



## HOW CHINA SEES THE WAGNER FIASCO

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“Within a day, with not a single shot fired and not a drop of blood seen; the ‘armed rebellion’ that attracted global attention was settled.”

That’s how one Chinese news commentary [described](#) the [Wagner incident](#) that shook Russia. However, in the aftermath of the short-lived [uprising](#), views in China remain diverse and often conflicting.

### A view from Beijing

The official response from China has been muted. In a two-line statement, the foreign ministry [described](#) the incident as “Russia’s internal affair” and assured of China’s support in helping Moscow “maintain its stability and achieve development and prosperity,” reaffirming its “good neighborliness” and “[Comprehensive strategic partnership](#) of coordination for the New Era” with Russia. Other opinions, particularly in the media, have been more reflective of the situation.

The hawkish *Global Times* [took shots](#) at the “wishful thinking of the West.” Citing Chinese international relations experts Wang Yiwei and Cui Heng, the report denied that Wagner’s call to move to Moscow constituted an “armed rebellion,” instead calling it a mere display of dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. It further stated that the Kremlin’s ability to stop the revolt within 24 hours refutes any claims of Putin growing weak, calling such analysis one of the many “cognitive warfare” tactics of the West fanning “anti-Russia sentiment” or stemming from ignorance of

Russian politics. A report in the *People’s Daily* similarly [credited](#) strong public support to the Russian government as a major factor in defusing the crisis.

However, such assurances have [failed](#) to calm Chinese investors, particularly in the energy sector, who rushed to stop shipments as the news of the revolt broke out. Others in the media display similar concerns. An editorial in the *China Daily* [described](#) the situation as an “uneasy calm” which displays Russia’s socio-economic and political problems and contradictions—specifically stemming from the use of private mercenaries—that have come to the fore since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

While the reasons for the mutiny are assessed as ranging from heavy losses incurred during the prolonged war, failure to demilitarize Ukraine, demands for more cash, tussles with the Russian Ministry of Defense and Prigozhin’s own political ambitions; one surpasses all—the Russian defense ministry’s order to incorporate all private mercenaries under its command by July 1. [Talking](#) to China’s *Observer*, military expert Song Zhongping noted that Prigozhin feared losing power and, as the deadline neared, decided to wage a mutiny. While all commentaries [criticize](#) Moscow’s overreliance on private mercenaries as “getting caught in one’s own cocoon” (*zuojian zifu* 作茧自缚), Song stated that Wagner did play an unparalleled role in the war. Being a private military company independent of the state, Wagner took losses without impacting the legitimacy of the Russian state nor its purse.

Though Putin’s political acumen and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s diplomatic skill in handling the crisis have been hailed, many in China believe that the dust is not yet fully settled. Talking to *Sina News*, Geng Xin [noted](#) that the Wagner fiasco was not a “false alarm” as many “contradictions” continue to lurk.

First and foremost being the dilemma in Russia on whether it sees itself as part of the East or the West. Such a phenomenon is coupled with a poor record of economic development, with the Russian political elite’s miscalculations that a return to the former “glory” of the Soviet Union is possible. Another

contradiction is the underestimation of Ukraine's potential to fight back and the disastrous decision to go to war. Third, the lack of an effective military system which allows too much space for private mercenaries poses a major challenge. Fourth, the phenomenon of "chaos giving birth to heroes" (*luan shi chu xiaoxiong* 乱世出梟雄) i.e. when all political, social, and economic contradictions elevate inequality to the extent that produces men prone to revolt like Prigozhin.

Moreover, Prigozhin not only refused to surrender but openly [defied](#) Vladimir Putin by describing Wagner soldiers as "true patriots." Talking to *The Observer*, Tan Dekai [noted](#) that many in Russia see Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu as a product of the oligarchic system and do not think he is fit for the job. Being a war hero, Prigozhin enjoys popularity, but Russians do not favor him as a leader. The continued presence of several private military forces such as those held by Gazprom is seen as a threat for China since a divided Russia ruled by warlords would invite external forces, particularly the United States, to intervene. Another commentary in *Sina News* [described](#) the incident as the "biggest gray rhino" since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War, a term Xi Jinping used in his [20th Party Congress Report](#) to refer to unexpected security threats.

### Whither the Ukraine war?

Russia has [clarified](#) that this incident will not impact the "special military operation" in Ukraine. But many in China are not so sure. *The Paper*, a Shanghai-based publication, [noted](#) that Prigozhin has destabilized the two main arteries of Russia's military offensive, Rostov Oblast in South and Voronezh Oblast in North. A war between Wagner and the Russian military would have been disastrous but, even with the crisis averted, dealing with the demobilized soldiers and ensuring their loyalty in Prigozhin's absence would be an uphill task. Beijing is also [worried](#) about the misuse of Moscow's nuclear arsenal. As Ukraine's counteroffensive intensifies, many in China believe Putin did the right thing to negotiate with Prigozhin, but will he come out stronger? They say he would, but this is dampened by concerns of entrenched problems in post-Soviet Russian society. Analysts in Moscow

share similar beliefs. Talking to Russia Today, Dmitry Trenin [described](#) the deal as nothing short of a miracle, specifically as concerns were high over a lack of opposition against Prigozhin's march into Rostov-on-Don and on to Moscow. Vladimir Bruter [noted](#) that the incident has heavily tarnished Moscow's international image and a prolonged warfare with Ukraine would be "too optimistic" to expect. He believes that the need of the hour is to formulate a consistent plan for the military operation.

But will Putin end the war? As of now, no. He would like to deal with the internal challenges to his authority that the incident has exposed and making a move to negotiate first would be equal to conceding defeat.

### "No limits" no more?

While Beijing has reaffirmed that its "comprehensive strategic partnership" with Russia in its official statement, opinions reflect that a prolonged war with growing aggression from private military groups is bad news. The main reason behind supporting Russia remains the challenge Moscow presents to the expanding influence of Western liberal ideas that China views as a threat and Beijing's own sovereignty concerns over Taiwan. However, it will never allow any partnership, no matter how "comprehensive," to derail economic development that robs Beijing's international significance and tarnishes the image of the Communist Party at home. Neither can it afford to send military troops in support of Moscow and face Western sanctions. The idea remains to engage so far as the relationship remains profitable but as the tides turn unfavorable, Beijing finds itself caught in the quagmire.

China is hence highly likely to reassess its "no limits" partnership with Moscow, but without an official announcement, just as support for Russia was never explicitly committed to. Beijing is likely to push ahead its [peace plan](#) for ending the war once again before Washington does but how well China succeeds depends on to what extent Putin agrees to listen to Beijing, for he certainly has bigger ambitions and far less at stake.

The incident however presents a flickering hope for the United States and China to restart dialogue. Analysts in China [agree](#) that ensuring stability in nuclear-armed Russia and bringing the war to an end are concerns Beijing shares with Washington.

Instability in Russia is a mounting concern which China finds hard to address on its own. If sincere attempts to end the war do spring from Beijing, the United States must be ready to work with China. However, for that to happen, Beijing must tone down its prerequisites for dialogue with Washington that have blocked all high-level attempts at thawing the ice. The Wagner incident could facilitate what diplomatic negotiations so far have failed to achieve.

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