



Russian Civil-Military Relations (CMR) and the Long Open-Ended War

By Jahangir Arasli

Introduction

Civil-military relations (CMR) denote an interface between a nation (state and society) and its military system. Three key subcategories in the CMR domain include:

- **Civilian control** over the military (which boils down to the control by governments and ruling elites over the military establishment, preventing its interference in politics).
- Interaction between a political echelon and a military establishment in an area of strategic **decision-making process** (DMP) in the field of defense and security, especially in times of external war or armed conflict.
- Patterns of relationship and reciprocal engagement between **society** and a nation's military (through the existence of a pool of uniformed citizens).

Any war causes **deformations** of CMR that existed in peacetime. With the procrastination of a war, those ensuing effects only increase. Russia, which invaded Ukraine in February 2022, is not an exception to that rule; rather, it is a vivid illustration. This war generates multiple downsides that impact Russian CMR, including the aforementioned three sub-categories. The most significant of these impacts are as follows:

- The top military establishment has **failed** to deliver qualified professional advice to the upper political echelon due to the nature of the Putin-centered system, which values personal loyalty and subordination over professionalism. This kind of pathology, in particular, set up a distorted strategic calculus and eventually led to the disastrous decision to invade Ukraine. It continues to affect DMP gravely throughout the entire course of action.
- The servile and inept generalship (known as the “Arbat Military District,” after Moscow’s quarter where the General Staff is located) triggers **dissatisfaction** among the ranks of the fighting army, including its professional officer corps. Beyond humble

operational tradecraft, the failure of the top commanders to manage rotations, supply, and logistics are the main irritants. From a mid-term perspective, this trend may amplify fissures in the military system.

- The top military leaders (the Minister of Defense, the Chief of General Staff, and the “parade generals” from headquarters) have **lost** credibility, confidence, and respect in the ranks. Pejorative nicknames of Shoigu (such as the “Plywood Marshal”) are widespread in the acting army and illustrate this tendency. It echoes the 1916-1917 situation when the Tsarist army expressed disdain to its commanders.
- The long war **degrades** the morale and ethos of the forces. The trends of corruption, alcoholism, and drug addiction diminish the spirit of the officer corps.
- The horizontal escalation and the simultaneous elongation of the war have led to the **proliferation and fragmentation** of the entire pool of Russian military and paramilitary forces. Importantly, both the sub-state and private actors are contributing to the creation of that pool alongside the state. Such a configuration erodes the **state’s monopoly on violence**, significantly complicates command and control over the forces, and raises the issue of the loyalty of the involved personnel to actors other than the state or the regime. The June 2023 armed mutiny of the Wagner Private Military Corporation (PMC) is an illuminating example of the peril potentially posed by such entities.
- The partial mobilization enhanced by the volunteer movement, prison recruitment, conscription, and other mechanisms, propelled **hundreds of thousands of citizens** into military service. That situation brings a truly broad societal dimension to the military system and creates multiple outcomes with many instant and delayed effects.

Typologies of the Russian Military and Paramilitary Forces

The war instigated the mushrooming of the Russian uniformed services. If there were two broad categories of state-controlled forces and agencies before the war, now their number has increased to nine. Those categories are as follows:

- **Regular armed forces.** The ground forces, the airborne forces, and the naval infantry units are essentially depleted after 19 months of combat. Their professional core (officers, sergeants, and privates on the contract), who were well trained and bound by military discipline, is partially wiped out and diluted now by the influx of mobilized reservists, volunteers, and conscripts. The Aero-Space Forces, the Navy, and the Strategic Missile Forces are largely intact from a material perspective, but they have to drain out part of the personnel to backfill the ground army in the Ukrainian theatre. In many ways, that situation replicates 1941, when the Red Army lost a great part of its professional core. The difference is that Russia is not currently able to sustain the effective industrial conversion to a wartime mode and replenish the material losses. That increasingly makes the army afield a mainly infantry force and leads to improvisation, primitivization, and brutalization of the Russian way of war.
- **Guardians of the regime.** That category includes the Rosgvardia, the FSB (Federal Security Service) and the FSO (Federal Protection Service) trio, as well as the secondary pool of agencies with embedded paramilitary capabilities (the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Emergency, the Federal Penitentiary Service, etc.). In total, that cluster incorporates some two million men, who constitute over 4% of the work-capable population yet consume one third of the national budget (together with the armed forces).

The security agencies, with some exceptions, are not directly involved in the war and are not exposed to its perils and hardships; they are spared to quell any potential socio-political troubles on the home front. Such a situation creates a precursor for potential conflicts with the continuously expanding army and the population in general.

In addition to the aforementioned categories that existed prior to the war, additional groups have now augmented the Russian military and paramilitary forces post-February 2022.

- **DONLUG separatist forces.** Since January 2023, the “popular militias” of Donetsk and Lugansk (as well as some other minor collaborators’ formations from the Ukrainian territories occupied at the early stage of the 2022 invasion) have been formally incorporated into the regular Russian army. Still, those outfits have their own identity that distinguish them from the core forces.
- **Chechen tribal cluster.** Kadyrov’s forces are officially part of the Rosgvardia structure. However, their leader enjoys a great degree of political and strategic autonomy. The force’s characteristics are their ethnic cohesion, high spirit, strong training, good equipment, and lavish material privileges (that include the granted feuds in the occupied territories of Ukraine). These factors, coupled with the quite rare Chechen engagement in direct action, generate frictions with other clusters of Russian forces.
- **Penal battalions.** The need to increase boots on the ground led to a twisted practice of prison recruitment of inmates into the so-called “Storm-Z” assault detachments (another resemblance to 1941-1945). That track was introduced first by Wagner PMC, and then intercepted by the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). The recruitment from incarceration on the condition of participation in combat in exchange for early parole brought into the ranks an impressive number of asocial elements who got access to weapons.
- **Private military companies (PMC).** The previously existing PMC community has been substantially expanded by the war. Those entities do not represent private security providers built along the West’s adopted model, but rather are combat units used for hybrid missions abroad. However, the hardships of war led to the deployment of those outfits in Ukraine. Until recently, they have operated in the grey legal zone, as Russian law prohibits mercenaryism. However, Putin and Shoigu have learned lessons from Prigozhin’s mutiny, and now the members of the PMCs have to sign contracts with the MOD, which formally make them army service members. However, the involvement of sub-state actors in the creation of PMCs makes the issue more intricate. Certain corporate entities (such as Gazprom or Roskosmos) and individual oligarchs are involved in the financing and logistic support of the PMCs (probably, by Putin’s orders, as a part of the “war tax”). Equally, some regional leaders (for instance, in the Crimea) also raise mercenary companies. Financial levers and political influences on the PMCs produce a phenomenon of double loyalty (to actors other than their formal employer, which is the MOD).
- **Mobilized forces of territorial defense.** The September 2022 “partial mobilization” brought a truly societal dimension to the Russian military, as some 300,000 men were taken away from their families and regular lives into the trenches. Many of the mobilized reservists are embedded into the so-called “motor-rifle regiments of territorial defense” (MRR-TD) and other similar units formed by the MOD. Those formations are assembled

by region and consist of citizens from the same area of the Federation (sometimes two or three regions adjacent to each other). That increases the regional dimension: a unit consisting of the homeboys with the elbow touch is branded with added cohesion and self-identification. On the other hand, if a unit of such kind suffers heavy losses, it may precipitate negative psychological blowback in its home region (an example is the momentous destruction of the 1444th Samara Regiment in January 2023). The cumulative psychological effects can eventually turn into political ones. At the current stage, more and more videos from soldiers and family members of MRR-TD complaining about delayed rotations, underpayment, poor logistics, and commanders' abuse appear in the public domain. Although those units are subordinate to the MOD, the responsibility for their supplies de-facto lies with the administrations of the regions where they originate. That provides the governors with a potential instrument of influence over a particular sponsored unit. Recently, some heads of the regions have started to articulate statements on the need for rotations of the mobilization formations, thus increasing their political capital. In addition, some regions (mostly those adjacent to Ukraine) were granted permission to form their own territorial defense units (Tier 2) that report to governors, not the MOD. Although those detachments are undertrained and underequipped, they provide additional assets at the disposal of regional leaders.

- **Volunteer forces' cluster.** As Russia's initial invasion plan failed and it had to adapt its military forces to the expanding and extending nature of the war, the call for volunteers was launched in summer 2022. The individual subjects of the Federation were ordered to form their own "named volunteer battalions" that have been incorporated into the structure of the regular army (the 3rd Army Corps, etc.). In fact, it became a form of covert mobilization, except for the fact that the personnel of those units volunteered of their own free will, motivated by aspirations of patriotism, propaganda, or adventurism. The next wave of the volunteer movement, launched in spring 2023 to delay the compulsory mobilization, had different motivations. The second-generation volunteers are attracted mostly by the material incentives (high salaries and veteran benefits). Many are subtly pressed or lured into the service through social engineering by the government (cancellation of debts or criminal records, police blackmail, and other unorthodox solutions). The volunteer cluster that incorporates dozens of different formations is the most heterogeneous category in the Russian military forces. Some of them are branded as BARS (Combat Army Reserve of the Country) battalions and fight as separate formations; others are integrated into particular army units upon agreement with individual commanders (a sign of fragmentation of the chain of command). Although volunteers take oaths and sign contracts with the MOD, they may maintain loyalty to actors who created their particular units – heads of regions, corporate structures, individual oligarchs, and political movements of all kinds (the Russian nationalists and imperialists, the neo-Bolsheviks and neo-Nazis, the Cossacks, etc.). The soccer ultras, the bikers, the members of martial arts clubs, and the technology geeks who control copters over the battlefield complement the patchy picture.
- **Foreign legion.** Russia reportedly tried to recruit foreign "volunteers" to its war in Ukraine, including the Syrian pro-regime elements; the Afghani exiled military personnel; the North Koreans and Cubans; as well as members of the far-right-wing parties in Europe. Those efforts turned out to be all but futile. However, one group remains available: the guest workers from the Central Asian states (there are some 4

million of them in Russia). Recently, hundreds of migrants from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan were pressed into the service with the use of a combination of sticks (threat of deportation or imprisonment) and carrots (fast-track acquisition of Russian citizenship). The increasing incorporation of the migrants into the ranks will generate an array of problems: control and management issues, linguistic gaps, ethnic and religious frictions, and legal controversy with the parent states that punish mercenaryism by law.

A grasp of the above-displayed typology of the mutating Russian forces is **imperative** for assessing the state of civil-military relations and the potential effects they can produce in wartime and post-war settings.

Putin's CMR Management

It is unclear to what extent Putin and his circle are concerned about the mounting effects of war on CMR. The intuitive feeling is that the system is **wary** of the massive troubles caused by the mobilized citizens and a military-led coup, or a combination of both. To prevent such scenarios, the Kremlin uses the following executive techniques:

- **Encouragement of generalship loyalty.** Professionalism and effectiveness also matter, but they are not top priorities. The retention of Shoigu and Gerasimov in their positions, despite the misconduct of the war, is the telling indicator. All promotions and rotations in the below command echelon apply the same logic. In broader terms, that pattern reflects the pursuit of the conservation of the existing system that is common for authoritarian regimes. However, the other side of unconditional loyalty is the directive system of command and control and the ensuing restraint of individual commanders' initiative. That pathology has a grave impact on Russian war performance.
- **Stimulation of the interagency rivalry.** The pool of "guardians of the regime" is further empowered after the start of the war. Particularly, the Rosgvardia (including its Chechen tribal cluster) expands and acquires heavy weapons to suppress any domestic dissent (including in the ranks of the army); the FSO physically protects the rulers, while the FSB maintains an information monopoly and controls the army's allegiance. This trio are the systemic competitors to the military establishment. Redistribution of assets and responsibilities is another technique in use. For instance, if the Ministry of Interior had to yield its special assault teams to Rosgvardia, it would gain some of its authorities in exchange, in the spirit of Putin's system of checks and balances.
- **Application of repressive procedures.** The regime implicitly exploits the painful institutional memory of the 1937 purges of the military establishment. The two-month-long "isolation" of Aero-Space Forces commander Gen. Surovikin in the wake of Prigozhin's mutiny is a similar overt signal. Many commanding generals seen as not loyal enough were dismissed or sent to Syria (which serves as an exile zone for the disgraced commanders, as was the Caucasus in the 19th century). The non-systemic (anti-establishment) leaders that may influence the military mass, such as Igor Strelkov-Girkin, are also monitored and neutralized in advance.

However, there is a much more challenging issue that rests beyond the control of the military establishment. That is the **problem of control** over the uniformed citizens who were brought into the war by mobilization, conscription, volunteering, and other similar procedures.

Putin's Mobilization Trap

As the war lingers, Russia needs more boots on the ground – to deter the ongoing and future Ukrainian counteroffensives, to gear up for its own offensives, or to keep the line of contact in the case of a frozen conflict. However, Russia's shortage of manpower makes it far from sufficient for all kinds of such missions. That creates a **dilemma**.

- The **political considerations** restrain the Kremlin from a full-fledged mobilization and force it to exercise other improvised ways to get cannon fodder.
- The realists in Putin's administration and the economic block of the cabinet fear the domestic political repercussions and the further decline of the economy. Moreover, Russia does not have sufficient infrastructure, materiel resources, executive apparatus, or administrative skills to sustain an overall mobilization akin to 1941. Not to mention the absence of totalitarian control and massive ideological indoctrination of society required for such an undertaking.
- In the meantime, the military establishment vows mobilization as a **precondition** for mission success. Furthermore, the systemic, semi-systemic, and non-systemic **ultra-patriots**, nurtured by the war, insist on the same. The "party of war until the victorious end" has particularly strong positions in the **volunteer cluster** of the military forces.
- It cannot be ruled out that certain segments of the elites implicitly desire the mobilization as a vehicle for undermining Putin's **legitimacy** and causing more resentments in society.

Thus, Putin and his cohort face a **Catch 22** situation: "mobilization cannot be cancelled."

Conclusion

Summarizing the characteristics of Russian CMR evolving in the conditions of the long war, the following aspects should be kept in mind:

- The war causes **pressure** on the state and society, bringing on multiple effects and open-ended scenarios. The emerging outcomes, relevant for the issue in question, are as follows.
 - The state's monopoly on violence is **eroding**. The process of "sovereignization" of a state's sub-systems, which act not for a state as a whole but rather for their own ends and interests, has started (Wagner PMC was a quasi-state entity, and Prigozhin de-facto has been a member of the elite circle).
 - The **expanding constellation** of heterogeneous Russian military and paramilitary forces, some of which have ambiguous legal status, creates a challenge for centralized control over them and complicates disciplinary management. The proliferation and the blurred Command and control (C2) lines cause friction, tension, and even possibly **violent conflict** between different clusters of forces.
 - The evolutionary curve of the Russian forces has led to visible technological primitivization, improvisation, feudalization, brutalization, and privatization of the Russian way of war, which is also affecting, by implication, the state of CMR.
 - Two important domains will play a **crucial role** in the shaping of future wartime and/or post-war Russian trajectories:

- The Kremlin regime grasps the perils emanating from civil-military relations twisted by the war. So far, it has been able to more or less control the **military establishment**. However, the prerequisite of the expansion of the military forces for the needs of the war, combined with the need to avert the negative socio-political and economic effects of the mass mobilization, creates an inevitable **impasse**. The entry of hundreds of thousands of uniformed citizens into the military would likely erode further public support for Putin, destabilize society, and may form preconditions for the **1917 Redux**.

Overall, the end of the hostilities (notwithstanding a frozen conflict, a negotiated peace, or something else) will leave Russia with an **immense pool** of seasoned veterans who tasted blood, got combat experience, forged frontline camaraderie, and may have stored some weapons and ammunition in sheds and lofts at home. Many, if not most, of these people will probably experience post-traumatic stress disorder, have grievances, felonious records, loyalties other than to the state (such as ethnic affinities, for example), and no moral restraints. As such, they will remain vulnerable to radical political and religious ideologies or criminal temptations. In addition, there will be generals and surviving cadre officers who will feel themselves betrayed and disaffected, yet are professionally linked to each other. That would be an **explosive mix** that could potentially prompt an ideal storm for power transition under certain conditions. The delayed impact of civil-military relations, in one form or another, will emerge as a **paramount influencing factor** in the post-war and post-Putin settings and dynamics of Russia.

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