

## THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

THE CURRENT: Putin imperiled? What to know about the Wagner Group's Russian revolt

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**Moderator:** Susan Glasser, Staff Writer, The New Yorker

**Guests:** Michael O'Hanlon, Philip H. Knight Chair in Defense and Strategy, Senior Fellow and Director, Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology, Brookings

Constanze Stelzenmüller, Fritz Stern Chair on Germany and Trans-Atlantic Relations, Senior Fellow and Director, Center on the United States and Europe, Brookings

Angela Stent, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings; Senior Adviser, Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies, Georgetown University

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**PITA:** You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adriana Pita.

Following this weekend's surprising rebellion in Russia by Wagner Group mercenaries, Brookings experts dove into the many unanswered questions about what these events mean for Vladimir Putin's grasp on power, the war in Ukraine, and how U.S. and NATO's allies might react. This conversation was moderated by journalist Susan Glasser.

**GLASSER:** Well, welcome, everybody. I'm just so glad to be with you this morning and to try to figure out what the heck just happened here. And I can't think of a better group of people than, you know, my friends at Brookings to help us kind of sort through all of this. As somebody who has been watching Vladimir Putin for more than 20 years since he came to power, I have to say in many ways, the last 48 hours have seemed like the biggest challenge to his leadership since he very unlikely assumed the Russian presidency on December 31st, 1999. But at the same time, we're left with so many unanswered questions. And I do think maybe we should just go ahead and start out with that. Angela Stent, I want to start with you because I learned everything about Russia from you. And one of the things I know we both have learned is beware of overinterpreting an overly limited set of actual facts. So what do you think are actual facts at this moment about what has happened inside Russia? And let's let's start from that and then go broad with our interpretations.

**STENT:** Well, thank you, Susan. And as you and I know, nothing in Russia is ever what it appears to be. So we had yesterday morning Putin accusing Prigozhin, Yevgeny Prigozhin of being a traitor and implying that he was going to be arrested. And then later on in the day, in the evening, we had Prigozhin's Wagner troops marching toward Moscow, turning round and allegedly a deal brokered by Belarussian President Lukashenko, Alexander Lukashenko, whereby Prigozhin will spend the rest of his time maybe in Belarus. And everything stood down. And this is clearly just the opening act of something that's going to play itself out over the next weeks and months. It clearly isn't what really happened. If Prigozhin did sign some agreement or agree to stand down, to have his troops withdraw from the 200 kilometers near Moscow, what did he get for it? So there were rumors that his accusations against the defense minister and the chief of the general staff were taken into account and they would be replaced. Let's see if they're replaced. Let's see if he actually is in Belarus. Let's see what happens to him.

But what we do know is that Wagner itself, even if it withdrew from it's alleged, it's mutiny against Moscow has been the most important way in which Russia has projected power in Africa, in parts of the Middle East. It owns a lot of assets that it's a very important arm of Russian foreign policy. So it's not going to go away. So I think this what happened yesterday raises many more questions than gives us answers. Putin, yes, appeared to be challenged in the morning. Maybe by

the evening he appeared to have restored order. But this could also be a game that's being played out that we really don't understand.

**GLASSER:** Yeah, really don't understand is unfortunately a good way of putting it. I want to I want to bring in Mike O'Hanlon right now to the conversation, because, of course, here in Washington, we're also looking at this and thinking of the war next door and what implications there are, if any, for the counter offensive that Ukraine has just launched. Over the last year and a half, many reports have suggested that in some ways that the Wagner fighters were among the most effective and brutal of the Russian troops fighting in Ukraine. So do you see any direct impact on the war? There certainly was a sense that this must benefit Ukraine in some way. But is it just the chaos inside Russia that benefits Ukraine or is there a specific military advantage to be gained, do you think, from from this craziness?

**O'HANLON:** Thank you. Well, Susan and Angela, excellent questions and statements to frame the discussion. I think the way you put it, Susan, is probably just right, that this may marginally weaken the current Russian position. But the reason why, even though I know much less about Russia than either of you two and less than Constanze as well, I still feel like yesterday's events were probably what they seemed more or less on the surface because I can't see any particular benefit to sort of staging this kind of a of an attempted coup or anything. It's not as if Ukraine is going to be lured into rushing their offensive because, of course, the offensive has already begun and is currently in sort of what we interpret to be a probing dimension or state and therefore, you know, some weakening of certain parts of the line because the Wagner group might fall away, well, that's not going to be something that that President Zelensky and his generals hypothesize about. They're going to actually probe and they're going to see where and if they find any soft spots. So if yesterday's tumult in Russia has created some new soft spots, I don't think that Ukraine is likely to get overconfident and somehow attack unwisely or, you know, brashly or recklessly. I think they're likely just to find that certain parts of the line may be a little bit weaker than they were before.

Having said all of that, I don't expect major change because my guess is that most of those frontline troops probably knew less about this internal drama in Russia yesterday than we did on the outside. I mean, they maybe through social media, they heard rumors. But the idea that, you know, they were sort of reassessing their loyalties and we're going to decide to somehow desert their positions within a 24-hour news cycle doesn't strike me as very credible. I think it's therefore better interpreted as just one more broader weakening of the general state of Russian morale and Russian cohesion, but unlikely to have any immediate acute effects on the battlefield. Again, these are just my guesses and I will finish by joining Angela and you in acknowledging my uncertainty about the future. But I doubt very much that we've seen a fundamental shift in the Ukraine order of battle on either side because of yesterday's events.

**GLASSER:** Yeah. No, I think that's that's really interesting. And there is this question as well though, about, you know, the devolution inside of Russia and what what is the consequence of having essentially an armed and militarized large group that doesn't see its loyalty primarily to the state, but to a non-state actor like Prigozhin? You know, Constanze, who's joining us from, I believe, an airport in Germany, Constanze Stelzenmueller, I would say this is almost a textbook definition of, you know, a country that is who's whose leadership is is weak and uncertain if you lose that monopoly on the control of force. And I'm curious whether you see that as sort of the you know, many people are portraying this sort of a beginning of a potential unraveling for the Putin regime. Do you do you agree with that? What do you make of the idea that they're we can see that there's this, you know, large non-state militia essentially that now exists inside of Russia as well as outside its borders?

**STELZENMUELLER:** Sure. Good morning, everybody from indeed, Frankfurt Airport. And for a moment there until your last sentence Susan, I thought you were maybe talking about the unraveling of Germany, which indeed is run by a very fraught coalition. But I'm glad that we're not talking about that.

**GLASSER:** There are no armed militias, are there?

**STELZENMUELLER:** I'm sure there are political forces here who wish they had something, but they'll be looking at this and saying this is not the way to do it. The joking aside, it's great to join you all. And this is a really important topic. I mean, I'm even less of a Russia expert than anybody else is. But what strikes me here is that it confirms something that I've sort of, as a complete outward observer, have thought for a long time, which is that it highlights the sort of the mafia-ness, the essential mafianess of the of Russian government power at this point. It looks, this all, you know, only marginally begins to make sense if you look at it as sort of a, you know, "Goodfellas" in Russia. In other words, it's tribal, tribal warfare between different divisions of organized crime, which of course, is part of the support structure of Putin's system from way back in the day when when he was a young street thug in St. Petersburg. The other aspect of this that borders on the comical is, is, you know, the famed Chechen irregulars who everybody was terrified of a decade ago who keep arriving too late and then and then say we're sorry we arrived too late and take selfies of themselves and drive away again.

But that aside, I, of course, see this as a something that is of deep, deep concern to the European security order. I suspect we'll want to go into that more, but let me just say two things. The unraveling of Russian governance on the borders of NATO is nothing to feel good about. It is, I think, a deeply worrisome prospect that brings security concerns that are very specific, not least because the Russians have been saying or the Kremlin has been saying it is moving nuclear weapons to Belarus. This so-called deal, the outlines of which we still don't know, but which made Prigozhin go back home, brought Belarus's dictator Lukashenko back into play politically in a way that I think we have yet to see fully play out. And it all of this has just made the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius on July 11 and 12 a lot more interesting. And I suspect it will make discussions about Ukraine's NATO membership trajectory and perhaps even its, the timeline of its EU membership a lot more pressing. Thank you.

**GLASSER:** So, Angela, you and I have spent a lot of time over the last couple of decades, you know, sort of observing Vladimir Putin at moments of crisis, at moments of public scrutiny. And I'm really kind of blown away that we haven't heard from him again since this deal, whatever it is with Prigozhin. And, you know, the speech that Vladimir Putin gave yesterday morning to the Russian public was an extraordinary speech. He outright invoked the possibility of civil war. He spoke of the disastrous example of 1917 in which, you know, thousands of Russian soldiers essentially laid down their weapons in World War I and refused to fight anymore. And a specter that that no leader of Russia would willingly invoke. He spoke of Prigozhin's stab in the back, called him a traitor, vowed to crush him. And yet then a few hours later, he seemed to have backed away from all of that, and he left it to his longtime spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, to simply announce this deal. He never spoke again to the Russian people. So the last thing the Russian people heard from Vladimir Putin was essentially, we're on the brink of civil war. And then never mind. And I just I'd love your thoughts on what to make of Putin's speech yesterday and the fact that he has not spoken to Russians since then.

**STENT:** Yeah, I mean, I agree with you. It was quite a remarkable speech. He was very angry. But obviously, by invoking what happened in 1917, what happened in 1916 when the war was going badly, and then the specter of civil war and of course, the specter of the intervention by the United States and other powers on the side of the, on the anti-Bolshevik side. So, again, warning about foreigners taking advantage of all of this. And this was a speech, I think, designed to create alarm among the listeners. He looked angry. He didn't look good. And then, as you say, he disappeared. So I think one of the problems for Putin is Prigozhin. Prigozhin was able to resonate with a significant number of Russians because in the last weeks and months, he has really become the populist hero in Russia. He has told the Russian people -- and they're watching him on the on his Telegram channel -- you know, your sons and brothers and husbands are being killed in this senseless war in Ukraine. He's come out and said there was no need to go to war in Ukraine. Ukraine wasn't threatening us. You know, they're not being provided with the right equipment, that

their commanders are ineffective. And yet the children of the elite are all sunning themselves on beaches in the south of France and not fighting. So that message has, I think, resonated. You saw yesterday when the Wagner troops were in Rostov, they were greeted in a friendly way by the population there. And when they left after the so-called deal was signed, they were applauded. So Putin has to realize that there are, that that questioning about the war and about what the elite has done to the population is definitely there in Russia. And I think what we saw yesterday from him and then the fact that he hasn't spoken to the population, again, he didn't announce the deal, would suggest that he's really quite uncertain about how to deal with this, about what's going to happen in the future. This is, I think, the most significant challenge to his rule since he came to power.

Now, I'm concerned that as a result of this, you could see even greater repression in Russia, that maybe he's thinking about how to respond to this and, of course, the clamp-downs have already being greater. And as Michael said, I think you can also see not only a change, you won't see a change in the order of battle in Ukraine, but the Russians might double down and get even more aggressive there. So the fact that he hasn't appeared again, you know, indicates to me that he's trying to figure out what the next steps are. But he has certainly not projected to his population the image of a man who is in control and who knows what's happening. It's much more just invoking the dangers, trying to intimidate the population and maybe using that in the future for a greater clampdown.

**GLASSER:** Yeah. No, it's really it's pretty striking. And, you know, like the couple of other people that we have not heard or seen from since these extraordinary events began, Ah, Sergei Shoigu, the Russian minister of defense, and Valery Gerasimov, the top general in the, the commander of the armed forces fighting this war in Ukraine, right in the middle of this very significant moment in the war and the invasion that Russia launched a year and a half ago. And so I guess my question to you is, what does that tell you, you know, about this? There are many reporters who have looked at Prigozhin's very public fight and feud with Shoigu and Gerasimov over the last few months. The fact that Putin never stepped in to stop it. And even now there's an uncertainty, it seems to me, about the command and control of the Russian military itself. So what do you make of that? Is it possible, many have thought, have speculated, that part of the deal with Prigozhin standing down and not marching on to Moscow was the firing of Shoigu. But Shoigu is a survivor. When I arrived in Moscow in 2000, he was already a senior official in the Russian government. He's managed to hang on through purge after purge after purge inside the Russian elite. And so what do you make of this? Who is in charge of the Russian military right now? And do they need to reveal themselves publicly or does that not matter in their system?

**O'HANLON:** Susan, excellent question. And probably both you and Angela are better equipped to answer it. But my instinct is to say that as you have Shoigu and Gerasimov somehow are survivors. And it's different apparently from a Western system where any time you've had major setbacks in a military campaign, you know, presidents in this country tend at some point to blame their secretary of defense or their top generalship and replace them. But also there can be these loyalties. And again, I'm reasoning by analogy with the United States, which is never a good thing to do. I don't want to be guilty of mirror imaging, but I remember how loyal George W. Bush was to Donald Rumsfeld. And and even when he finally replaced Rumsfeld with Bob Gates, Dick Cheney wasn't happy about it and thought that the firing was a mistake. So these personal loyalties can be quite striking in these kinds of, you know, especially even more so, of course, in a closed off, cloistered regime like Putin's. And he may just not have better ideas on who to ask to hold those positions. My instinct, though, is that on balance, Putin will come off as the relative winner yesterday because he did get you know, he he did get Prigozhin to stand down and to accept asylum, essentially, at best in in what looked otherwise to be a pending threat to Moscow. And so I think by raising the specter of collapse in 1917, by appealing to Russian nationalism, by talking about this great existential struggle against the West and NATO, Putin has again reverted back to the kinds of themes that so far have kept him going and will probably, unfortunately, be able to help him get through this. And whether he decides that sacrificing Gerasimov or Shoigu is a way to help restore his, you know, his strong standing with the Russian people, I don't know. I'm

sort of skeptical, though, at this point for reasons that you alluded to, Susan, these guys have been around so long, and if there was a time to fire them, it would have been presumably a year ago. And unless Putin's come up with a better idea for who to replace them, I think he may just circle the wagons and assume that this kind of rhetoric he's again employed the last 24 hours will be enough to sustain the war effort, at least for a few more months going forward. But we'll have to see. Again, I should finish on a note of agnosticism and an acknowledgment of uncertainty in my own head, but my bet is they all survive for the foreseeable future.

**GLASSER:** So you brought up, I think, an important point, which is this, Putin's consistent rationale for this threat, as with basically every other threat he's faced over the last 20 years, which is to project outward, to blame the West in some unspecified or simply untrue way, is to say that it was all a plot against him, to say that it was NATO, that it was the United States, that it was whoever the external enemy is. It's a long-held playbook in Russia. I always thought it was breathtaking, frankly, that even before the military events began to play out with Prigozhin and Wagner, the day began on Friday with Prigozhin speaking out and directly undermining Putin's very B.S. rationale, stated rationale for the invasion of Ukraine, which was this idea that somehow the West and NATO had provoked the war and Prigozhin, who is literally a creature of Putin, said to the Russian people and to the world, know that's B.S. That's not true. It's had nothing to do with NATO, this is a total lie that you've been told by the Russian leadership. Constanze, you know, this is been fascinating to me because, of course, there are many amplifiers of Putin's excuse for launching the war in Ukraine, in in the West, on both the far left and the far right. Do you know, does Yevgeny Prigozhin become like the source that is cited now to debunk that once and for all? What what do you make of that? I mean, it's a pretty frontal attack on Putin.

**STELZENMUELLER:** Well, it's a great question. I think based on our experience, all of our experience with nearly a decade of disinformation around Ukraine and around a couple of other crises, I think we know that there are certain groups of people, I mean, there's obviously malignant actors who will spread the disinformation because that's their job, and then there are other groups who just can't be reached who whose receptors to information are so selectively tuned that, you know, they will probably expend a great deal of imagination to make out that somehow Putin is playing 5D chess here. Right? But but, yes, I mean, the I think the larger issue raised by your question is that what we have seen in the last 24 hours, I think calls into question the framing, the narrative, strategic framing of key European continental powers. And of course, here I'm thinking mainly of my own country, Germany, but also to some degree of France, which is that we are dealing with a great power that is in full control of its power assets, that has a functioning social contract, that has a strategy, and that is also legitimate because it is based on an ancient civilization. Right? That's been in a nutshell the way Western European strategists have frame this this conflict and the the the sort of the consequence of all of that was always we need to offer Putin off-ramps. We need to find an accommodation that doesn't humiliate Russia. We need to return to some kind of status quo. And if we can't do that, at least find a stable equilibrium. I think what we've seen in the last 24 hours puts all of that narrative into question. Right? And and I think that is something that, again, a lot of people in in Western Europe will find hard to digest. I can imagine that some some policymakers in Eastern Europe will find themselves constitutionally unable to say things along the line of "I told you so," which I would have some sympathy for. And again, I think that this will make the conversations at the NATO summit in two and a half weeks that much more interesting.

**GLASSER:** The fatal off-ramps. I have I've been watching Russia for a long time, and I'm not sure that that word translates effectively into Russian, because the bottom line is the United States government, you have been offering Vladimir Putin off-ramps for two decades --

**STELZENMUELLER:** Three decades.

**GLASSER:** -- and still on the highway there.

**STELZENMUELLER:** Exactly. Absolutely.

**GLASSER:** So, we are getting some great questions from the audience. And I also want to invite Ishaan Tharoor of the Washington Post to jump in and ask your question of this terrific group from Brookings. We have Angela Stent here. We have Constanze Stelzenmueller live from Frankfurt. And, of course, we have Michael O'Hanlon. So please go ahead and fire with questions. And Ishaan, now I'll let you have the first one here.

**THAROOR:** Thank you so much, Susan. I really appreciate it. And I really appreciate Brookings for organizing this. This is such a helpful format in weekends like this. I joined a little bit late, so I may be asking a question that's already been directly addressed in certain ways. Constanze also somewhat answered I think, on her end, what my question is, but I'd love to get the experts to discuss a bit directly about, you know, has a particular genie come out of the bottle this weekend? And and if so, what is that genie? And and how impossible would it be to get it back into that bottle? Thanks.

**GLASSER:** Good question. Angela, do you want to take a stab?

**STENT:** Sure. I'll start off. It is a great question. So I don't think a genie has come out of the bottle in as much as Prigozhin, has been signaling a lot of his criticism for certainly for four weeks now and in the past week, particularly with a direct challenge saying that this war, you know, was senseless and that Ukraine wasn't threatening Russia. And also criticizing he's been criticizing the defense minister and the chief of the general staff for weeks, if not more, for their incompetence and for the senseless loss of lives and saying that were it not for Wagner, Bakhmut would have fallen before. I think the change was obviously the fact that he marched into Rostov. It looked as if the Wagner troops had in fact taken over Rostov, threatening to march on Moscow and then retreating. So showing, you know, how much power he had to do that. But but but I think the criticisms he's been making and the doubts that he's been raising in the you know, in the minds of the Russian public and I'm sure in some of the elite have been there for some time. So what I think we need to know going forward or ought to watch is whether this is over now and whether, in fact, the Kremlin learns any lessons from this. I would be very dubious. But if they don't change the conduct of the war and if they go back to business as usual, that's why I think we don't really know what the end of this is. This is really only the first act. And we could see more of this.

**GLASSER:** Yeah. On the first act theme, Mike, I'd love for you to expand a little bit more and one of our listeners as well, on what you think possibly Ukrainian responses might be to this. You know, some people say, well, you know, Putin has shown a certain amount of weakness and certainly internal discord, you know, is not going to be bad for the Ukrainian military. For what? What what are some possible responses you could see from Ukraine right now to this?

**O'HANLON:** Susan, it's a great question. And again, I have to emphasize the uncertainty starting off the bat, but I do try to refer back to history when I think about these kinds of situations. And of course, Putin did yesterday in invoking 1917. And, you know, most times in these kinds of big wars, even when countries start to have internal dissent, it takes a while for that to translate into a real change in policy. That's the Russian angle. You were asking more about the Ukraine angle. The question is, will the Ukrainians recognize that fact that I just stated, or at least my interpretation of of historical tendencies, as well as Russian current realities and just, you know, sort of take this in stride and not make too much of it? Or will they somehow be lured into trying too hard, too quickly with their offensive, let's say, for example, throwing six or eight brigades into just one specific place, out of these nine brigades they built over the last few months, throwing most of them just at Bakhmut because they've decided the Wagner Group is no longer dependable or resilient. I think that would be a mistake on Ukraine's part. Like I said earlier, they're better off trusting their empirical findings of what their probing attacks will tell them about Russian positions, rather than somehow concluding that a major crack has been revealed in Russia's ability to maintain its current positions. If the latter is true, the way to find out is by fighting, not by overinterpreting what happened yesterday. And so I think the Ukrainians need to be careful not to become more confident than they already may be. I admire them, as we all do. If anything,

however, I think they verge on slight overconfidence about their military prospects. And yesterday's events could push them more in that direction. So I would counsel, you know, a sober interpretation of where things stand. And all they can really keep doing is slogging away and then seeing where they find points of weakness and trying to exploit those.

**GLASSER:** Yeah. You know, I want to follow up on that. What is your assessment of just a couple of weeks into this counteroffensive? On how you think it's going, and, you know, there was this incredible buildup of expectations around this, and I'm wondering whether what you're seeing so far, and recognizing it's very early, matches up with those expectations?

**O'HANLON:** Well, it does match up with my expectations, yes. I was not particularly sanguine about the offensive given that Russia's had so long to prepare. And I think last year there was a little bit too much of a narrative that the Russian army might be near collapse. Actually, it may have been near collapse, or at least in certain sectors last year, but this the second mobilization and the several months of preparation over the fall and winter, I think have allowed Russia, including but not exclusively dependent on the Wagner Group, of course, to develop a pretty good system of trenches. They've also used a lot of explosives and mines, which we've all been reading. And of course, Ukraine does not have air power and has limited amounts of mobility and limited opportunity for real surprise, because, you know, we've been talking about potential for attacks essentially along the entire multi-hundred-kilometer front. And Russia is well aware of those possibilities. So I really think that Ukraine's best case hope is still essentially to cut the Russian position and to even that's going to be hard. They're going to have to find some local weaknesses and then exploit those and then hope that the Russian second and third and fourth and fifth and sixth trench systems and reinforcement systems somehow collapse in the rear sector, or that they can just keep slogging away, punching away, making a kilometer or two of progress here or there for weeks or months. I'm afraid the latter is more likely. There's always a possibility that Russia will, you know, have some local sectoral weaknesses in its rear echelons that will be exploited by Ukraine. And maybe they can get to the Sea of Azov somewhere in the general vicinity of Zaporizhzhia. Who knows? I mean, that's, I think, a best case over the next few months in my mind. I'd like to be wrong, but I don't see the prospects for Ukraine taking back more than, let's say, a few percent of its territory and the rest of 2023. And I don't think that's changed very much as a result of the last couple of days. Again, acknowledging all the uncertainty, hoping very much I'm wrong, but that's how I see it.

**GLASSER:** Yeah, it's a pretty sort of sobering perspective. At least it's, you know, at least leveling up some expectations, which because it was for months and months, people were waiting for this counteroffensive that the expectations just seemed to grow with each telling. Now, Constanze, you've mentioned a couple of times this upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius, not necessarily the stuff of, you know, people's day-in and day-out expectations, but I've been struck recently that it's actually for once, the dynamic seems to have changed a little bit and that it's not the U.S. kind of pulling Western European allies to be more supportive of of Ukraine, but or, you know, the Eastern European countries, but a little bit the reverse that I've noticed in the last few months that you've seen even some Western European countries being more forward leaning about, you know, Ukraine in NATO and let's go forward and let's kind of end this uncertainty. And yet the United States, perhaps with Germany, still has been more reluctant. Tell us a little bit, help us understand the kind of diplomatic politics of all of this. What is the current state of the alliance as you see it? On Ukraine.

**STELZENMUELLER:** Okay. I will do my best. I will say I do. I mostly agree with Mike on his military assessment. I just also want to point out that there is an awful lot of the American debate among Ukraine's most ardent supporters focuses on getting them more and more high tech stuff like ATACMS, in other words, very long range missiles that could reach inside Russia, or F-16s. Whereas I think the real problem is, is air defenses and ammunition. And those are in short supply on the western side as well. I was on another European tour around the Munich Security Conference in February talking to European governments who are saying, you know what, we've given we've given Ukraine every single one of our air defense systems. Right. And and as is well

known, even the United States is using up its stocks. And the fact that we are having a debate about whether or not we should give the Ukraine cluster ammunitions because we've run out of the other stuff is truly telling. And I, and I do want to get to the NATO summit in a second, but I do want to highlight this issue. Cluster ammunitions are, you know, have been the subject of a of an energetic attempt to ostracize them under international law because some because so many of them are duds, meaning that they enter the soil and then become essentially landmines. And the Russians have already significantly mined Ukrainian territory. And if the Ukrainians start shooting cluster ammunitions, that just adds to what is already a pretty horrific de-mining problem, which will be a humanitarian problem before peace and after peace road or other before a but, you know, during the war and thereafter. So I just want to raise that. Those are those are also significant issues to be discussed at the NATO summit. In other words, we have given the Ukrainians things that we no longer have and that we need to defend our eastern regions.

**STELZENMUELLER:** Now, on the summit, the of NATO's deterrence and defense is a really significant question, and not just because we have found that a lot of our equipment is antiquated, not fit for purpose, and that we've given away much of it. But I think there the alliance is essentially in agreement that NATO had to pivot back to territorial defense of deterrence, and that given what is happening in Russia right now, that argument is being reinforced on a daily basis. The main contentious issue right now, I think, is to fix the how to how to treat Ukraine and then the future of a European security order. Do we allow some kind of a loophole for considering Russia as a partner at some time in the future or do we not? There are a number of Nordic and Eastern European NATO members for whom that is currently completely inconceivable, and based on the language coming out of the Kremlin on a daily basis, you know, addressing not just Ukrainians as Nazis, but the West as as enemies, I again, I have a lot of sympathy for that.

The sharp the sharp end of the of the NATO debate will indeed be the question what do we do with Ukraine. And that right now, as you were saying, Susan, there is not so much a Washington and a U.S. administration that is pulling reluctant Europeans along. Well, the division is a different one, which is there is what I've been calling an axis of prudence between the Biden White House, particularly Berlin that is, whose governing emotion and governing apprehension appears to be a fear of escalation and which therefore has been exquisitely cautious and careful in calibrating Western responses and weapons deliveries to Ukraine. As many of the listeners will have noticed, the one of the conclusions that one can draw from from the last 24 hours is that Putin, when cornered, doesn't so much escalate as back down. Does that, is that a lesson that can be transferred to the the conflict between him and NATO? I think that's a question to be discussed. But right now what you have is a sort of semi-formal coalition of Nordics and Eastern Europeans who want a clear, short and specific path to for Ukraine to NATO membership that remedies the the sort of in-between state it was given in 2005 at the Bucharest summit, whereas the so-called quad -- and that's not the quad that we're seeing operate in the Indo-Pacific it's it's a NATO quad of U.S., France, U.K. and Germany -- is arguing that what that that is unrealistic as long as Ukraine is embroiled in war and that we instead should be giving them a package of bilateral strong security guarantees, that that's where we are.

**GLASSER:** So basically shorter version of this, there's no consensus. We haven't you know, Ukraine is not going to be asked to join NATO at this summit. And there'll be some language that kind of says in more strong terms, well, we really, really want you some day, but we're not going to spell it out. I mean, you know, there the ambiguity will remain. It strikes me, Constanze, at least for the foreseeable future.

**STELZENMUELLER:** You know, I, I that's that's one way of reading the situation. But it seems to me that the the the the the reverberations of this weekend in European capitals will be significant. Right? It is no longer possible to say, I think that that Putin is a partner or even a potential partner in negotiations with Ukraine who is who has a stable grip on power. And that that is the most significant obvious change of this weekend. Now, some of us were surmising that earlier and I was among them. I mean, to me, this always looked some of you will have heard me say this, sort of very late stage Milosevic. Sorry, that's a reference to the Yugoslav wars of the late



1990s. Dates me, I suppose. But it does, this this evidence of instability, this evidence of of unresolved power struggles among his, you know, his errand boys, as Sergey Aleksashenko was just saying in a piece, I think it really, really flips the burden of proof, right, against those in the alliance. And I think that includes the Biden administration and the German government and the Brits who currently are saying we can find a safe place for Europe and for Ukraine that does not articulate a clear path to NATO membership. I think that flips the burden of proof against them for making that argument.

**GLASSER:** All right, Angela. Late-stage Milosevic, Constanze has laid down a marker here. I am curious because, you know, both you and I have watched this for for so long and there have been so many iterations of, you know, now's the moment. Now is the moment when the, you know, the regime is weakening. This is not our first go-round here. And yet Putin has certainly proven himself a survivor, if nothing else. What do you say to those people who detect in this the beginning of the beginning of the end for Vladimir Putin?

**STENT:** Well, there are some people who've been predicting the beginning of the beginning of the end for Vladimir Putin for years now. I want to come back to for a moment to the question of escalation and intimidation. So, Putin has very successfully since this war began, intimidated the West, not so much the Ukrainian people, but including, I would say, the Biden administration, into thinking that they have to be very careful about what they do in terms of supplying Ukraine with different kinds of weapons and where they should be used because of the fear of nuclear retaliation. And that's been very true in Europe. I would say it's been true in the U.S. and it's been true in in many other cases. Now, what you could say, if you look at what happened yesterday, is yes, the emperor has no clothes. This is the beginning of the beginning of the end, and we shouldn't be so intimidated by Putin. Because, you know, they admitted the Kremlin appears to be almost paralyzed in terms of what it's going to do. On the other hand, you could say if there really are underneath the rug power struggles going on and it's not clear who's fully in command, that should maybe make us more concerned about the disposition of nuclear weapons. I mean, there were lots of rumors yesterday flying around before the, this so-called deal was reached that, you know, who would have control of these weapons? What could they do with them? There's a lot that we don't know there.

So I think we have to be, again, very cautious. We again, people have predicted Putin's end for a long time, as far as we know. He still controls the reins of power. Whatever happened with this with this deal yesterday? But but I think we do have to be concerned about about the challenges to him and where those challenges come from. And again, let's look and see. Are there personnel changes at the top? What happens in the next couple of weeks? But I don't think that it's accurate to say that, you know, the regime could collapse very soon. And then having said that, I I'd like any person who has been a student of Russia for all of my professional life know that things are stable in Russia until they aren't. And you could wake up tomorrow and something completely different can happen. So Russia surprises and and I think we just have to wait. We have to be humble about how much we can predict this.

**GLASSER:** Exactly. Well, that's an important warning I want to ask you, because a lot of people have been asking me and asking us, you know, in this Twitter conversation, Angela, a lot of speculation, of course, around Prigozhin. And, you know, many people have pointed out that he is a creature of Putin, you know, for for two decades, essentially, and they know each other for a long time. He he would not have risen, Wagner would not exist if not for the personal patronage directly of the president. Putin did not act before this even though there were already extraordinary public rifts between Prigozhin and and the Ministry of Defense for months that went sort of unanswered in any official way. You know, do you rule out or do you entertain the possibility that somehow Prigozhin thought he had Putin's support for this, that this was some kind of an effort to to undermine the leadership of the Ministry of Defense? You know, how do you interpret this kind of long term relationship between Prigozhin and Putin? Is it just a very public breakup or is it possible that something else more kind of Machiavellian was going on here?

**STENT:** Yeah, I doubt that this is a public breakup. Yes, you're completely right. I mean, Prigozhin owes his career to Putin. He spent quite a few years in jail for various offenses before he then had this kind of catering company, I guess, and was known as Putin's chef. And then we know everything else he's done with the Internet Research Agency, the the outfit that was responsible for a lot of the election interference in 2016 and now, obviously his leadership of Wagner. So we know that Putin allowed his criticisms to go, you know, I'm the unabashed for the last weeks and months, we all believe that this was a typical Putin modus operandi, that you let different people around you fight with each other and you're kind of the arbiter and you let them, you know, you control the strings here. And so I think until what happened yesterday, it looked as if Putin was willing to to let him do that. I don't know whether he crossed the line when he questioned the whole rationale for the war. We don't know that. But certainly I do not believe that this is necessarily a break between them. I think that, you know, as I said at the beginning, the Wagner organization is a very important arm of Russian foreign policy in parts of the global South. So I'm sure that the Wagner organization as such is not suddenly going to collapse. It also owns lots of assets in places like the Central African Republic and other countries, some of which the Kremlin benefits from. So there's a whole lot going on there under the surface that we know something about; we don't know enough about. But I'm waiting to see whether Prigozhin actually shows up in Belarus and what he does there. And I think we'll have more answers to that question then.

**GLASSER:** You know, Mike, that's really interesting, Angela's point here. Her view that this isn't the end of Wagner and possibly not even the full and final breakup between Putin and Prigozhin. I'm curious whether, A, you agree and B, you know, how do you characterize what just happened here? And maybe the answer is we don't have enough information yet. But, you know, people first went to these big, huge conclusions very quickly: it's a civil war in the making, it's a coup. Then they sort of backed off yesterday and now they said, well, okay, it's a mutiny, not a coup. I'm not sure, actually, that I even would agree at this point that we know enough to say whether it was a mutiny as opposed to even a coup. But I'm curious how you characterize those things when you look at it from the point of view of a military analyst.

**O'HANLON:** Great question, Susan. And acknowledging very much that, again, we don't know and Angela knows the Kremlin and Russian politics much better than I. My gut feeling, nonetheless, is that Prigozhin went too far this time and caused irreparable damage to his relationship with Putin and perhaps even his prospects for ever returning to Russia. You know, Constanze, you referred to "Goodfellas" a few minutes ago. I think about Michael Corleone in "Godfather." And it's one thing to disagree with Michael Corleone, but the minute you decide you're going to actually try to overthrow him, you can't think of too many people in the three movies who survived that decision, even even personally. And, you know, Prigozhin was marching on Moscow yesterday. I mean, you're right. We can't be 100% sure. Maybe there was some element of that that was theatrical. Maybe there was some element of that that was focused on Shoigu and Gerasimov more than on Putin or the state or the Kremlin itself. But that's a pretty big development.

And I again, can't see how Russia benefits from staging that or from building it up to be more than it really was. Because, again, unless Ukraine had been lured into a reckless, you know, rapid offensive operation that it otherwise would not have undertaken, it's not as if the world has somehow lessened its resolve or its guard or changed its tactics for dealing with Putin as a result of yesterday. So I think it was real. I think Prigozhin in probably a semi-frenzied, semi-rational state, but mostly perhaps irrational, I should say, actually thought he could create a change in government, at least at the level of minister of defense, by essentially carrying out what looks to me like somewhere between an attempted coup and an attempted civil war. It was a really bad attempt. It was foolish, its prospects were always mediocre and it wasn't very rationally thought through, which I think is why Prigozhin ultimately backed down. But I think he crossed a line and I don't expect to see him personally survive this in any kind of professional or perhaps even literal way. Yes, the Wagner Group will in some way be kept on, but I think it'll probably be brought more closely under the Russian state at this juncture. Those are just my guesses. I acknowledge they are guesses.

**GLASSER:** You know, I want to follow quickly because I'm sure people are wondering about this in terms of the fighting in Ukraine and the Wagner fighters versus the regular Russian Ministry of Defense fighters. Why is it that Russia has leaned more and more on Wagner over the last year and a half? Is it because of weaknesses that have sprung up or that are sort of obvious in the conscript army model that the regular troops are following? Or what can you tell us about their effectiveness and utilities, a fighting force in Ukraine versus the regular Ministry of Defense? I mean, Prigozhin and his very public rants that he's had over the last few months has basically accused them of being incompetent, of throwing their own sort of throwing regular Russian soldiers into a sort of conveyor belt of death, of not providing sufficient ammunition, of corruption. You know, tell us a little bit about the military piece of this.

**O'HANLON:** Right. Well, my interpretation is that for a while, the Wagner Group gave the Kremlin and Russia in general at least two things. One is sort of a plausible deniability in a way that allowed them to go after resources and prop up corrupt regimes in the Middle East and Africa. And, you know, Putin was willing to do that with Russian state power in Syria. But in general, in some of the more shady operations in some of the, you know, sweetheart deals far away in the remote corners of the earth, he preferred to see sort of a group one step removed from the Russian government do this. And Wagner provided that. Wagner and Prigozhin also provided the ability to challenge the United States directly within Syria. And you'll recall the famous incident about four years ago when the Wagner Group was actually approaching a U.S. military position and shooting at it in central Syria, and the United States called in air power and killed a couple of hundred Wagner fighters. And this was remarkable when you think about a couple of hundred Russians being killed by American air power and basically no one really talking about it, Russia not going out and retaliating, at least not directly for that action, because Putin knew that what he was doing was risky, but he was willing to take the chance at trying to push us out of Syria. He just didn't want to do it with a direct instrument of the Russian state because then he wouldn't have had this ability to perhaps deny it, let it be sort of forgotten, back off from that effort the way he did with Wagner. So all that seemed to be, those kinds of dynamics seemed to be creating opportunities. And then, of course, the Wagner group could recruit prisoners and other people that Putin wouldn't have wanted to admit to the Russian state, that he was doing quite that cynically. But he could allow Wagner to do it, and maybe that would help in Ukraine as well. Well, now we've seen the limits of this whole set of ideas and the dangers for Putin of this whole set of ideas. So I think Wagner will be, again, reined in a little more tightly or perhaps put under alternative leadership. But what was appealing for a while has played out its course and now come back to boomerang and hurt Putin. So I don't think he'll let things go on in the same way they did before.

**GLASSER:** Well, predictions are a dangerous business at this point involving Russia, involving the war in Ukraine again and again and again, literally for 20 years. Putin has some surprises. All that being said, we're about we're running out of our time. So I think my final question to each of you, and I'll start with Constanze, is just not asking you to, you know, look in the crystal ball that none of us actually have, but go ahead and give us a couple of things that you're going to be watching for over the next few days to help us understand better what we've just seen here. What what are you particularly going to be focusing on? And, you know, do you see this as something we're going to remember six months or a year from now? Or is it just going to be a minor blip?

**STELZENMUELLER:** Oh, absolutely. I think we're going to remember this date. And I think this is for all of us who work in this space we're going to be watching very closely from now on. Obviously, the the thing that is coming up right now is the NATO summit. There's one listener asking about security guarantees. I've heard in Europe a senior policy maker saying that's a misnomer. It means we give them things, meaning lots of weapons, continually. That will be perfectly firm, I think, in Western capitals, but unfortunately, it's also contingent upon elections. The other thing to watch is, is the Kremlin's relationship with neighboring countries like Belarus and Kazakhstan. That I think is where a great deal of interesting relationship issues will play out, which

will allow us to measure just where the standing of the Kremlin and of Putin himself is going. Thank you very much. This has been really been great.

**GLASSER:** Well, thank you. Good luck on your travels, and we'll, we'll do it again. Angela. What, what are you going to be watching for? What are some data points through the noise that might make us understand this a little bit better?

**STENT:** Well, first of all, I agree with everything that Constanze has said. So I am going to be watching are there changes at the top? Will Shoigu still be the defense minister, Gerasimov the chief of the general staff? If there are changes at the top, if there is new leadership, then I think that will certainly tell us something about Prigozhin's influence. But also then we have to watch and see how that impacts the conduct of the war. And the other thing I'm going to be watching is will we hear again from Prigozhin? When will we hear from him? And also, what will we hear from Lukashenko? Because suddenly Lukashenko seems to have assumed a role that surprised a number of people, given that he seemed to be so subordinate to Putin. So I think those are all of the things that I'm going to watch for. And I'm also going to be watching for what's happening domestically in Russia and whether you have even a greater crackdown as a result of this.

**GLASSER:** Lot to watch for, that's for sure. And I got to agree with you on Lukashenko. His his very unlikely emergence as a as a diplomatic negotiator is a twist I think most people were not expecting. You know, maybe next year will, all eyes will be on Minsk. Mike, I'm going to ask you to finish us up here. What are the things that you are going to be watching to help understand what just played out in Russia?

**O'HANLON:** Well, thank you. And I certainly agree with Angela and Constanze and you that the fate of Gerasimov, of the fate of Shoigu, and also obviously Prigozhin will be front and center. I would have been watching the battlefield dynamics closely anyhow, and certainly to see if there are any additional Russian weaknesses that emerged from this will be a key question. And then to go back to Constanze and your emphasis on the Vilnius summit that's coming up within a month, I, too, will be curious to see whether those who oppose NATO membership for Ukraine and I'm in that category myself, whether there is just sort of a tendency to try to play out the debate and let it sort of slow roll or whether there is an alternative way of framing the discussion a little bit like Navalny did in a Washington Post op-ed today where he talked about a vision for a future post-Putin Russia that had to be part of our way of thinking. And that's part of why Lise Howard and I have written about an alternative security architecture for Europe that would not necessarily require Ukraine to be in NATO but would do more than just give Ukraine weapons, that would try to get a big training mission on the ground with Western powers there, essentially a tripwire of sorts and framed under a different kind of security community. Whether you like our idea or not, I'll be curious to see whether Biden wants to think big about the future of Europe or if he just sort of slow roll, slow rolls the NATO membership question out of purported prudence. Now, I prefer the former, but we'll have to see. And Constanze is right to talk about this sort of axis of prudence, but it can also be an axis of excessive incrementalism. And I hope they'll be some bigger ideas debated in Vilnius. Thanks.

**GLASSER:** Well, thank you, guys. What a terrific discussion. And helping to make sense of things that are really hard to make sense of. In the meantime, I know there were lots of popcorn memes for floating around Twitter over the last few days. My guess is keep the microwave ready because there's going to be more acts of this thing and and a lot of stuff that we don't necessarily understand in real time as is playing out. So, I want to thank Brookings for convening us all this morning, Constanze Stelzenmueller, Angela Stent, and Michael O'Hanlon. What a terrific group of people and what a stimulating conversation about events that we will be discussing for a long time to come. Thank you all.