

PUTIN'S FSB: FAILED STRAIGHTFORWARDNESS AND BENEVOLENCE

[NB: Check the byline, thanks. /~Rayne]

It's rather amusing that in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* – the ancient Chinese monograph used globally to teach the fundamentals of warfare – spying is addressed in the very last of its 13 chapters.

To conduct successful and effective warfare, intelligence collection and analysis including spying should be a country's *first* consideration. A nation's leader can't make an informed, reasoned decision to take any military action let alone commit resources ahead of the possibility of war, without knowing everything possible about the potential opponent as well as knowledge of one's own state.

Somehow Vladimir Putin neglected this critical lesson, subordinating the critical nature of Russia's own FSB to his narcissism. He's learned the hard way – assuming he's actually getting the truth from anyone in his circle – that the intelligence on which he operated was deeply flawed.

He has no one to blame but himself but he'll be sure to punish others for his weakness. The director and deputy of FSB have allegedly been taken into custody for questioning.

I actually feel a little sorry for FSB personnel, if the first letter from the FSB insider is true; political conditions didn't allow anyone to share anything but happy talk of victory based on the narrowest of intelligence, because Putin apparently can't handle the truth.

From *The Art of War*:

15. Spies cannot be usefully employed without a certain intuitive sagacity.

16. They cannot be properly managed without benevolence and straightforwardness.

17. Without subtle ingenuity of mind, one cannot make certain of the truth of their reports.

Assuming the first FSB letter is true – and the detention of FSB leadership suggests it is – Putin wasn't able to exercise the necessary benevolence and straightforwardness necessary to obtain candid and complete reports. How can spies and analysts obtain and present the truth when they're under tight political restrictions to report only what a volatile president wants to hear?

Furthermore, if the president is afraid of his own intelligence community to the point where he ensures they are suffocatingly restrained, he will get out of them nothing useful.

~ ~ ~

Let's look at the organization of the Russian "coercive apparatus" which has been compartmented to reduce the chances of a coup. Adam Casey, post-doc fellow at Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies at the University of Michigan, shared a Twitter thread describing this system.

1	What are the prospects for a coup against Putin in Russia? A thread on what we know about coups in other similar regimes and how the Russian coercive apparatus is structured to prevent coups 1/16
---	---

2	<p>First of all, the grievances that have motivated coups elsewhere are present in Russia: battlefield setbacks, low morale, economic catastrophe, disgruntled elites harmed by Putin's actions</p>
3	<p>But Putin has been preparing for the risks posed by a palace or military coup for decades. The Russian coercive apparatus in fact has multiple mechanisms to prevent a coup</p>
4	<p>First, Russia has a large praetorian guard, the Federal Protective Service (Федеральная служба охраны). The FSO is the successor to the KGB 9th Directorate and is responsible for leadership protection and is well armed. Estimates of its size vary widely</p>

5	<p>Second, Putin consolidated his internal security troops under the National Guard (Росгвардия) in 2016. I don't see the Guard as a coup-proofing measure per se, but more about centralizing the agencies useful for repressing mass protests in Russia</p>
6	<p>Yet by removing the possible use of the regular army for repression at home, Rosgvardia does help reduce some of the motivations for coups. In comparative perspective, we know militaries really dislike being used for domestic repression and it has motivated coups</p>
7	<p>Third, Russia has the FSB. The FSB is not only large, with its own security troops, but it has one key mechanism to prevent a military coup in Russia: the military counterintelligence department (Департамента военной контрразведки ФСБ)</p>

8	<p>The Soviet system had essentially three components to prevent a military coup: 1) party membership for officers/soldiers; 2) political commissars; 3) embedded secret police ('special departments'). This was coup prevention through the penetration of the army by monitoring agents</p>
9	<p>Contemporary Russia has 1 of those 3 mechanisms. Officers are not generally members of the ruling party (United Russia) and when active duty officers have run for office (like Gen. Kartapolov last year) it was unusual. He also retired his commission</p>
10	<p>Commissars are also absent. There is technically a successor to the main political administration (the org responsible for managing the commissars) but it does not function in the same way as during the USSR)</p>

11	<p>The only major part of the Soviet system present is the military counterintelligence department of the FSB. This department monitors the military. It was strengthened considerably a couple months after Putin came into office. He once described the department as a “mini-FSB”</p>
12	<p>The FSB is much more autonomous than the Soviet KGB (it is not under any central party control), it is also engaged far more in corruption than the Soviet service. Corruption of course was (especially later on) a problem in the KGB, but in the FSB it is more pronounced</p>

13	<p>In short, there are a lot of mechanisms to prevent a coup in Russia. Yet in other ways Russia also doesn't have a typically 'coup proofed' military. His nephew doesn't run the 1st armored division in Moscow or anything like that. It has a professional officer corps</p>
14	<p>Instead, the Russian military's loyalty to the system is generally sought through autonomy and insulation from politics, and of course the watchful gaze of the FSB military counterintelligence department.</p>
15	<p>In part for these reasons, I think the most likely scenario for actually ousting Putin is elite defection rather than a coup. It is really hard to coordinate a coup even against a hated dictator, especially with a security apparatus as extensive as Putin's</p>

16

But it might be more likely for elites to defect from the regime rather than use extensive repression to save Putin. This too is perhaps unlikely, but the costs of defection can be less than the costs of a failed coup (jail, exile, death). /end

There are so many moving parts watching other moving parts it's a wonder anything constructive has ever been done – and perhaps there hasn't. Each function must be constantly looking over their shoulder making straight feedback difficult. Benevolence as The Art of War calls it, or the lack thereof, expressed in suspicion inhibits productivity.

When the apparatus spends so much time looking inward, constantly second guessing what the leader wants to hear while working under pressure from kleptocratic forces, it's irrational to expect lucid, honest intelligence. Straightforwardness in reporting is a casualty.

~ ~ ~

The quality of Russian intelligence is not the only loss; nine Russian generals are reported to have died since the invasion of Ukraine began.

I used the passive voice there because Russia and its predecessor the USSR have an unfortunate history when it comes to losing generals.

Materiel losses continue to mount..

Video showing 5 captured Russian T-72B tanks and what looks like a Tor air defense TLAR in the background. Reportedly near the town of Mokrets. <https://t.co/8YM6SIj747> pic.twitter.com/jDEW3LCWJk

– Rob Lee (@RALee85) March 11, 2022

...along with personnel losses.

Russian armored column of about 30 tanks and APCs is ambushed as it tries to advance on Kyiv. At beginning of the video you can see an anti-tank weapon being fired, left of picture.
<https://t.co/prTZgNhGXm>

– Euan MacDonald (@Euan_MacDonald) March 12, 2022

There can't be much regular army to call up to replace those killed, injured, or surrendered if Putin is calling for volunteers from elsewhere like Syria.

This morning, #Putin told his national security team that #Russia should begin accepting 'volunteers' from the #MiddleEast, to fight in #Ukraine.

Now we have this video, shared by #Moscow, that appears to include [some] #Assad Republican Guard personnel:
pic.twitter.com/6oL1Jsn5W0

– Charles Lister (@Charles_Lister) March 11, 2022

Wagner Group personnel were detailed as part of a hit squad to decapitate Ukraine's government, but now there appears to be wider recruitment. Again, this also suggests limited regular army for deployment to Ukraine.

Russia's notorious Wagner mercenary group is reportedly recruiting like mad to raise a private army to fight in Ukraine. Previous requirements dropped. Come one, come all! (The existing main contingent is to remain in Africa, however.) <https://t.co/zFVELuY9e0>

— Kevin Rothrock (@KevinRothrock) March 11, 2022

Contractors don't have the same motivations as regular army; they may not accept getting paid in rubles which makes sanctions even more important to deterring mercenaries. They're not loyal to a nationalist cause if they're not Russian, which may make them harder to command and control.

How will the Russian army respond if it feels it's not only been set up to fail, its efforts potentially undermined by contractors while it suffers for lack of adequate support? We've seen enough anecdotes about Russian troops who had inadequate food and water from day one; they may have been given permission to loot. What happens when remaining Russian military leadership feels the weight of condemnation and ridicule directed at their mission, let alone its futility?

None of this suggests the kind of discipline necessary to prevent a coup.

~ ~ ~

Outside the "coercive apparatus," the Russian government, and the shuttered social and independent media, the truth about Russia's illegal and misbegotten invasion of Ukraine has begun to leak through to the public. Protests have made it onto television:

Vladimir Soloviyev, usually one of the Kremlin's most reliable chief propagandists, had to interrupt guests on his prime time television talk show to stop their criticism of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Speaking during a broadcast on Russia 1, Karen Shakhnazarov, a filmmaker and state pundit, said the conflict in Ukraine risked isolating Russia.

He told Mr Soloviyev: "I have a hard

time imagining taking cities such as Kyiv. I can't imagine how that would look."

He went on to call for the conflict to be brought to an end, saying: "If this picture starts to transform into an absolute humanitarian disaster, even our close allies like China and India will be forced to distance themselves from us."

This is an interesting sleight of hand. Soloviyev has been sanctioned by the European Union, his Italian villa seized. He stopped the protest against the invasion on his program featured on Russia 1 network, but he could have prevented the content from being broadcast if he really wanted to keep it off the air.

Similarly, a protest by a military officer also leaked through a talk show on Zvezda, the Russian ministry of defense's network. The officer wanted the deaths of his comrades honored thought the program host asked him to stop his line of commentary. It was another subtle method of telling the public there are many military deaths in Ukraine to be acknowledged by the government and the public.

The invasion began only 17 days ago and it's already been likened to "Afghanistan, but even worse" on Russian television.

One doesn't need to be a trained intelligence analyst to understand what this means in a country which does not allow much free speech.

~ ~ ~

In the first chapter of The Art of War it is written, "All warfare is based on deception."

Deceiving one's own country about warfare treats them like the enemy. After a while it becomes difficult to know who the enemy really is. We might wonder if Russia's FSB has come to the same conclusion.