

The Men with the Guns

The War Wrecks Russia's Civil-Military Relations

Jahangir E. Arasli

"It smells like a thunderstorm in town."

– *Человек с ружьём*
(The Man with the Gun)
Soviet film (1938)

The Ukrainian counteroffensive develops slowly and painfully. Thus far, not much progress is in sight (apart from limited tactical gains), and the Russian forces are mostly holding their ground. Still, there are at least three more months of active operations ahead before the arrival of the autumn season. This raises the possibility that the situation may shift in Ukraine's favor through escalatory scenarios.

Yet one strategic effect has already surfaced. Metastases of war continue to affect increasingly the domestic situation in Russia, as I forecasted in previous IDD Analytical Policy Briefs. Yevgeny Prigozhin's quasi-mutiny in June 2023 turned out to be a watershed moment in Russia's deteriorating internal dynamics. One of the essential after-effects has been the reemergence of the civil-military relations (CMR) factor. Given its multiple intricate facets, the CMR factor eventually could turn into a game changer, imperiling the durability of the present Russian system.

This IDD Analytical Policy Brief analyzes the evolving state of the CMR field from two particular angles. First, the interface between the top political echelon and the military establishment under conditions of faltering war. Second, the potential politicization and radicalization of uniformed citizens absorbed into wartime military service. The paper also focuses on the potential effects of the foregoing on domestic stability in Russia.

Jahangir E. Arasli is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) of ADA University and a former Adviser on International Issues in the Ministry of Defense of Azerbaijan. The views and opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author, who may be contacted at jangir_arasly@yahoo.co.uk.

Retrospective: Politicized Army Out of Politics

Maintaining firm control over the armed forces was an utmost task of the Soviet Union's leadership, since official Communist Party historiography played up the role of a collapsing Tsarist army in both 1917 revolutions, with an emphasis on the second (i.e., the Bolshevik Revolution). The need to manage millions of uniformed citizens and to prevent praetorianism (intervention into politics by top officers) brought into being the phenomenon of "subjective civilian control" over the military. The system facilitating such control centered on a combination of intensive political indoctrination, careful selection of cadres, and rigorous supervisory oversight by both Communist Party and state security apparati. Periodic preventive cleansings of cadres to potentially restrain generals' ambitions and condense their institutional autonomy and corporate spirit became a common practice. The control framework was aligned with "3-7-3" formula: the Third Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defense (Personnel), the Seventh Main Directorate of the Ministry of Defense (Political Guidance), and the Third Directorate of the KGB (Military Counterintelligence). Such a system, paradoxically, kept the multimillion military force politicized while ensuring that it also stayed out of politics.

Overall, the Soviet CMR system was a success story, though the price of its side-effects was sometimes high. The large-scale repressions of 1937 and the lesser-scale preventive purges of Stalin's "marshals of victory" in the aftermath of 1945 are but two examples: both left painful footprints on the military's institutional memory. Throughout its history, there were no instances of solo military interventions into political processes within the Soviet Union—this was done only on orders from the political leadership (i.e., the dismissal of Beria in 1953, the Novochoerkassk massacre in 1962, the suppression of independence movements in various Soviet republics in 1990-1991; and the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991).

Upon its re-emergence as an independent state in late 1991, Russia inherited the established pattern of Soviet CMR, with three significant modifications.

First, the post-Communist ideological vacuum deprived the Kremlin of its instrument of political indoctrination. However, the notion of personal (private) interest effectively substituted for it. The incorporation of senior military officers into business networks provided a working mechanism to warrant their loyalty to the supreme political echelon. The army has intervened in politics only on the orders of its civilian principals—as it did in 1993 during Yeltsin's confrontation with the Duma. A few opposition figures with military backgrounds were isolated or died in unclear circumstances (e.g., retired generals Alexander Lebed and Lev Rokhlin). The mismanagement of the First Chechen War that caused discontent in the military was compensated by the Kremlin's quasi-victory in the second one. Later foreign interventions (e.g., Georgia, Crimea, Donbass, Syria) kept the generals busy. The increase in defense expenditures and the delivery of new weapons systems became another way to facilitate the army's fidelity through monetary dependability and societal praise.

Second, the insulated nature of Russia’s personality-centered state system devalued qualified military expertise and advice. Political motivations and propaganda drivers prevailed over realistic strategic considerations. That precise pattern brought Russia to its disastrous decision to commence its war (dubbed officially as a “special military operation”) against Ukraine in February 2022. By that time, the top professional military bodies—the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff of the Armed Forces, and its Main (Intelligence) Directorate—had fallen out of the decisionmaking loop. Therefore, none were in a position to warn the political leadership of the perils of that war, as the existing system valued loyal conformism over professionalism.

Third, the societal link to CMR has weakened. The downsizing of the armed forces, the gradual abolition of conscription, and the turn to professionalization through contract military service turned the armed forces into a more encapsulated domain. Despite the proactive projection of militarized propaganda, most citizens have not remained in touch with the realities of military service.

However, the war in Ukraine and the resulting lengthy combat operations have triggered a landslide shift in CMR.

Angry Generals: An Ascending Trend?

Each war deforms CMR. Both victorious and defeated armies (and generals) pose an increasing challenge to the political stratum, irrespective of the regime type (the threat posed by Douglas MacArthur in 1953 is a good American example). The present Russian case is hardly an exception.

No one is able to say with a straight face that Russia’s war performance has been satisfactory—some have even argued that it has been catastrophic. There are no clear war objectives or defined strategies. The chain of command is rigid and reactive. Obsolete technical capabilities place a restraint on operations. New, highly-advertised weapons and equipment are nowhere in sight. The supply and logistics system is inadequate, and “ammunition dystrophy” has become chronic. Although reportedly something like 90 percent of Russian military power is currently deployed in or proximate to the Ukrainian theatre, frontline units are under-strengthened and the backfill personnel are undertrained, while the attrition rate is high. The public blames the army for the misconduct of the war. Even so, the political leadership and the supreme command demand success.

Not surprisingly, the discontent in the field army ranks continues to grow. The Ukrainian counteroffensive—despite its lack of visible gains—amplifies the stress. So far, the focal point of discontent is Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu and Chief of General Staff General of the Army Valery Gerasimov. The duo stand accused of poor war preparation as well as ineffective wartime management. The top political leadership is not blamed—so far, in part because the exhausting war restrains the fighting generals from public criticism.

However, the Wagner affair became the stone that evidently triggered an avalanche. Recent developments indicate a brewing political crisis in the commanding echelon. Several influential commanders were isolated in the aftermath of the quasi-mutiny and did not appear in public for a month. Among them are Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky (commander of the Airborne Forces), General of the Army Sergey Surovikin (Commander-in-Chief of the Airspace Forces), Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev (Deputy Minister of Defense for Logistics), and Lieutenant General Vladimir Alekseev (First Deputy of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff). All of them had personal and operational contacts with Prigozhin. In addition, the Commander of the 58th Army (that fights back the Ukrainian counteroffensive), Major General Ivan Popov was relieved of duty for his vocal criticism that implied the high command was responsible for logistics shortages and operational failures. The commanding generals of the 7th and 106th Guards Airborne Divisions, the 90th Guards Tank Division, and the 27th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade—all prewar first-grade units—were also dismissed.

These events most likely reflect the start of a “soft cleansing” of the potential military opposition. Previous battlefield command rotations were caused by combat ineffectiveness: since the beginning of the war, 11 top commanding generals of all four strategic theatre commands and the Airborne Forces were either relieved from their positions, retired, or sent into “exile” to the Syrian theater. However, the current rotations appear to be motivated by more political considerations. The elite corporation of the Airborne Forces, which is particularly not happy by its use in “meat assaults” as ordinary infantry units, and the GRU military intelligence, which had established close operational contacts with Wagner’s contingents in Syria and Africa, are in the particular focus of consideration.

Apparently, the leadership is wary of the emerging front camaraderie of the field commanders and its bias towards “parquet generals” in Moscow. The informal personal ties of certain generals with individual empowered figures, groups of influence, situational coalitions, nomenklatura clans, and corporate business heads are a source of additional concern. All this is treated as a potential challenge to what analysts call President Vladimir Putin’s “vertical of power” and the system of arbitration over which he is said to preside. Therefore, the Shoigu-Gerasimov duumvirate and the status-quo-oriented uniformed bureaucracy, mandated by the actors of Putin’s inner circle and the Presidential Administration, accelerate damage control by replacing perceptible opponents (i.e., popular and publicly-exposed commanders) with trusted cadres—notwithstanding their (lack of) professional credentials. There are low chances—at least for now—that the Russian president would be willing to trade horses in midstream and relieve Shoigu and Gerasimov, keeping them active to serve as potential scapegoats for the war’s failures. This may mean that the military’s disapproval will only increase in the event of wartime setbacks, further eroding CMR and all that this entails.

Post-Wagner Landscape: Empowering and Proliferating Alternative Forces

The sanitation of the commanding ranks is just one aspect of safeguard measures. Another is the empowerment of paramilitary forces that can counter potential rebellions by the regular army. The Rosgvardia (RG) forces are likely to expand and gain heavy weapons and equipment. Its personnel is likely to get increased payments and benefits. And the reinforcement of the RG with tanks and artillery will likely take place at the expense of the army's capabilities and personnel. The same thing happened in 1990, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, concerned about the deteriorating political situation, ordered the transfer of a couple of army divisions to the auspices of the KGB in order to maintain internal stability. The experiment did not work, though, due to diverse institutional cultures and inconsistencies in the chain of command and logistic systems. That situation may repeat itself. A certain portion of the anticipated heavy weapons transfers will most likely go to RG's Chechen cluster. Furthermore, we know that the RG will incorporate over 7,000 operatives from SWAT (special weapons and tactics) units known as Grom (Thunder), which have been ordered to transfer their subordination from the Ministry of Interior. Thus, the Ministry of the Interior (whose regional branches are tied to local governors) remains deprived of its force component. Meanwhile, the RG now centralizes all three types of SWAT units (OMON, SOBR, and Grom) within its own structure.

A brief overview of other state paramilitary agencies tasked with defending the status quo begins with the Federal Security Service (FSB), which was also empowered in the wake of the quasi-mutiny. The agency's natives dominate the National Security Council. Apparently, the line of the FSB that reports to the Kremlin maintains a sort of information monopoly. However, it seems to be suffering from intra-agency rifts between clans, which represent different structural subdivisions: the Fourth Service (economic security), the Ninth Department (own security), the "M" Department (oversight of state agencies), and the Moscow Main Department. Competition is also developing over future leadership positions (the FSB's Director is about to retire) and the protection of commercial interests.

Another notable player is the State Protection Service (FSO) and its integral component, the President's Security Service (SBP). Both are relevant as they provide an immediate shield for the present Russian system. Meanwhile, the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) appears weakened in the interagency landscape.

Sub-state paramilitary entities are proliferating. The recent quasi-mutiny was not Wagner's swan song; it will likely transform into a new incarnation, splitting into the "Belarus Cluster" and the "African Corps." The Kremlin is working on decoupling the "Orchestra" from Prigozhin and his warlords and transfer it to the command of the Defense Ministry. This does not appear to have been fully successful, and Russia, most

likely, will miss one of its most effective combat forces in the war theatre. Still, the Defense Ministry has appropriated Prigozhin's "Project K" (the prison's recruitment campaign) and is now beginning to staff its "Storm Z" forlorn hope units with conditionally-released inmates. Meanwhile, "private military companies" other than Wagner are increasing in numbers. Some of them operate under the aegis of the Defense Ministry, while corporate and even private business actors raise others. In addition, there are hundreds of further detachments: the so-called BARS battalions, regional volunteer formations (raised by local authorities and sustained by them), as well as outfits established by political parties and groups (including far-right and far-left elements), Cossack movements, soccer ultras, biker clubs, etc. This heterogeneous composition can potentially turn flammable, as war lingers without an end in sight.

Societal Dimension: Mobilization Trap

By autumn 2022, Russia had to face two sobering realities: the war turned long, and its cadre army was reduced to a strength not sufficient to sustain an extended campaign. However, the option of declaring a "popular war" through a *levée en masse*, akin to 1941, was dismissed by the Kremlin as politically risky, economically inappropriate, and technically unfeasible.

In September 2022, a "surrogate" partial mobilization was announced instead. Still, according to official figures, the number of citizens called or accepted into the national service will reach some 1,500,000 men by the end of 2023. Some 40,000-50,000 people sign contracts with the Defense Ministry each month. Those numbers reflect the considerable social, political, and psychological effects that are an increasingly large part of the Russian reality. Yet, the foregoing measures are still considered not enough for the long war and the expanding army.

Consequently, the government uses different carrot-and-stick tricks to increase the number of boots on the ground. Elevated payments and other material incentives are offered to those who enlist voluntarily, whether driven by patriotism, propaganda, or mercantile considerations. In parallel, the age limit for the regular conscription is now 18-30 years. The age appropriate for mobilization increases too, and the penalties for avoiding the call of duty have been toughened.

The consequences of war, especially those associated with high combat loss rate, affect any army personnel's morale gravely—and Russia is no exception. Videos distributed on social media show conscripted soldiers complaining of poor logistical and medical support, food and water shortages, delayed payments, and commanders' outrage. The promised vacations and rotations are infrequent. The rate of individual and group desertion grows; in June 2023, the military court system was issuing some 100 verdicts per week on cases of absence without leave. Allegations of alcoholism, drug addiction, and abuse of civilians in the area of operations are persistent; in mainland Russia, the

rate of violent crime and homicide with the use of firearms and hand grenades rises, as vacationers or discharged combatants come back home.

The primary outcome of the crypto-mobilization is the objective militarization of society, which is reminiscent of how it was in the country prior to the second revolution of 1917. War changes the psyche of combatants and makes them susceptible to radical political rhetoric and ideas. Prigozhin’s anti-establishment discourse that resonated with the masses highlights that phenomenon. Hundreds of thousands of battle-hardened, disgruntled men in uniform represent a potential hazard for the system.

In 1917, the most disciplined and organized political force—the Bolshevik party—was eventually able to master the leaderless anarchy of a “soldiers’ democracy” and seize power. Wary of such a scenario, the Kremlin tends to suppress in germ any self-organized non-systemic influencers who can affect the mindset of its military forces. Currently, the group of “angry patriots” (retired Colonels Igor Strelkov-Girkin, Vladimir Kvachkov, Viktor Alksnis, and Lieutenant General Leonid Ivashov) who had been sharply criticizing the misconduct of war from an ultra-patriotic angle have ended up in preventive legal duress. The media wing of the “party of war to the bitter end”—the so-called “Z-bloggers”—is also under increasing censorship pressure. Such a reaction indicates the Kremlin’s fear of anti-establishment war propaganda elements corrupting and radicalizing its military ranks.

Synopsis

- In the current situation, the Kremlin’s main strategic objective is system’s self-preservation, which seems to prioritize the conservation of internal stability over the need for military success.
- This implies the need to lengthen the state of war and use it to manage and control society and the elites.
- However, the war itself negatively affects internal stability, thus locking in the vicious circle.
- The fragmentation of the inner core of the present Russian system, systemic dysfunction, and a rise in friction between elite groups (a.k.a. the “battle of the Kremlin’s towers”) over the exit strategy affect the conduct of war.
- In such conditions, the deterioration of CMR due to the mounting domestic effects of war comes to the forefront.
- Russia faces two principal challenges from the standpoint of CMR: the fighting generals and the uniformed citizens in the trenches.
- Each of the mentioned groups is distressed by the course of the war—in different ways, though.

- So far, Russia’s top decisionmakers are unwilling to manage CMR with an iron fist, akin to Stalin’s 1937 purges or those of post-revolution Iran in 1979-1980; the actions taken are a reduced variation of the 2016 post-coup cadre cleansing in Türkiye.
- To block a possible army-led challenge, the Kremlin uses the following preventive techniques:
 - isolating non-loyal generals and non-systemic military opposition;
 - empowering alternative paramilitary leadership-protecting agencies;
 - avoiding full-scale mobilization whilst continuing to rely on a surrogate one, as long as conditions permit.
- The Kremlin’s credibility and trust in the ranks of the field army is gradually eroding.
- It is hard to expect, though, that the generalship and the officer corps will *independently* intervene in the political process to alter the course of action (akin to General Lavr Kornilov’s mutiny in September 1917). However, they can intrude through the demanding calls of enabled elite groups. Such an army’s intervention, if happens, would be a critical influencing factor.
- The uniformed citizens who went to war either voluntarily or by conscription would represent a growing pool of people exposed to radical political ideas.
- Overall, at the current stage, the evolving state of CMR does not endanger the existing system directly or immediately. However, their delayed cumulative effects could represent an escalating challenge to the system’s stability as it enters the volatile “Transit-2024” mode.

The 1938 Soviet historic war drama *Человек с ружьём* vividly depicts a mediocre peasant-soldier unwillingly absorbed into the army, demoralized by the war and the revolutionary turmoil, and subsequently exposed to political indoctrination. Putin apparently remembers lessons from history, as he referred to the 1917 collapse of the army and the state in his appeal to the nation in the wake of Wagner’s revolt. As war transforms into a “new normal” in Russia, CMR emerges as one of the most critical determinants of its uncertain future.