into the streets of the Russian Federation. That remains to be seen if they still keep some kind of linkages to Wagner if they're going to behave like sleeping cells. But Wagner being able to recruit from Russian prisons and having its own recruitment centers is also something. So in terms of wartime economy, arsenal, recruitment efforts, and in terms of its doctrine, order of battle and global outreach, this is not an ordinary Russian private military company.

Peter Rough:

And based on their performance in Ukraine and also some of the images coming out of the last few days, one has to wonder if Wagner doesn't boast of some of the best units within the broader Russian sort of military sphere. If they can't go up against the Russian military in terms of quality and oppressiveness. You already mentioned that when we think of a company or a contracting organization, we tend not to think of a private security including attack bombers and main battle tanks and sometimes that can spin out of control. Let me go to Luke Coffey next. Luke, can you tell us how we actually arrived at this moment? What were some of the generating events that led to this balance of power system that Putin seems to have in his own ranks where he pits advisors against one another, spinning out of control and Prigozhin ultimately deciding to what seemed like cross the Rubicon and move towards Moscow?

Luke Coffey:

Yeah, thanks for moderating, Peter. Yeah, well there are a number of issues that led up to this point. I would say the most immediate was the frustration that was felt by Prigozhin and his Wagner group on the front lines in Eastern Ukraine, probably not getting the support that he needed or expected, at least for the meat grinder that was Bakhmut. And I think over a series of several months, this built up frustration. It is no secret that many of these oligarchs and power
brokers inside Russia are constantly behind the scenes looking for their next opportunity to get more influence in power and to topple other members of the elite. And of course, defense minister Shoigu was clearly in Prigozhin's sights. And so you then have this ongoing conflict that was meant to last three days or two weeks or whatever it was in the early stages, and now has been going on for almost a year and a half with estimated almost 150 to 200,000 Russian soldiers killed.

And there's a lot of stress amongst the Russian elite that I don't think we have visibility on or that we see. We think Putin is safe and stable because he rules with an iron fist. But the reality is he must be under a tremendous pressure to maintain this balancing act between these different centers of power. And Prigozhin is one of them. But in my opinion, the origins of what we saw play out over the weekend started back in 1991 when the collapse of the Soviet Union started. And I don't think it's finished. I think it's an ongoing collapse. And I think historians 200 years from now will write about the era that was the collapse of the Soviet Union and probably identify February 24th, 2022 as the most consequential moment in this collapse.

And I think what we saw in Rostov and the Wagner Rebellion march towards Moscow was simply a part of this process and it's certainly unfinished business. Anybody who thinks that Prigozhin is going to cool off in Belarus and the Wagner group is no longer going to play a role is hopelessly naive. We are in the very beginning stages of what I think will be a major power struggle inside Russia in the coming months. And depending on how badly or, well, let's hope not, but depending on how well or badly Russia does during this Ukrainian offensive, I think will determine the speed and intensity of this looming power struggle inside Russia.

Peter Rough:

Luke, I should have mentioned, had a piece which has been re-upped on our website, a report preparing for the final dissolution of the Soviet Union, which you can pull up on hudson.org. It talks about the various ethnic, religious and other striations that characterize the modern Russian Federation and the pressure that the war in Ukraine will put on those divisions and Putin's ability to manage it. I recommend it to you all. We'll get to this foreign policy piece, which is hot off the presses a bit later on because that talks about the implications for American policy. Sitting to my right is one of the country's foremost national security strategist, Rebeccah Heinrichs she's a regular on major media and I would say has as her core area of expertise, strategic stability, nuclear weapons, policy, deterrence, et cetera, and has been following Russia in particular through that lens carefully for some time. I know we were in touch over the weekend and that you were following this very closely. So Rebeccah, what strikes you when you're watching this unfold? How else would you set the table?

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Yeah, thank you. Thank you so much to my Hudson colleagues for doing all the work behind the scenes to put this on in such a quick manner and all the research that's been ongoing that enables us to be able to hopefully shed a little bit of clarity on something that has been, I think very confusing over the last several days. One point I think is really important to keep in mind is obviously just that the fact that I just said, it is very confusing. It's very dynamic. If you're tracking this on social media, you see your Russia hand saying direct things that are indirectly contradictory to others about what Putin may have known, when he knew it, the degree to which Wagner was all in on this or not. And so just a couple of points of what I've been able to distill,
things I think are still unknown but really important to keep an eye on. And then things that I’m tracking.

One of the points I think is really interesting is just how quickly... First of all, the major point I think that Luke brought up is that Prigozhin’s major complaints have been against the Russian military, not against Putin himself. And correct me... I’ve got my Putin experts here as well who can shed some light too. And that's really important because his complaints have been yes, that Wagner group has not been supplied sufficiently, but that Putin himself is not getting accurate information on the battlefield. That Ukraine has done better than what Putin has been able to receive from his intelligence. And so these are some of these very hotheaded videos that have come out of Wagner group leading up to this. And so essentially that Putin is being failed by his generals and that has been a persistent problem throughout the war.

He also made some accusation that Wagner group had actually been targeted by Russian forces whether or not on purpose or inadvertently, but that was a problem that had continued to persist. And then there was the mobilization of these... He claims, Prigozhin claims it was 25,000 I believe Wagner troops. I believe what's been reported has been probably about half of that is what was actually mobilized to make this mutinous move. They got about a hundred miles from Moscow, which is very close, uncomfortable, before they stopped. And he made the announcement that for the sake of avoiding bloodshed Russia and Russian bloodshed that they would stop and he would retreat to Belarus. To the extent that I can be able to confirm or not confirm, we still do not know the whereabouts of Gerasimov, obviously the Russian Chief of the General Staff, or Shoigu, is still... So there was a video that was posted of him but there was no audio and we are not able to confirm when that video was posted.

So those two are still missing. So those are things that I'm tracking to see what is the fate of these two and then what that would mean in terms of the Russian military's efforts, their cohesion, obviously their lack of cohesion that they've had throughout the war against Ukraine. The last major point that I would say too is I'm watching the propaganda that's coming out from China. How is China talking about this? The Chinese propaganda has essentially defended the Russian government, likely I would say, and then criticized this mutiny. And then there was some activity with some Wolf Warriors on social media doing the same. But it seems like they're relatively quiet coming out of Beijing in terms of the instability in Russia. So while I agree with my colleagues on the fact that this does point to fractures in the Russian military and Russian leadership, I would also point out that Putin was able to get control of this thing very quickly, 24 hours and was able to at least stop it so far.

And then we have yet to see how this is going to finally unravel and to see where things shake out. But still that shows the power that Putin still has over the oligarchs and over the officials around him. And then I guess the one last point I must say is I get really uncomfortable when there's instability in Russia because they have the world's largest arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. They were not to the extent that I can tell under any kind of threat in this particular mutiny, but that's obviously something that we here at Hudson are very sensitive to Lucas written about this potential threat if there was instability in Russia, so something that we’re tracking.

Peter Rough:

It's, as an American, I think easy to go quickly to who's the winner and who's the loser in this and to try to scorecard out whose position has been improved and whose has been weakened.
On its face, I would imagine given that the last national address Putin delivered that the West watched with bated breath was the announcement that he was moving into Ukraine. The assumption based on American intelligence services was that he would be successful in that and take Kyiv in relatively short order. Talk was of preparing for an insurgency, not really the Ukrainian military being able to stand up to Putin. Here we are 16 months later, he's giving a major national address blasting a mutinous rebellion as Prigozhin moves his troops up towards Moscow. Can has already mentioned trenches being put in place, roads being turned upside down, cement trucks moved in place in Moscow, counter-terrorism regime called out.

And so one would think that at least for his own population and probably for third parties around the world watching this, it does suggest I think that Putin is somewhat weakened. On the other hand, I would say at the same time that Prigozhin has struck some sort of indeterminate deal, which is difficult to speculate on because we don't know its precise contours or provisions, although there have been earlier reports which Shauna has been following on telegram of a Belarussian base potentially for Wagner. But if he surrendered or surrenders Rostov-on-Don a major point of leverage and at the same time his forces are conscripted into the Russian military.

One wonders how this ends for Prigozhin. So those are his two major calling cards. I can't imagine that he'd be willing to surrender those unless again, we don't quite know the deal or those parameters aren't really the correct ones. But I think maybe that is something to quickly talk about is, how do these two players... I don't want to say exit this crisis because I agree with Luke, it's really the start of a lengthy probably campaign or process. Maybe Can, we'll start with you again. Do you think who's up, who's down? How should we think about this current state of play between Putin and Prigozhin, if that's even the right way to think about it?

Can Kasapoğlu:

Well, let's start with the question, who is Putin? Putin is a 70-year-old ex-KGB officer who swore an oath to protect the Soviet Union. His last post was in Dresden, the KGB liaison office in East Germany. So these are really manifesting some iconic things about who he is, who his political persona is. And this event actually... Not Putin personally, not Putin as the president of the Russian Federation, but the geopolitical worldview of Putin that was manifested back in 2007, Munich conference speech. What did he say? The enlargement of NATO was the biggest security threat to Russia and that was unacceptable. Finland is now a NATO member and soon Sweden will be a NATO member. And NATO's Eastern flank has never been that bolstered and NATO is now back to its Cold War DNA. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical catastrophe, said Vladimir Putin.

Now we know that there is an awakening in the form of Soviet space. We see it in Ukraine, in Azerbaijan, in the Baltics, that the idea of the Soviet Union is tantamount in nightmares in the eyes of many. Looking at the image that Putin was trying to portray, the invincible strong Russian leader who cannot be challenged. For God's sake, we are talking about a private military company seizing control of one of the major military headquarters in the Russian Federation for 24 hours without shooting one single bullet into the keepers of that castle, downing seven aircraft within the Russian air space. In terms of operational tempo, this is far better than the Ukrainian Armed forces maneuver short range air defense capabilities. And rolling into the gates of the Russian capital all the way from Rostov to Voronezh to Lipetsk and only being stopped in the gates of Tula.
By the way, the governor of Tula is again pointed out as one of the candidates to replace Putin. Okay? This is not the way that you would rejuvenate the Soviet Union, which is the epicenter of Putin's political persona, but this is actually the basis that my colleague Luke is pointing out. Russia is now a nation at the high risk of civil war. The fault lines are there, the potential is there. And let's look at Russia yesterday. Does it look like let's say, the glorious days of the Soviet Red Army or the Soviet Red Soviet Union? Or would you call it more akin to Yeltsin's Russia, the sick Russia? And Moscow yesterday, which city, it was just looking very similar to? Kyiv, back in the very beginning of the Russian invasion with all like cratered highways and the sandbags and defensive positions like that.

I don't know Putin's personal safety. I don't know if he's going to be in power next year or not, but I know that his political persona that was manifested in the Munich Security Conference speech back in 2007 is over. The geopolitical project of Vladimir Putin is over right now. The rest we are going to see when the dust settles and who will not find the chair and who will find the chair when the music stops. But that's it. The other actor here, Prigozhin, there are three key intelligence questions that we should mark. We do not have precise answers to them, but we know that these are the questions to ask. First, can he be able to move his base and the core Wagner to Belarus or somewhere else and will he be able to pursue his operations in Africa or not because Ukraine has turned to be a liability for Wagner that we should understand. He's losing business in Africa because of what he's doing in Ukraine.

Will he be able to pursue his operations in Africa still? Because this is again, like us, the accountant and finance office here, this is where the money is coming from, where the money is going to. Second, we got here among the audience, the social media team of Hudson Institute, let's ask them. We are talking about a private military company. Private military companies are about plausible deniability, right? But you are talking about a private military company that is more active than any US Think Tank on social media, hundreds of Telegram channels, hundreds of V Kontakte accounts, which is the Russian Facebook. So where does plausible deniability fit here? If you ask Hudson social media team, there is a political figure. He is following a populist Russian Nationalist agenda like Navalny very interestingly, okay. And he's running hundreds of Telegram channels. Does it fit into plausible deniability? They would tell you, "Are you crazy," first. Second, this person is running a political campaign. So will he be able to run his political campaign because this is the 21st century, this is the digital age?

I'm sitting miles away from Washington right now. By coincidence, I'm in Washington and I was supposed to have a peaceful just vacation for about one week and we are having a coup or mutiny in Moscow. But the thing is in the 21st century, he can run that political campaign. The third question, which we are coming to the limits of open source intelligence and one step ahead is speculation, but let's turn it into a hypothesis. Was Prigozhin alone or was he doing bidding? Was he doing the biding of a faction within the Russian Federation? And will he be left alone? There are windows in Belarus. If he falls out from a window, we would understand that he was doing some crazy Kamikaze dive. But if he cuts a deal with... You cannot cut a deal with the Russian president after an armed mutiny in the Russian proper. If he can get away with that, we would understand that this was something bigger than it seems at first glance.

Peter Rough:

I do think that historical examples of armed rebellion in Russia, be it Peter the Great putting down rebellion or Nicholas I, Nicholas II, of course Putin mentioned 1917 and referenced it somewhat surprisingly in his address to the nation. All turned on whether or not the regular
military moved over to the rebels or stayed loyal to the existing regime, to the powers, the incumbents, so to speak. I think what is obvious is that there will be no love lost between Putin and Prigozhin and that whatever arrangement they come to, and I doubt any arrangement can even hold, will have to be based on Prigozhin being able to exercise leverage over Putin to have existing cards to play. Because I don't think the compassion of Vladimir Putin in this case is going to keep Yevgeny Prigozhin safe. Belarus, if that is where he ends up as many Soviet style apartment buildings with windows that open and many stories high and so dangerous times.

Luke Coffey, Kremlinologist from vacation, please inform us.

Luke Coffey:

Well, it remains to be seen how this is going to play out for Prigozhin himself. I don't believe that he's going to, as I said, have a quiet life in Belarus. And I think that as Can said, unless he has some sort of protector as part of the inner circle, you don't capture the headquarters of the Southern military district and march just a hundred miles outside Moscow while shooting down six or seven aircraft and simply get away with it. I think we need our policymakers to appreciate and understand the historical magnitude of the situation we are witnessing, the scenarios we are witnessing play out inside the Russian Federation.

I think the US government as a unit is very much driven by status quo and doesn't like the idea of these strategic shocks that could rock the geopolitical system as we know it around the world. I mean a good example that's linked to Russia would be 1991, Russia recognized the independence of Ukraine, including Crimea, I should say, three and a half weeks before the United States did. And also the hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin five days before it was taken down in the lobby of the US State Department. So we have this built in slowness or reluctance to deal with these big strategic shocks and I think we're seeing one start in the modern day Russian Federation.

And I think for too long we have become complacent with these big, momentous historical occasions and we often fail to recognize them. And I think we need to be prepared for what could come next because in 1989, 1990, early 1991, people would've imagined that by December of 1991 we would've seen the emergence of 15 new states and the beginning of internal conflicts and armed conflicts in some of these states and Russia meddling in some of these newly established states. No one could have imagined it. But we need to think like this today. We need to be prepared for what could happen if Russia does descendant to chaos. This isn't something we should be advocating for, but we have to be prepared for it because there could be consequences that impact US policy making and the policy making and security of our allies and partners across the Eurasian landmass.

Peter Rough:

What really struck me I think in the last 24 hours is that a lot of the Russian newspapers have begun also issuing kind of critiques of Putin rather openly, and that is not something we've really seen in the past. Of course, Russia is a society in which a significant percentage of the public receives its news through state TV, but the newspapers themselves were I think remarkably acerbic and biting in the way they described the events. And one didn't really notice the Russian public and the streets of Moscow were else were rallying to the side of Vladimir Putin as this March unfolded. So again, he does seem wounded to me, but maybe we'll just finish this round on American scorecarding with Rebeccah's read.
Rebeccah Heinrichs:

Sure. Well a few points as you were talking that I kind of made notes of here of other things that we should pull out... Especially as my main concern is obviously just how does China perceive Russia? To the extent that Russia is a liability for the Chinese, that's very good for us. And so if there's a point to mark there, I would say that definitely goes in that column. It's good for seeing vulnerabilities in that relationship. Not huge perhaps because you haven't seen China make big criticisms of Russia over this, but their silence is interesting and then the criticism of the insurrection is interesting. The other points I think that are really important for Americans to think as we think about our support for Ukraine is clearly Russian morale is low. There is this sense regardless of what faction you're looking at, they're not pleased with the way the Russians are fighting this war against Ukraine.

And so that was interesting. I saw some videos, again, sort of always the asterisk there about who's filming this and posting this online, but there was some welcome reception with Wagner Group. And so again, it's not that they're criticizing the war in Ukraine for the mission, it's the they're criticizing the war fighting ability, the lack of organization and so that's very interesting, low morale in Russia on international, just world display here about how the war is going for Russia. The other thing I think could be an opportunity, and again, with always the warning that we're kind of dealing with in the world of hypothesis right now without knowing... But why see this opportunity? Because I'm always trying to think how can this war end for Ukraine on terms that are favorable to Ukraine and to NATO and to the United States? And this does present... In my understanding from my Russia expert friends too, is the way Putin operates is when bad things happen. He doesn't sort of look at it and think like, "Oh, everything I've done is a disaster." He just kind of looks at and says, "How do I make the best out of this?" He is able to or thinks of himself as adapting to events as they come.

And so something like this might present itself and he might see it as an opportunity to scapegoat his Russian generals for how badly this war has been going for Russia. And again, that's why I'm very interested in the fate of his Chief of Staff and the Minister of Defense to see when they pop up. And then of course also the fate of Prigozhin. So that will be very interesting if Prigozhin survives this and then gets sent back to his mission, maybe perhaps on another continent. But that'll be very interesting in terms of understanding how Putin might perceive this as an opportunity. And then that might present an opportunity for the Russians to say, or for Putin himself to say, "Perhaps we're getting to a point where," and this might get to your next point, "What should we doing for Ukraine?" If you Ukraine can actually have some battlefield successes here with all this going on in Russia, there might be an opportunity for Putin to create for himself an off-ramp, which of course is always something that we're looking for.

Peter Rough:

You did, you read my mind. I'll go to Can with that question, which is, are the implications of these events in Moscow, Rebeccah's already raised it, simply poisonous for Russian troop morale. Not that that's just a simple thing that's rather important. Are there other military aftershocks or effects in Ukraine that we should look for or things that you think might occur because of this? Or do we basically have two unrelated theaters in your mind?

Can Kasapoğlu:
Well, they're related and unrelated in certain aspects. First of all, Ukraine's biggest problem in its counter offensive is not the resolution of the Russian personnel. Every single military operation has, its, if you like, in biology terms, morphology. We call it battlefield geometry. And the battlefield geometry of the Russian occupation in Ukraine itself is problem in both tactical and strategic aspects. In the strategic sphere, it is problematic because just think it like a human being, a human being, we wouldn't want that, but can live without a limb, but it cannot be without its liver, even though liver is proportionately very small to the entire body. Ukraine was invaded and still is occupied in that way. Just like when listening to us right now, the audience should get quick, their map and look how Ukraine is invaded. It is only 20% of the country, but Ukraine was turned into practical Mongolia.

It is landlocked right now. It lost its entire access to Sea of Azov. And Odessa is under constant threat from the Russian Black Sea fleet. And the Russian Black Sea fleet is putting Odessa under that constant threat because it is able to operate first from Crimea, which was invaded back in 2014, and also because of the Russian Iranian alliance that is equipping with Russia with thousands of loitering, munitions and drones that are launched from Krasnodar. And it doesn't matter even if the Ukrainians are intercepting 80% of them because of two reasons. First, drone warfare, like missile warfare is an offense dominant regime. So you are shooting me with your revolver like six bullets, and my Kevlar vest is holding five of them. And I say I have like 90% interception rate. You only hit me with one single bullet. Secondly, it paralyzes the life in Odessa. Overall, Ukraine is landlocked practically right now, and Ukraine is a trading nation. They cannot sustain the occupation, the strategic sphere.

In the technical segment, the entire proportions and the segments and branches of the Russian military failed to perform well except for a few. And one of them is the engineering. The Russian engineers really establish good layered defenses and this battlefield geometry, the layered Russian defenses, minefields overlapping with the artillery kill boxes and the Russian reserves. Really, these are the main problems of the Ukrainian counter offensive. It is not the Russian morale. It has never been Russian morale. The battlefield geometry in strategic and tactical segment that is not changing unfortunately for Ukraine. But there is one thing that can change and that brings us all to the first point that I was referring to, the Putin project, not himself as Putin, the homosapien, the man, but the Putin political project reached the idea of rejuvenating the Soviet Union.

We saw that, Rebecca pointed out that. You pointed out that Prigozhin was greeted by the people of Rostov. It is a major Russian city. It holds one of the most important military headquarters in the entire Russian proper. We didn't see public uprising against Wagner troops. On the contrary, they greeted them. And what is important is they greeted Wagner and Prigozhin after Putin called this betrayal. And after he depicted is as a stab in the back, the Russian president before all the nation. These are not good signs. So what could be in a more geopolitical and long-term sense, if this project of rejuvenating the Soviet Union hits a hard wall by this.

And this would not be the thing that would do it by itself, but the catalyst or a series of events that would take us there still, I wouldn't want to just portray a promising scenario here because our analysis about... Since the outset, our analysis about this and how it could play not in Ukraine, but in Russia, is that the Russian Federation has significant internal turmoil and even civil war risk. It doesn't mean that the Russian Federation will stop being a great... It already stopped being a great power. It doesn't mean that it'll not keep being a threat. I agree with the NATO strategic concept that it's a direct threat to the alliance, but so is North Korea to the
United States. So the biggest threat for us is actually that potential of fault lines and internal conflict within the Russian Federation.

**Peter Rough:**

And a very quick follow up.

**Can Kasapoğlu:**

Yeah.

**Peter Rough:**

What specifically should the United States do on the Ukraine front now to take advantage of this moment?

**Can Kasapoğlu:**

Since the beginning, what it should have done? The United States is arming Ukraine for not losing the war. Okay. It is a strategy of confinement as we entitle it in our co-authored article with you. The United States and all NATO capitals should see that there is a window or opportunity for Ukraine to win. And the military assistance program should be shaped accordingly. Not for saving the day or for avoiding a catastrophic loss, but actually this is a winnable war. But that window opportunity is narrowing day by day.

**Peter Rough:**

Great. Luke, if I could go to you on what us policymakers, if you're sitting in the White House or the State Department should do about the internal turmoil and possible problems in Russia, this is something you've written and thought about a lot. So pivoting from Ukraine perhaps to Russia itself.

**Luke Coffey:**

Well, actually the first point I want to make actually has to do with Ukraine.

**Peter Rough:**


**Luke Coffey:**

But in the context of what's happening in Russia, there's a tendency in Washington to believe we have more influence and power and the ability to influence matters. But in reality, we actually can't often, or at least most of the time. Or at least not as effectively as we think we can. So the first thing that the US policymakers should do in the event of major strife or civil war or rebellion or mutiny inside the Russian Federation is to remain focused on Ukraine. That's where we can still have a lot of influence. And as my colleague Can said, and as you and Rebeccah, have repeatedly said, we have to start wanting Ukraine to win more than we just hope Russia's going
to lose. We have to start arming Ukraine for victory and not just for survival. So we should maintain our focus on Ukraine and supporting their counter offensive and not get the distracted about trying to influence internal events inside the Russian Federation.

I think we also need to remember that if there is major in-fighting, or rebellion, or civil war inside Russia, just because there’s a civil war somewhere doesn’t mean we have to pick a side. Let them kill each other. We have this tendency to believe that it’s very black and white, and one side is perhaps a little bit better than the other. That is always the case in geopolitics where there are many shades of gray. And so we should even pretend. Like I heard actually some over the weekend on social media that all of a sudden the Wagner group was just a little bit more preferable than Putin. And I’m thinking, “These people are crazy who suggest this.” So we should not fall into this trap. We don't have to pick a side and we shouldn't. We should also make sure that there is... We should do what we can to work with neighboring countries, allies and partners across the Eurasian landmass to do what we can to prevent any spillover from internal fighting inside Russia if it does break out into, let’s say a civil war.

And we need to start doing this right now, we need to start working with countries in the region on capacity building and their security sectors, their border police and border forces, their armed forces, their law enforcement, their security services. We should be helping these countries now. So in the event that major conflict does break out in Russia, which after last weekend, we cannot rule this out, however crazy it might seem, we cannot rule it out. We should be helping these countries prepare for this with the goal of keeping any fighting that's taking place inside the borders of the Russian Federation, inside those borders. And then looking forward real quickly, we have to start thinking now about how we might respond to calls for self-determination and independence by certain regions in Russia in the event that there’s a civil war. We need to recognize these calls for self-determination in a way that is in accordance with international law and norms and also in line with our interest.

And we need to work with our allies on this, on coordinating a message. And we should start thinking about this now. Because it's no secret, we know where a lot of these calls for self-determination will take place. And we should start thinking now how we will approach this. But we should also start thinking about how a civil war or rebellion inside Russia could impact other regions like the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, in Transnistria, in Moldova. Azerbaijan would no doubt try to get rid of the Russian peacekeepers that were forced onto them after the second Karabakh war. And Lukashenko and Belarus would also be weakened in the event that there's internal fighting inside Russia. And then of course, as Rebeccah already mentioned, we have the big issue, which is the nuclear weapons and the chemical biological warfare programs. What can we do to monitor this, to track this, to help the countries in the region detect any illicit or illegal movement of these items? And in this case, there’s actually very little we can do. But we still have to do what we can.

Peter Rough:

Yeah, I think there’s generally a temptation to categorize the internal politics of other countries between reformers and hardliners. We’ve seen that, for example, in Iran, and I noticed also over the weekend how some were trying to fit Wagner or Putin into the reform camp, meaning we should take sides with them over the potential more negative force. Which strikes me as entirely ludicrous. Which really I think gets to a broader point too, and that is it's somewhat solipsistic or self-centered to think that we can shape events. Once, for example, Prigozhin really, as I said, crossed the Rubicon as I saw it, and began moving against Russian military units in Russia
proper... The White House, according to David Ignatius, who I think many would agree, is relatively well sourced into the intelligence community and some Democratic Party national security types wrote in the Washington Post that their message to other leaders on the phone on Saturday was, "to cool it" not to do anything to exacerbate what they saw already as a dangerous situation.

Now, I take your point, Rebeccah, as a nuclear weapons expert, that there are concerns, of course, about what could take place in Russia. But at the same time talking with you over the weekend or on email over the weekend, I think there is a danger that the administrations succumbs to fears of Russian disorder and ends up taking its foot off of the gas. Russia has established positions of power all across the globe from Luke just mentioned Azerbaijan in the Caucasuses to their position in Syria, obviously in Ukraine. And I would think that, and this is called leading the witness, so to speak, it would be in the administration's interest to diminish Russian power, to signal to the rest of the world that the US is in a competition and means it.

There will be small ways of doing that instead of leaking to David Ignatius that they want countries to cool it. They could have leaked to David Ignatius that the president spoke with Prime Minister Modi about arm sales, for example. Which of course the Indian Russian relationship there is very strong. Or Secretary Blinken could have called up his Armenian Azerbaijani counterparts and just issued a statement saying they had a very interesting conversation. Which also would've, I think set out some, not only alarm bells in Moscow, but more importantly signaled to the rest of the world that the US is on offense. Leading the witness, since I know you think that we should also see this as an opportunity, how would you think about US policy and sure in this moment?

Rebeccah Heinrichs:

So thank you Peter for that. That was great. I did want to follow back up here. Whenever I talk about... And this is related, I promise. But when we talk about Russian morale, it's not that I think that Russian morale is necessarily the thing that's going to be the thing that's going to help the Russians lose, but it is an indicator that things are not going well for them on the battlefield as they would like. Which then brings me to my next point. Now is the time for the United States to be hitting the gas for Ukrainians. And I did see some reporting that perhaps Jake Sullivan will be going around talking to some allies now to encourage them that now is not the time to be slowing our support to Ukraine. But I think that there's some specific points about why this would be the case. I mean, one, the morale is an indicator that perhaps things are not going as well as the Russians would like on the battlefield.

And there might be things that we don't know yet about Russian senior military leadership and what changes that might entail. Putin's then potentially looking for opportunities to make a change in Ukraine as all this plays out. But then the other thing that I keep thinking about too is how... Ukraine watching all of this play out, it is very encouraging for the Ukrainians that they can see that they have been doing so well because they've had this constant stream of weapons support from NATO allies from the United States in particular. But then now there is some... Because the political dynamics at home, there is more media reporting that potentially, especially with the debt ceiling deal... Talk about American politics for just a minute, that there might not be more Ukrainian military aid coming. That would be a huge mistake. And we've even seen some now from senior Democrat leaders. We've heard some about the populist Republicans in the house being weary about increased support for Ukraine.
But now we're seeing senior Democrats in the house, the ranking member on the Defense Appropriations Committee saying, "Unless there's more domestic support that there's not going to be increased Ukrainian weapons." That would be just a huge mistake. And I hope now after this, the last 48 hours that we've seen, that Ukraine is still doing well on the battlefields, that there is opportunity here, that there might be... Clearly there are some fractures within the Russian military. ...that now is just an opportunity to actually push for another... I don't want to use the word surge, so I'm not going to use the word surge. But there now is- Yes, a great opportunity. And so specifically what Hudson scholars have been advocating for attack EMS the DPCIMs are like my favorite low hanging fruit because these are just the cluster munitions. We've got them on the shelf, they're collecting dust. It's a great opportunity to get them over to the Ukrainians because what we actually need at this point is for the Ukrainians to be able to actually go beyond this essentially. We're not letting Ukraine win, we're keeping it contained, and we're allowing the Ukrainians to fight the way the Russians would fight rather than the way NATO would fight.

NATO is not fighting, this is a Ukrainian fight, but we can equip Ukraine to fight the way NATO would fight if NATO were. And that means greater longer range strike systems. It means cluster munitions, the bigger drones, the MQ-9s, the MQ-1s. Those things would be very, very helpful for Ukraine. Obviously we're supportive of F-16s. Little disagreement on timeliness on how effective they'll be in the very short term, but certainly very, very helpful for Ukraine to be confident that they're going to have a modern air force to be able to continue to provide for their own security and defense. So that's the message that I would be sending now, is now is the time to hit the gas for Congress to rally to understand that they got to help Ukraine win.

Peter Rough:

Well. And in addition to helping Ukraine also to diminish assistance to Russia, I think it would be an opportune time to come out with an aggressive stance on the sunset clauses in the JCPA pertaining to the ballistic missiles. That given the burgeoning really pretty intense defense relationship, Russia and Iran have built up to make sure that those missiles aren't exported en masse to the Russians once that missile embargo, which lapses only in three or four months, ends up sunsetting. You mentioned that in Ukraine, they were rather pleased with this. And I saw images of a famous drone operator in Ukraine eating popcorn and watching the events in Russia on his tablet. I don't know if today's discussion has been worthy of eating popcorn at home, but I hope you've really enjoyed it. Thrilled have been joined by really three top-notch colleagues of mine.

You can find all three of them@hudson.org. Rebeccah and Luke also have a very lively social media Twitter feed. Can Kasapoğlu and Can also be found on Twitter, on social media. Please follow @hudsoninstitute for your latest updates. And if you'd like to see more, for example, on what Rebecca mentioned, the weapons that Ukraine needs to win the war, Hudson produced a fact sheet on the top military systems that would be useful. You can also find that at hudson.org. So with that commercial out of the way, thanks so much for being with us today. I hope you've enjoyed this flash event, as it were, as the news business used to put it. And we'll see you at future events. Thanks so much.