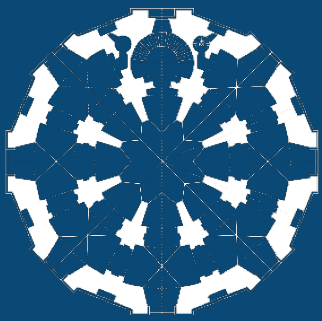

OXFORD MIDDLE EAST REVIEW

Vol. 6, No. 1 (Trinity 2022)

Oxford Middle East Review is a non-partisan project that seeks to bring together a wide range of individuals with different backgrounds, beliefs, ideas, aspirations, viewpoints, and methodologies, while sharing an adherence to principles of equality, social justice, freedom of speech, and tolerance.

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The editorial board would like to thank the St Antony's GCR and Antonian Fund, and the Middle East Centre at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, for their generous support. The editors are also most grateful to our peer reviewers for their time and feedback.

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From the Editor

Dear Reader,

The 2021-2022 editorial team of the *Oxford Middle East Review* (OMER) is proud to present the sixth edition of our journal. OMER was founded in 2016 by two students of Middle Eastern Studies at St Antony's College, Oxford, which we are proud to still call our institutional home. OMER is a space for students and scholars to thoughtfully engage with issues pertaining to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

2021-2022 has been a record-breaking year for OMER on all fronts. Our 20-person editorial team is the largest in OMER's history. This capable group of individuals has revived the OMER blog; team members and outside contributors alike have published over twenty articles on our site over the course of this year, including book reviews, interviews with academics and activists, political commentary, and poetry. OMER's social media following has more than doubled this year, allowing our content to reach even more readers and expanding the potential of future editions.

The theme of this year's issue is "Borders and Boundaries," which invited contributors to consider the functional as well as intangible aspects of borders. From a remarkable range of submissions, our team has chosen six articles that explore the theme from various original perspectives. First, Jan Stormann investigates the conceptual boundaries of status and identity in his study on *Dabiq*. Ian Parmeter then looks at how states wield influence beyond their borders, examining Russia's strategy in the Middle East. Elizabeth Monier's article kicks off a series of policy pieces, where she offers recommendations for reimagining minority/majority boundaries. Benedetta Galeazzi looks at the impact of coronavirus restrictions on refugee rights in the Levant; Erin Hayes' article then explores the conceptual border of neutrality in humanitarian aid. Finally, the issue concludes with Marjorie Kelly's examination of the ways a museum exhibition on contemporary Muslim fashion crossed cultural boundaries and expanded viewers' apertures.

We are proud to present such a diverse array of articles from contributors around the world. OMER's success is a testament to our hardworking team, our generous peer reviewers, and the importance of student-run initiatives for quality scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa region. It is also a testament to readers like you, who support our endeavours.

Juliet O'Brien, St Antony's College
Managing Editor

Author Biographies

Jan Stormann *is a lecturer at Sciences Po, a student at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration (ENA) and a regular contributor to the Chatham House Common Futures Conversations.*

Before receiving his MSc in IR from LSE and his BA from Sciences Po, he helped develop quantum computers and statistical designs for computer experiments. Since then, he has researched strategic and policy issues. He worked under the guidance of Prof. Berezin at the Department of Sociology at Cornell University and served in the French and Austrian public sector, most recently in the French Policy Planning Staff.

Ian Parmeter *is a Research Scholar at the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Australian National University.*

He worked for 25 years in Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where his diplomatic postings included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Russia (as Deputy Head of Mission) and Lebanon (as Ambassador). From 2004 to 2015 he was Assistant Director-General in Australia's Office of National Assessments, where he oversaw analyses of developments in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa.

Elizabeth Monier *is a researcher in Modern Middle East Studies at the University of Cambridge.*

She holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies and works on the contemporary politics and history of the Middle East. She is currently researching state-society relations and minorities in Egypt, Iraq, and the Arab Gulf States.

Benedetta Galeazzi *is pursuing a Master's Degree at Sciences Po in International Security within the Paris School of International Affairs.*

Having received her Bachelor's degree at King's College London in International Relations, she is now specialising regionally on the Middle East and thematically in Human Rights as part of her postgraduate studies. Her current research focuses on the protection of refugees with disabilities in the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as on the radicalisation amongst refugee communities in Lebanese camps.

Erin Hayes *is pursuing an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy at the University of Oxford.*

Before coming to Oxford, Erin studied Political Science and Arabic at the University of Notre Dame, then moved to Egypt, where she worked at The American University in Cairo and then in refugee legal aid.

Marjorie Kelly *was Associate Professor of Anthropology at the American University of Kuwait, following her teaching career in California and Hawaii.*

She also consulted for the National Museum of Qatar. Dr. Kelly has published numerous articles on the presentation of culture and heritage for museum and tourist audiences, as well as editing a volume on Islamic civilization. Prior to obtaining her Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles, she served as Director of Community Programs for the Foreign Policy Association in New York City.

Russia's Non-Traditional Statecraft in the Middle East and its Application to Ukraine

Ian Parmeter

In the past decade, the Middle East has again become a Russian foreign policy priority – reversing Moscow's reduced focus on the region from the 1970s, when the United States took on the dominant external role. This renewed interest was a result of growing tensions between Russia and the West from the mid-2000s and the Arab Uprisings of 2011, which led to the Syrian civil war. The Russian military intervened in Syria in 2015 to support Bashar al-Assad, Syria's dictator; this deployment of hard power has received comprehensive analysis, much of it critical, particularly from Western governments. However, Russia's use of non-traditional methods of statecraft -- aimed at supplementing its military strategy, countering international and potential domestic criticism of its intervention, and advancing its interests in other parts of the Middle East -- has been less closely examined. This non-traditional statecraft includes the use of mercenaries in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and elsewhere. It is also evident in sophisticated influence-building techniques, and use of cyber technology aimed at shaping the views of governments and the public in the Middle East. These methodologies have also been on display during Russia's war in Ukraine this year. This paper outlines the augmentation of Russia's traditional diplomatic and military capabilities through deployment of non-traditional statecraft to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. It assesses Russia's foreign policy successes to date and Russia's likely use of this hybrid strategy in the future.

How Russia came back to the Middle East

During the first half of the Cold War (1950s-60s) the Middle East was a major theatre of Soviet-American rivalry. While the U.S. supported Israel and cultivated relationships with the conservative Gulf monarchies, the Soviet Union backed more radical Arab states, particularly Egypt. Though the Soviet Union sought to cultivate ties with Syria and Iraq, military coups in both hindered a consistent policy until the 1970s, when Syria's Hafez al-Assad and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, both ruthless autocrats, seized power and stabilised their regimes. The Soviet Union's doctrinal atheism further limited the establishment of ties with Gulf Arab states, and Moscow was shut out of Iran because of the Shah's partnership with the U.S.

The disastrous Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli War was also a defeat for Soviet arms, compounded by the death of pro-Soviet Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. The definitive break occurred in 1972, when Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet military advisers and turned to the U.S. for both material and diplomatic support.

U.S.-brokered negotiations between Egypt and Israel through the 1970s culminated in the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the subsequent peace treaty. This represented a major foreign policy win for Washington, and a zero-sum loss for Moscow, as the accords confirmed the U.S. as the primary external actor wielding

influence in the Middle East.

Moscow's attention to the region was further reduced as a consequence of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and Moscow's failure in the subsequent nine-year war. Moreover, throughout the 1980s, Moscow's focus on foreign policy was overshadowed by the growing internal strains of the weakening Soviet Union, which would lead to its collapse in 1991. Though the last Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, sought a more accommodating relationship with the U.S., including by sending Soviet forces to join the international coalition to eject Iraq from Kuwait in 1990-'91, his main priorities were domestic: a last ditch effort to save the union through economic and social reforms represented by *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union caused political, economic and social upheaval in Russia for a decade. From Russia's perspective, Western leaders took advantage of the resulting power vacuum in Eastern Europe to expand NATO right to Russia's border - dashing prospects of a less adversarial post-Soviet relationship. Vladimir Putin, who had succeeded Russia's first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin, in 2000, made clear his anger over Western policies in his landmark address to the NATO Security Conference in Munich in 2007. Putin accused the U.S. of an aggressive foreign policy aimed at establishing a U.S.-dominated unipolar world and neglecting the views and interests of other states. Putin's speech marked the beginning of a new Cold War style rivalry between the US and Russia.

In this environment, the Middle East again became of interest to Russia. President George W. Bush's poorly conceived and executed invasion of Iraq in 2003 highlighted American vulnerability in the region; this legacy overshadowed the foreign policies of his successors, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. Through deft diplomacy across the region, which took advantage of U.S. missteps, and calibrated military interventions (Syria, 2015 and Libya, 2019), Putin has been able to counter U.S. policies and develop productive relations with the most important regional actors – the major Arab states, Israel, Iran, and Turkey – despite their mutual antagonisms. Remarkably, he has for some years been the only world leader to be on personal good terms with the heads of all significant countries in the region.[1] How his aggression in Ukraine might affect this remains to be seen.

Russia's alliance structures in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

This personal diplomacy is a substantial feat. Essentially, Putin has achieved it by isolating Russia's bilateral relations with individual states in the MENA region from the region's broader antagonisms. A brief examination of Russia's dealings with individual Middle East states demonstrates this.

Syria is the only MENA state with which Russia has a formal alliance, and Russia's actions there have the potential to affect, for better or worse, its

[1] This remains the case at time of writing (May 2022), though if the war in Ukraine extends for some time, there may be an impact on relations with individual leaders. For example, Israel has reacted adversely to a suggestion by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov that Hitler had Jewish origins so Ukrainian leader Zelensky, despite being Jewish, could still be a Nazi. See: Tia Goldenberg, "Israel lashes out at Russia over Lavrov's Nazism remarks," *Associated Press*, 2 May 2022.

relations with all other states in the region.[2] Syria's progressive descent into widespread anarchy, as the civil war developed from 2011, rang alarm bells across the region. Many states feared that a spill-over of the violence there would affect their own security, especially after Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) emerged as a significant force in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Moreover, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey had to cope with huge numbers of Syrians displaced by the conflict. Iran was alarmed for different reasons; it saw Syria as an essential bridge to Lebanon and its Shia client, Hizballah, which would be threatened if there was regime change in Damascus.

Moderate states in the region, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and Egypt, looked to the U.S. for a solution, given Washington's past interventions in the Middle East.[3] However, President Obama, who ran in the 2008 elections on a pledge to extract American ground forces from Iraq,[4] was reluctant to intervene in another war in the Middle East. In this context, Russia's resolute but carefully calibrated intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 provided a significant contrast to Obama's inaction. All leaders in the region, including those with no brief for Assad, were impressed by Putin's determination to support his Arab ally. This was perceived as a stark contrast to the U.S.' apparent abandonment of former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in 2011.[5]

The Gulf Arab states were formally opposed to Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war.[6] However, this attitude was counterbalanced by their anger with the U.S. over what they saw as Washington's tilt to Iran through the 2015 nuclear deal.[7] Additionally, much like Israel, the Gulf states worried about the inconsistencies in Obama's approach to the Middle East; particularly following his refusal to stand by his declared "red line" concerning Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013.[8]

With Saudi Arabia's and its Gulf Arab allies' confidence in the U.S. shaken under Obama, they welcomed Putin's outreach during Obama's second term – not least in order to display their displeasure with the American administration. They saw

[2] The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed by the Soviet Union and Syria in October 1980. Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, has adopted the treaty. It provides for military cooperation and coordination in times of crisis. Hafez al-Assad's long-serving defence minister, Mustapha Tlas, claimed the treaty had a secret clause in which the Soviet Union promised to come to Syria's aid in the event of external aggression, but this was never confirmed by the Soviets.

[3] Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman.

[4] Lawrence K. Korb, "The promised withdrawal from Iraq," *American Progress*, 27 February 2009.

[5] Arab reaction to Russia's intervention in Syria is examined in detail in Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* 31 October 2019. Rumer's summary is, "By reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and saving an old client, Moscow sent a message to other Middle Eastern regimes that it is a reliable partner."

[6] William Maclean, "Gulf Arabs oppose Russia role in Syria, still bent on Assad's ouster," *Reuters*, 22 September 2015.

[7] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by Iran, the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and Germany, which lifted economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for Iran's curtailing its nuclear enrichment program.

[8] See Yoel Guzansky and Azriel Bermant, "The Best of the Worst: Why Iran's Enemies Support the Nuclear Deal," *Foreign Affairs*, 13 August 2015, which provides detailed analysis of the Gulf states' concerns over the Iran deal and what they saw as the Obama administration's inconsistency in its approach to the Middle East.

Trump's inauguration in 2017 as a positive development for their relationship with the U.S.; Trump made a major gesture by honouring Saudi Arabia with a trip to Riyadh as his first presidential overseas visit. However, Trump's visit did not deter Saudi King Salman from making a rare visit abroad to Moscow that October.[9] Putin subsequently reciprocated this gesture with a visit to Riyadh in October 2019.[10]

That said, Putin's motivations in his dealings with the Gulf Arab states lie more in bilateral than geostrategic interests. Russia is the world's second-largest oil exporter after Saudi Arabia - though Western sanctions imposed this year over Russia's invasion of Ukraine will probably affect this. Putin therefore seeks to work with the Gulf States in an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+) arrangement to manage global oil production and prices. He also wants to encourage them to invest in massive natural gas projects in Russia's Arctic region. Moreover, he seeks to increase Russia's share of the lucrative Gulf market for arms sales, which the U.S. has long monopolized. He took advantage of strikes on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 (which Washington and Riyadh blamed on Iran) in order to claim that Russia's S-400 air defence system would have prevented the attacks.[11] As well, Putin judiciously avoided taking sides in the dispute between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt on the one hand and Qatar on the other (2017-2021).

The reality is that, apart from cooperation on energy, the Gulf is a non-core area of foreign policy activity for Russia. Though it would like to loosen Washington's grip on the region, Moscow does not have the resources to take over the U.S. security role. Rather, Putin seeks to dilute the U.S. role through a multinational arrangement that would include a number of extra-regional powers, including Russia.[12]

Accordingly, Russia announced a Security Concept for the Gulf in July 2019.[13] The project envisages a regional security cooperation organisation whose members would comprise the Gulf states (including Iran) and external stakeholders involving Russia, the U.S., the European Union, India and China. Given the plan's impossibly broad nature and proposed involvement of antagonistic parties, Moscow could hardly have been surprised by the tepid initial reaction to the initiative. Nor was international reception of the plan helped by the fact that it was announced by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, rather than Putin or Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov - suggesting it was a relatively low foreign policy priority. In calling for expansive dialogue between Iran and all Gulf states overseen by the UN, the GCC, the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Concept ambitiously sought to establish an Action Group to prepare an international conference on security and

[9] Leonid Issaev, "Decoding King Salman's Visit to Moscow," *Al Jazeera*, 4 October 2017.
[10] *Al Jazeera*, "Putin visits Saudi Arabia in sign of growing ties," 15 October 2019.
[11] Michelle Nichols, "Exclusive: UN investigators find Yemen's Houthis did not carry out Saudi oil attack," *Reuters*, 9 January 2020; Adam Taylor, "For Saudi Arabia, an oil field attack was a disaster. For Russia, it's a weapons sales pitch," *Washington Post*, 21 September 2019.
[12] Noted Russian scholar Bobo Lo sets out this aspect of Russian foreign policy in *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London, Chatham House, 2015).
[13] *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, "Presentation on Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region," 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru.

cooperation in the Gulf area.[14]

The Trump administration, despite its relatively benign approach to Russia, seemingly saw no value in the initiative and largely ignored the idea.[15] Biden has done the same. China politely praised it but showed no sign of taking it further.[16] The only Middle Eastern states to welcome the project were Russia's regional partners, Syria and Iran, which almost certainly rules out support from other Arab states.[17] Given these divisions, the timing for the Russian initiative was unpropitious.

Russia's relations with non-Arab regional states such as Iran, Israel and Turkey have been in line with its strategy with the GCC states: to undertake bilateral dealings and keep Moscow separate from broader regional frictions.

Russian-Iranian relations are rooted in a troubled past that continues to haunt their contemporary ties; as neither fully trusts the other, misunderstandings abound. They share a common interest in their mutual hostility towards the U.S. and their support for the Assad regime. However, their objectives are fundamentally different: Russia's focus is global, while Iran's is regional. Moscow has shown repeatedly that it is prepared to break its commitments to Iran when larger benefits are on offer elsewhere.[18] Russia has other Middle Eastern partners, some of whom are rivals to Tehran, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. And Russia can afford to be relatively complacent in its relations with Iran, as Tehran has no other major power toward which to turn.

Russian relations with Israel have shown the most dramatic improvement since Moscow's intervention in Syria. In the last century, Jews emigrating to Israel from the former Soviet Union and its successor states often harboured bitterness over the anti-Semitism they had experienced. Over time, that has been gradually replaced by growing interest and curiosity in the culture of their former homelands. Russian is now the fourth most-widely spoken language in Israel after Hebrew, Arabic, and English.[19] Moreover, Israeli politicians seek to cultivate the Russian-speaking vote, a factor that helped forge a strong relationship between long-time Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

[14] Detailed explanations of the concept were left to relatively minor officials: For example, *Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations*, "Press conference by Charge d'Affaires of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Polyanskiy, on Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region," August 8, 2019, http://www.russiaun.ru.

[15] Paul Saunders, "How does Washington see Russia's Gulf security concept?" *Al Monitor*, 11 October 2019.

[16] *Tass*, "China welcomes Russia's collective security concept for Persian Gulf," October 8, 2019.

[17] See, for example, Theodore Karasik, "Is Russia's 'old' Gulf security plan the best it can do?" *Arab News*, July 30, 2019.

[18] Several examples are set out in Witold Rodkiewicz, "Russia's Middle East Policy – Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives," *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW),* Warsaw, 2017 https://www.osw.waw.pl. Among them is a secret Russian agreement with the US in 1995, when Moscow under President Yeltsin was seeking US financial aid: Russia agreed not to export arms or military technology to Iran after 1999. (This agreement was abrogated by Putin shortly after he came to power – when it was evident that the US had no intention of launching a Russian "Marshall Plan".) Another was Putin's quid pro quo with Obama in 2009 as part of the short-lived "reset" of bilateral relations: Russia backed a new UNSC resolution imposing further sanctions on Iran, and then-President Medvedev expanded the ban to include S-300 surface-to-air missiles that Russia had contracted to sell Iran in 2007.

[19] Alpha Omega Translations, "The Four Most Important Languages of Israel," March 4, 2019, info@alphaomegatranslations.com.

Netanyahu and Putin.

Israel under Netanyahu, and now Naftali Bennett, is amenable to many elements of Putin's policy in Syria. Israel hates uncertainty and does not favour changes to its regional security environment, particularly ones it does not initiate.[20] In the early stages of the Syrian civil war, Israel was conflicted. A relatively peaceful democratic transition in Syria offered prospects of a more benign and possibly pro-Western leadership in place of the Assads that could lead eventually to less hostile relations between Israel and Syria. It could also potentially produce a peace treaty, along the lines of those Israel has signed with Egypt and Jordan. At the same time, Israel doesn't believe in easy solutions in the Middle East. Even though Assad was an enemy to Israel, he was a known enemy. Since former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated the Israeli-Syrian disengagement in 1974, Israel's border with Syria in the Golan Heights has been its most secure. Meanwhile, Israel has handled other potential concerns, such as Syria's attempt to construct a nuclear reactor in the mid-2000s, through preemptive military action.

As civil war unfolded in Syria, Israel watched closely – prepared to take action if the conflict began to spill over its border. However, by 2015, the war was developing into something far more dangerous for Israel. In early 2015, hardline Islamists, such as ISIL and affiliates of Al Qaeda, were threatening to overthrow the Assad regime. If they succeeded, Israel would have had a truly hostile, aggressive, implacable, and unpredictable enemy on its northeastern border.

Accordingly, Israel's reaction to Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict in September 2015 should be of no surprise. Whilst Israel made no public comment, there was no doubt that Russia's intervention, which prevented the Assad regime from falling, was welcomed by the Netanyahu government. Bennett has also said little about the Russian presence in Syria publicly, but appears to share Netanyahu's views in that respect.

Russian-Turkish relations have fluctuated significantly in the past decade. Turkey was unhappy with Russia's support for the Assad regime because Turkish President Erdogan had staked much on funding and arming the rebel campaign against the regime. Relations between the two countries worsened after Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft that had strayed briefly into Turkish airspace in November 2015.

Following a period of frostiness, Erdogan uncharacteristically apologized, enabling normal ties to resume. Erdogan had been angered by the Obama administration's criticism of his 2016 crackdown following a coup attempt linked to U.S.-based opposition leader Fethullah Gulen. He consequently tilted strongly towards Russia, making Moscow his first external visit after the crackdown..

Turkish-American ties scarcely improved during Trump's presidency. Relations between the two countries were marred by America's continual refusal to accede to Turkish demands for Gulen's extradition, as well as by Trump's periodic

20 Daniel L. Byman, "Israel: A Frosty Response to the Arab Spring," in Kenneth M. Pollack et al (ed), *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington, Brookings Institution, 2011), 250-257.

insensitivities towards Ankara. Both leaders' egos made it difficult to ease friction between the two states. Trump's peremptory and undiplomatic letter to Erdogan in October 2019, in which he told Erdogan to not "be a fool" concerning a Turkish military incursion into the Kurdish enclave of northern Syria, unsurprisingly infuriated Erdogan.[21] The letter also undercut Vice President Mike Pence's efforts to mediate with Erdogan. Thereafter, the Turkish leader made clear that he preferred to work through Putin in order to reach an understanding with the Syrian regime on Turkey's Kurdish problem.

One of the consequences of the estrangement between the U.S. and Turkey is the ambiguous position in which it put Turkey within NATO. Erdogan's willingness to buy Russian military equipment, particularly the S-400 system, has precluded Turkish access to the US F-35 fighter, which is on order to most NATO countries.[22]

Though such tactical successes would please Putin, Russia needs to manage its relations with Turkey with utmost care. The two states' bilateral ties are underpinned by the Turkstream I and II natural gas pipelines, which cross the Black Sea. When completed, the project is planned to supply Russian natural gas not only to Turkey but also to several states in the west; including Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. U.S. and EU sanctions on Russia since the start of the Ukraine crisis put the project in doubt, though Turkey has said so far that it will not implement the sanctions due to its energy needs. Turkey has good relations with Ukraine and voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution on 2 March demanding that Russia end its aggression. Turkey has also sought to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, so far un-successfully at the time of writing.[23]

Russia also needs to broker relations between Turkey and Syria over the remaining rebel enclave in Idlib. Turkey does not want Syria to invade the enclave, as it would lead to a further flow of refugees into Turkey. So far, Russian influence has held Assad back.

Russian-Egyptian ties: Due to Egypt's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, its foreign policy is largely consistent with theirs. Given Moscow's excellent relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, that has facilitated Russia's ties with Cairo. These were further boosted when Moscow embraced the Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi regime in 2013 - in marked contrast to the US, which was initially hesitant over whether to condone Sisi's violent seizure of power.[24] Putin backed Sisi's campaign for the presidency in 2014 and welcomed him to Moscow early that year, Sisi's first post-coup

[21] Roland Oliphant, "Don't be a fool!" Donald Trump's letter 'binned' by Turkish president as Mike Pence attempts to broker ceasefire," *Daily Telegraph*, October 17, 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk.

[22] *TRTWorld*, "US formally removes Turkey from F-35 programme," April 22, 2021.

[23] Dimitar Bechev, "Turkey between a rock and a hard place on Russia," *Politico*, March 2, 2022.

[24] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by President Barack Obama on Egypt: "We are deeply concerned by the decision of the Egyptian Armed Forces to remove President Morsy and suspend the Egyptian constitution," July 3, 2013. See also: Michael Crowley, "We Caved: What happened when Barack Obama's idealistic rhetoric collided with the cold realities of war and dictatorship in the Middle East and beyond," *Politico Magazine*, Washington, January/February 2016. He quotes Obama as saying, "We can't return to business as usual. We have to be very careful about being seen as aiding and abetting actions that we think run contrary to our values and ideals."

overseas visit.[25] Egypt and Russia have since enjoyed closer military ties, holding joint naval and airborne military exercises since 2015.[26]

Ukraine impact

A tactical success of Putin's outreach to Middle East states over much of his leadership has been the ambiguous approach of the region's most important states to the Russian war in Ukraine. The UAE disappointed the U.S. by abstaining from the UN Security Council vote on 25 February 2022 to condemn the invasion, which Russia vetoed. Though the UAE voted in favour of an identical resolution in the UN General Assembly, Dubai has allowed itself to become a haven for wealthy Russians escaping Western sanctions.[27] Saudi Arabia has been unwilling to increase oil production to compensate for the sanctioning of Russian oil exports – prioritising the OPEC+ arrangement over the U.S. relationship. De facto Saudi ruler Mohamad bin Salman is still bitter about the Biden administration's claim that he ordered the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.[28] Though Israel voted in favour of the General Assembly resolution, it has refused Ukraine's request to purchase Israel's Iron Dome air defence system.[29] Damascus has reportedly facilitated the Russian Central Bank's use of the Syrian financial system to evade sanctions.[30] Another important factor linking Russia, Ukraine and Syria is that the newly appointed Russian commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, Lt Gen Alexandr Dvornikov, previously oversaw Russia's military campaign in Syria from 2015, which included the brutal levelling of large parts of Aleppo.[31]

Limits of bilateralism

The problem for Putin's MENA policy is that, despite being on good terms with the leaders of all major Middle East states, he is not the primary external ally of any but the Syrian and Iranian leaders. Moscow's support for Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar (through mercenaries, discussed below) did not win plaudits with Turkey and Qatar. On the other hand, Russia's intervention in the Libyan conflict received praise from Haftar's other supporters such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. Meanwhile, Putin has managed to keep his relations with Israel and Iran separate, despite their mutual antipathies. He was also indifferent towards the U.S.-backed Abraham Accords in 2020, which normalised the UAE's and Bahrain's relations with Israel (with implied Saudi blessing), and ignored the setback to the Palestinian cause.

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[25] Jonathan Marcus, "Sisi in Russia: Moscow's Egyptian gambit," *BBC News*, February 13, 2014.

[26] Anton Mardasov, "Russia, Egypt look to boost military ties," *Al Monitor*, November 7, 2019. See also *BBC News*, "Putin backs Sisi 'bid for Egypt presidency,'" February 13, 2014.

[27] Martin Chulov and Joanna Partridge, "Dubai throws open the doors for the rich Russians escaping sanctions," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2022.

[28] Clifford Krauss, "Loss of Russian oil leaves a void not easily filled, straining market," *New York Times*, March 9, 2022.

[29] "Israel torpedoed sale of Iron Dome to Ukraine, fearing Russian reaction – report," *Times of Israe*l, February 15, 2022.

[30] Michael Weiss, "Exclusive: how Russia evades sanctions via Syrian loan schemes," *New Lines Magazine*, April 5, 2022.

[31] "Who is the general leading Russia's new war strategy in Ukraine," *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2022.

Putin's diplomatic approach is thus to build regional relations where Russia and Middle Eastern states have mutual interests. It is essentially an opportunistic methodology, turning to his advantage developments as they arise, rather than a comprehensive strategy. Given Russia's limited economic heft, Putin has played a poor poker hand masterfully well. He is sufficiently canny to realise that a single approach cannot hope to straddle the region's divisions.

These limitations to traditional diplomacy have given Putin an incentive to bolster his approach with non-traditional statecraft.

Private Military Companies (PMCs) – Wagner Group

A major goal of the Putin administration is the re-establishment of international recognition of Russia as a great power. This would require peer acceptance of said status and a seat at the table in management of the global order. Putin follows the doctrine of long-serving Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, that no important international agreement should be reached without the Soviet Union's involvement.[32] Putin was clearly angry with President Obama in 2014 when Obama referred to Russia as a regional power.[33]

Indeed, Russia's economic weaknesses, compared with the economic prowess of the U.S., China, and Western Europe, makes it challenging to gain international recognition as a great power. According to IMF estimates, Russia's GDP is less than a tenth that of the U.S. and China – varying in size with fluctuations in energy export prices.[34] Nevertheless Russia's military power ranks second after the United States according to the independent 2022 Global Firepower Index, which is based on military resources, diversity of weapon systems and available trained manpower across land, sea and air theatres.[35] Russia has nuclear-weapon parity with the U.S., and conventional Russian forces have reportedly undergone significant performance-enhancing reforms and rearmament since their relatively poor showing in the brief war with Georgia in 2007 - though Russia's limited success in the Ukraine war to date casts doubt on the effectiveness of such reforms.[36] As well, a limiting factor for Russian power projection is its hostile neighbours, including NATO members and now obviously Ukraine, on its perimeter. Therefore, a significant proportion of Russia's military resources is focused on territorial defence.

Russia thus has incentives to look for smart and inexpensive ways to project power internationally. Private military companies (PMCs) provide a tool for Russia to

[32] Charles E. Zeigler, *The History of Russia*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 110;
Craig R. Whitney, "Andrei A. Gromyko: Flinty face of post-war Soviet diplomacy," *New York Times*, July 4, 1989.

[33] "Obama dismisses Russia as 'regional power' acting out of weakness," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014; "Obama calling Russia a regional power is 'disrespectful' – Putin," *Moscow Times*, January 12, 2016.

[34] U.S. GDP $22.7 trillion; China GDP $16.6 trillion; Russia GDP $1.7 trillion. Source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2021.

[35] *Global Firepower Annual Ranking*, "2022 Military Strength Ranking," www.globalfirepower.com

[36] Peter Apps, "Russia raises military clout with reforms after Georgian war," *Reuters,* February 28, 2014.

do great power politics on the cheap.[37]

This is not a new practice for Russia. The Russian state has a record of using non-state armed actors in regional conflicts since Ivan the Terrible's employment of the Danish mercenary Carsten Rohde against Sweden and Poland in the 16th Century.[38] Such non-state actors diversify the means available to achieve defined power projection goals, while providing plausible deniability to avoid accountability.

Wagner Group is the most well-known of the PMCs serving the Russian state. The Russian PMC industry comprises several companies of different sizes and specialisations. Not all are commercial in the sense of providing services on an open market. Wagner and a Ministry of Defence proxy, "Patriot," cater exclusively to Russian state agencies. Another company, 'RSB Group,' is more like a Western company (such as Academi, formerly Blackwater) and offers commercial services. Some are outcrops of military divisions, organised and run to "earn on the side" and perhaps allow their soldiers to operate with plausible deniability – for example, "Shield," which reportedly operates under the umbrella of Russia's 45th *Spetznaz* (Special Forces) Airborne Brigade.[39]

Wagner's origins, like much of its structure and financing, are shadowy. It is not a registered company in Russia, where mercenary groups are illegal. According to an analysis by the New America think tank and the Center on the Future of War, it was originally registered in Hong Kong in 2012 as Slavonic Corps Ltd by the Moran Group, a company formed by Russian military veterans to provide international security services.[40] Moran Group itself was registered in the Central American state Belize in the 1990s.

Wagner developed in stages in the first half of the 2010s as Moscow sought advantageous and politically palatable ways to fight wars in Donbas, a region of eastern Ukraine adjoining Russia, and then in Syria. The leader of Slavonic Corps was a former GRU *Spetznaz* officer, Lt Col Dmitry Utkin, whose call sign was Wagner – a name he chose apparently out of admiration for the German composer.

At some point between 2014 and 2015, Slavonic Corps took on the Wagner

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[37] This description is used in Ase Ostensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Private Military Companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?" *Journal of Small Wars and Insurgencies,* September 9, 2021.

Much of what is known about Wagner and other organisations associated with Prigozhin comes from cross-checking a range of reports in the Russian media and several detailed Western analyses. These include U.S. government reports, such as U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 2018 assessment of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, and Treasury and Justice Department documents sanctioning Prigozhin.

As well, the Jamestown Foundation, Washington, has published a series of detailed reports on Wagner and other Russian PMCs by Sergey Sukhankin, a Russian-speaker who cites a large range of checkable Russian media sources, particularly from the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, whose editor, Dmitri Muratov, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for 'safeguarding freedom of expression' in Russia.

[38] Sergey Sukhankin, "Continuing war by other means: The case of Wagner, Russia's premier private military company in the Middle East," *Jamestown Foundation*, July 13, 2018.

[39] Sergey Sukhankin, "New Russian PMC spotted in Syria: Potential military links and implications," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 7, 2019.

[40] Candace Rondeaux, Candace, "Decoding the Wagner Group, Analysing the role of private military security contractors in Russian proxy warfare," *New America*, Washington, November 7, 2019.

title. It was first deployed in Donbas in 2014 at a time when Russia needed to fight a covert war, hide casualties from the Russian public, and mitigate the international repercussions of a gross violation of a neighbour's sovereignty.

The Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war from September 2015 was primarily through air power as Putin wanted to avoid Russian army presence on the ground and minimise official casualties. However, he secretly sent hundreds of Wagner fighters into Syria in the early days of the intervention.

Yevgeny Prigozhin

Wagner is a textbook example of how the Putin administration harnesses the self-interest of ambitious members of the Russian elite to create covert and flexible tools. Though he denies association, the reported primary financier and manager of Wagner is a Russian businessman, Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin.[41] Born in Leningrad in 1961, his background includes a nine-year prison term for money laundering and organising a prostitution ring in the late Soviet period. He has no military or security experience, and became rich as a successful restaurateur based in St Petersburg. Though not initially a member of Russia's security or commercial elite, he made it big by associating himself with Putin – eventually catering for Kremlin events and becoming known in the 2000s as "Putin's chef."

He made himself even more useful to Putin from 2013 through creating the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a vehicle for online Russian influence operations. The IRA will be examined later in this report.

Prigozhin appears now to be a de facto member of Putin's inner circle. However, he is not a member of the *siloviki,* theelite current and former senior intelligence and military officers, who control the instruments of the state's hard power or the oligarchs, the super-rich who garnered the spoils of the collapsing Soviet economic structure in the 1990s, and control much of the state's economy in their own and their families' interests. Prigozhin is a level below them. He has no separate power base and strives for influence and financial rewards by pleasing Putin. That connection facilitated his winning lucrative government civilian contracts with the Russian military, such as cleaning services – helping with his initial financing of Wagner Group. The obvious benefit he provides to Putin through Wagner is a mercenary force that operates with minimal state support. Moreover, his activities are deniable. Putin argued in a 2018 interview that Russia has no responsibility for Prigozhin because Prigozhin has no official position.[42]

However, it can be assumed that Wagner cannot exist without Putin's blessing, and Prigozhin needs Putin's approval for strategic-level decisions, such as where and when Wagner is deployed. If he falls out of favour with Putin, he will be back to running restaurants.

Wagner's early activities in eastern Ukraine and Syria were funded largely

[41] Much of the following is based on research by Sergey Sukhankin noted above, but also on the Mueller Report into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, detailed below.

[42] President Putin: Interview with Austrian ORF television channel, June 4, 2018. Text on President of Russia website at www.en.kremlin.ru.

from Prigozhin's commercial activities with a minor contribution from the Russian Ministry of Defense. The latter proved to be tricky because Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu apparently resented giving any of his budget to a PMC – a situation aggravated by personal animosity between the two.[43] Whatever the case, from 2017 Prigozhin started to run Wagner on a more overtly commercial basis via an agreement with the Assad regime to substantially fund the group's operations in Syria. The deal involved the regime allowing a company established by Prigozhin, EvroPolis, to take 25% of the revenue from Syrian oil and gas fields that the group won back from control of anti-Assad rebels. That commercial formula underlies Wagner's more recent expansion into Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), and other sub-Saharan African states. The CAR agreement reportedly involved EvroPolis's access to diamond and other mineral resources of the state.

From 2014 onwards, the group started to train at a military facility at Molkino near Krasnodar in southern Russia run by the GRU (in Russian, the Main Intelligence Directorate), Russia's foreign military intelligence agency. The GRU was renamed the GU in 2010 (removing "intelligence" from the title) but the original name stuck. The focus of this training has been on guerrilla skills, sabotage, directing land-air operations, battle space coordination, and other skills valuable for a relatively small militia whose task is to act as a force multiplier for larger military units. Estimates of the total number of Wagner recruits who have trained at Krasnodar since 2014 vary, but seem to be in the 8,000-10,000 range. The group apparently continues to train there despite the Prigozhin-Shoigu friction. Wagner's weapons are Russian and presumably supplied by the Defence Ministry.[44] In eastern Ukraine and probably in the initial deployment stage in Syria, Wagner was apparently subordinated to the GRU, a claim supported in the U.S. Treasury's statement sanctioning Wagner and Utkin in 2016.[45] However, Wagner seems to have become increasingly independent as the Syrian operation progressed.

Remuneration for Wagner members is superior to that of Russian regular forces. When Prigozhin set up the group, the Russian military's basic pay level was about 60% of the lowest ranking Wagner operative. Like the Russian military, the Wagner remuneration package included compensation for injury or compensation to nominated family members in the case of death. Payment levels increased during combat service. A 2017 estimate, based on Russian sources, put Syria-based Wagner operatives' average monthly salary at 240,000 roubles, compared to the much lower average Russian monthly wage of about 40,000 roubles.[46] This remuneration reportedly

[43] "'Putiin's chef' Prigozhin loses Defence Ministry's favor, report says," *The Moscow Times*, March 2, 2018.

[44] Much of this detail is taken from interviews (e.g. by Russian-speaking reporters) with former Wagner Group members. In addition, a tablet apparently left behind by a Wagner Group fighter while retreating from an engagement in Libya provided substantial details about the group's operations. See Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, "Wagner: Scale of Russian mercenary mission in Libya exposed," *BBC News*, August 11, 2021.

[45] *US Department of the Treasury Press Center*, "Treasury designates individuals and entities involved in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine," July 20, 2017; Colin Wilhelm, "Treasury sanctions more Russian individuals, companies in connection to Ukraine," *Politico*, December 20, 2016.

[46] Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's not so secret mercenaries: patronage, geopolitics and the Wagner Group," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 8, 2019.

deteriorated when the Assad regime became involved in funding the group, but by how much is not clear.

The group's recruitment base includes Russian war veteran societies; reservists with combat experience; Cossack organisations (historically a source of mercenaries since Tsarist times); ethnically non-Russian regions (such as south Caucasus); Serbs (a separate Serbian unit has been reported); and even French, Spaniards, and Italians.[47] The proportions and remuneration levels of each group are not publicly known – not least because payment is in cash. During the group's operations in eastern Ukraine, a Ukrainian security service officer estimated that about a third of the mercenaries did not speak Russian.[48] Whatever the proportion, it probably varied over time and with each recruitment intake. The obvious aim of this diverse recruitment strategy has been to ensure that as few as possible body bags are brought back to Russia, thereby avoiding public disquiet. Furthermore, these would not have been counted among official Russian military casualties. A 2017 estimate of Russia-related deaths since the 2015 intervention in Syria put Wagner's at 200 and the Russian military's at just nineteen.[49] Neither figure can be taken at face value, but they provide indications.

In terms of international norms and standards, Russia is neither a signatory to the Montreux Document, nor a member of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers. The former outlines how international law applies to PMCs and is supported by fifty-five countries, including the US. The latter sets standards for PMCs to adhere to international law and human rights, as well as best practices in management. Evidence from several sources indicates members of the group have committed war crimes, such as killing prisoners, using torture and laying landmines in civilian areas.[50]

Syria

The number of Wagner personnel deployed in Syria since the start of the war does not seem to have exceeded 2,000.[51] That means they were too few to be a major on-the-ground force in their own right, but they could augment other ground troops and play a force multiplier role. There seems no doubt that the effectiveness of pro-Assad irregular forces, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hizballah, increased substantially when they were professionally coordinated from a single centre.

The tasks carried out by Wagner in Syria have included:

- Use as shockwave troops in conjunction with other pro-Assad forces
- Training pro-Assad armed groups and military formations

[47] Sergey Sukhankin, "Foreign mercenaries, irregulars and 'volunteers': non-Russians in Russia's wars," *War by Other Means, The Jamestown Foundation*, October 9, 2019.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Op Cit*.
[50] Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, *Op Cit.*
[51] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Op Cit.*

- Assistance with coordination of irregular pro-Assad paramilitary groups and working with Syrian army special forces units.
- Directing strikes of Russian air and naval assets deployed in Syria and off the Syrian coast.
- Taking back important Assad regime economic assets, such as oil and gas fields, and ensuring their security.

Though Wagner was too small to compete militarily with a technologically superior force in an open battle, the Syrian experience demonstrated that the 'cost-quality' balance favoured formations of this type: relatively little outlay for specific gain – especially in taking and maintaining control of economic resources, such as oil fields.

Wagner's role in Syria went through three stages:

- Ground reconnaissance (September 2015- early 2016) – in which the PMC helped lay the groundwork for Russia's intervention in the civil war.
- Independent military operations (2016) – its main success in this period was taking back Palmyra, a strategic town in central Syria, from ISIL on behalf of the Assad regime. Its activities in that battle included acting as shock wave troops through frontal military attacks. (ISIL recaptured Palmyra in December 2016.)
- Operations in combination with Assad regime forces (2017-2018): This phase involved closer coordination with Assad's military following the regime's agreement to assist with funding Wagner in return for specialist operations, particularly recapturing hydrocarbon resources. It included the group's assisting pro-Assad forces to retake Palmyra in March 2017.

Progozhin may have pushed his militia to take risks in order to demonstrate to Assad how its fighting skills could complement the larger Syrian army forces. The last phase led to a growing number of casualties. The worst occurred on 7th-8th February 2018 when Wagner, in combination with other pro-Assad groups, took on anti-Assad Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by the US military near Deir al-Zor in Syria's east. The result was a heavy defeat for Wagner and serious losses: the number is disputed, but they may have been as high as 200 killed.[52] Though that would have been a calamitous loss for a small force, the event demonstrated key advantages of PMCs for Russia. There was no domestic damage to the Putin administration – which certainly would have been the case if similar losses had been sustained by the Russian military. Similarly, Putin was able to deflect criticism from Western countries as news of the debacle came out. Russian officials simply denied the reports.

Nevertheless, Putin was reportedly furious that Wagner's role in Syria had become so prominent and that the force had come into conflict with US forces. His aides upbraided Prigozhin, who promised to ensure that nothing similar would

[52] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Op cit.*

happen again.[53] From 2018, with Assad having effectively won the civil war, the group gradually downsized its role in Syria, with most being redeployed to other theatres, such as Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic (CAR).[54] They were reported to be returning to Ukraine in early 2022 as the crisis there ramped up.[55]

Despite the Deir al-Zor debacle, there can be little doubt that Wagner was partly the reason why Russia's intervention in Syria did not descend into a 'quagmire', as Obama had forecast in 2015. Wagner formed a largely invisible but generally effective force that delivered substantial results with minimal economic expenditure – and, after the deal with Assad in 2017, clear profits for Prigozhin.

As Wagner and Prigozhin have become more widely known, Putin has become less reticent about being associated with them. Utkin was photographed with Putin at a Kremlin reception in December 2016 in honour of recipients of the Russian Order of Courage. Utkin has apparently been decorated with four Orders of Courage – awarded for bold and decisive action in carrying out military or civil duties under conditions involving risk to life.[56]

In 2012, according to a Russian media report, Putin described PMCs as "a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state."[57] In December 2018, at his annual media conference, the Russian leader gave a public green light to Wagner's activities abroad: "If they comply with Russian laws, they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world."[58]

Wagner and other PMCs are likely to remain part of Russia's hybrid warfare toolbox, as evidenced this year in Ukraine. Their activities now extend into Africa and Latin America (Venezuela). These mainly involve supplying authoritarian regimes with protective measures in exchange for mineral extraction rights and other economic deals. Their broader purpose, clearly with Putin's blessing, seems to be to restore respect for Russia as a great power by taking part in the geopolitical competition for influence in unstable regions. A benefit for Russia of this strategy was demonstrated by the divided African vote on the UNGA resolution on Ukraine on 2 March 2022: only 28 African states (51%) voted in favour; 17 of the 35 abstentions, more than half, were African, with Eritrea joining Russia, Belarus, North Korea, and Syria in voting against.[59]

[53] Ibid.

[54] "Political scientist: in Syria fights intensified after withdrawal of PMC 'Wagner,'" *URA News*, January 11, 2021.

[55] Guy Faulconbridge, "Exclusive: Russian mercenaries with spy links increasing presence in Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 14, 2022.

[56] Andrew Roth, "The Russian captives who may link Syria, Ukraine and the Kremlin's fight against the opposition," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2017.

[57] *RIA Novosti*, "Путин поддержал идею соедания в России частных военных компании" ('Putin backs the idea of creating private military companies in Russia'), April 11, 2012.

[58] Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference, President of Russia website, December 20, 2018, www.en.kremlin.ru.

[59] Congressional Research Service, "Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs)" September 16, 2020.
See also Geraldine Cook, "Russia's Private Military Companies: A threat to Latin America," *Dialogo Americas*, November 18, 2020; Abraham White and Leo Holtz, "Figure of the week: African countries' votes on the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Brookings*, March 9, 2022.

Adversarial influence operations

Attempts to subvert opponents' perceptions and morale are as old as warfare. However, many of today's tools are new. Media operations, psychological operations and information action and outreach are weapons in a "battle-space in the mind." The contested domain is both virtual and cognitive. In this form of adversarial conduct, perception trumps reality.[60] Adversaries attempt to obfuscate their involvement, and there may be no physical movement of troops or kinetic effects – though the build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's border in late 2021 and 2022, prior to Russia's actual invasion on 24 February 2022, could be described as a psychological operation as well as a military one. As implied in the U.S. Mueller Report examined below, influence operations tend to prey on segments of populations more easily drawn to conspiracies and outrage over developments they perceive as beyond their control.

All technologically advanced states play this game. Nevertheless, opponents of democratic countries have more angles to work: they seek to undermine trust in government by weaponising freedom of expression – in effect, turning Western countries' cultural strengths into weaknesses. That involves a combination of deception, disinformation and information laundering in order to control the narrative around current events and emerging developments.

Russia fears information operations from the West, and has developed its own measures to counter the effect of Western operations. This is evident in Russia's most recent Information Security Doctrine signed by Putin in December 2016.[61] The doctrine is defensive in nature. It claims that "special services of certain states" (an obvious reference to the U.S. and other Western states) are using information and psychological influences to threaten Russia's security. These malign actors, it argues, are targeting Russian citizens, especially the young – an apparent reference to the lures of Western lifestyles and entertainment. The doctrine notes that these dangers are exacerbated by Russia's high dependence on foreign technologies, including electronic components and software – the implication being that Russia must develop technological independence to reverse this. There is also an unexplained reference to the need for a "national system of internet management."

The doctrine, and especially the last reference, led to speculation that Russia was seeking to develop its own version of the Internet. Although this may become an objective in the longer term, Putin would probably be wary of cutting Russia off completely from the global Internet for now. Doing so would hamstring Russia's own technological progress and impede its online influence operations against Western targets. Even the Kremlin-imposed restrictions on Western media reporting on Ukraine have so far involved bans on specific websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and bandwidth limitations rather than a complete blockage.[62] Since the

[60] Robert Pratten, "The rise of information warfare: The need for training in a credible information environment," *Defence IQ,* March 30, 2021.

[61] *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation," December 5, 2016, www.en.mid.ru.

[62] "How Russia could cut itself off from the global Internet, and why it probably won't," *Euronews*, March 14, 2022.

limitations were imposed, Russian use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to sidestep these bans is reported to have risen substantially.[63] Moreover, the author has been able to communicate with Russian friends via gmail. That said, Russia is reported to be working on gradual indigenisation of domestic online hardware and software and an improved Internet filtration system along the lines of China's "Great Firewall."[64]

If the doctrine is solely explained as protecting Russians from the 'contamination' of foreign information, it would reflect only half the story. Putin is famously on record as telling the Valdai Discussion Club, a high-level Mosow-based think tank and discussion forum: "Fifty years ago, I learnt one rule on the streets of Leningrad: if the fight is inevitable, be the first to strike."[65] Though he was talking about security of the Russian state from military attack, his comments could be applied more broadly to the sophisticated information strategy his administration has developed over the past decade.

Prigozhin again

Here, too, Prigozhin came in handy. He allegedly established the innocuously-named Internet Research Agency (IRA) in 2013, which became known as the Olgino Troll Factory (after the suburb in St Petersburg in which it was housed).[66] Having cut its teeth on anti-Ukrainian internet posts during Ukraine's 2014 crisis, it helped develop and implement a strategy to interfere in the 2016 American presidential election from as early as 2014, according to several U.S. government reports.[67]

The totality of claims made, and evidence adduced, in these reports depict a brilliantly planned and executed information strike:

- The operation started as early as 2014 and involved Russians working for the IRA visiting the US to reconnoitre the pre-election landscape and tracking the U.S. social media sites dedicated to American politics.

[63] "VPN use in Russia is surging as citizens try to bypass government's tightening Internet control," *CNBC*, March 10, 2022.

[64] "Russia: growing internet isolation, control, censorship – authorities regulate infrastructure, block contact," *Human Rights Watch*, June 18, 2020; William Partlett, "Russia is building its own kind of sovereign internet – with help from Apple and Google," *The Conversation*, October 5, 2021; See also "Digital geopolitics: Russia is trying to build its own great firewall," *The Economist*, February 15, 2022.

[65] *Valdai Discussion Club*, "Vladimir Putin meets with members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Final Plenary Session of the 12th Annual Meeting," October 22, 2015.

[66] Jolie Myers and Monika Evstatieva, "Meet the activist who uncovered the Russian troll factory named in the Mueller probe," *National Public Radio*, March 15, 2018.

[67] The primary sources of publicly known information about the Internet Research Agency and Prigozhin's connections with it come from U.S. Government documents, in particular:

- Office of the Director of National Intelligence (January 6, 2017), "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections."
- Department of Justice, Grand Jury Indictment of 13 Russian individuals and three Russian companies for scheme to interfere in the United States political system, February 16, 2018.
- Robert S. Mueller, Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, Vols 1 and 2, 2019, US Department of Justice, Washington DC.

The veracity of claims made in these reports have not, and almost certainly never will be, determined by a U.S. court, so they remain allegations.

- Posing as American citizens, IRA employees created false personas to operate social media pages and fictitious activist groups designed to attract American audiences – creating hundreds of social media and Twitter accounts used to spread disinformation about candidates.
- They bought space on computer servers based in the United States in order to set up virtual private networks. Through these, operatives based in Russia could conduct activity inside the U.S. while hiding the fact that they were in Russia, thus avoiding detection by American regulators and law enforcement.
- The aim of this activity was to support Trump's candidacy and disparage Hillary Clinton's. Before Trump won the Republican nomination, the IRA operation attacked his more moderate opponents. The operation also backed Bernie Sanders in his campaign for the Democratic nomination until he dropped out. The objective seemed to be to disrupt the political establishment on both sides of U.S. politics.
- This activity included operatives posing as Americans contacting individuals associated with the Trump campaign aiming to work with them in supporting Trump.
- Throughout the operation the IRA employed hundreds of individuals based in St Petersburg. The annual budget from 2014 was in the millions of US dollars. By September 2016, in the lead up to the election, the IRA's monthly budget for the project exceeded $1.25 million.
- Russia's external intelligence services were also involved. The GRU, in particular, oversaw the hacking of Democratic National Committee emails, which were subsequently made public by WikiLeaks.

It's important to note that the claims made by Mueller and American intelligence agencies have not been tested in court, so they remain unproven. The Russian government,[68] and Trump for that matter,[69] have dismissed them. However, these indictments and reports are relevant to Middle Eastern politics (and to U.S. intelligence agencies) as they outline in compelling detail how Russia has developed a sophisticated capacity to mount information campaigns to support its foreign policy aims.

Application to the Middle East

Russian policy in the Middle East, and hence its information strategy there, both have application beyond the region itself; they are also aimed at the West, especially the U.S. Particularly since Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015, Rus-

[68] For example, "Kremlin says Mueller report shows no evidence of Russian meddling," *Reuters*, April 18, 2019; Marc Bennetts, "'No new information': Russia shrugs off Mueller report – Spokesman say report offers no "compelling evidence" of Russian interference in US vote," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2019.
Andrey Vadeev, "The mountain gave birth to a mouse: 'Russian business' fell apart before our eyes,'" *Gazeta*, March 23, 2019.

[69] See for example: "Trump dismisses 'ridiculous' claims of Russian interference in election result," *France24*, December 12, 2016.

sia's actions in the region have been part of a wider strategy that strives to create an international order guaranteeing Russia an equal footing with the U.S. in international decision-making.

Russia's information strategy in relation to Syria has been threefold:

- Domestic: Legitimising Putin's Syria policy, thereby preventing any potential Russian public backlash against the deployment of military assets to Syria.
- International: Imposing a narrative over the intervention in opposition to Western attempts to present a critical counter-narrative.
- Regional: Portraying the intervention as support for an embattled ally, thereby enhancing Russia's visibility in the region and encouraging hostility to Western military interventions aimed at promoting democracy or responsibility-to-protect obligations.[70]

Russian-controlled media, social media and websites, especially the Arabic language versions of RT and Sputnik News, expressed the Russian government's perspective on the war: the conflict was to be understood through the sole lens of the Assad regime's defence against a radical opposition comprising terrorists financed and equipped by the United States and like-minded regional states, aiming to force regime change.

The Syrian military was presented as a stabilising, patriotic, and disciplined force. Terrorists hid their true motivations in order to dupe credulous Western public opinion. Syria was a bulwark against Islamic extremism. There were regular references to the multi-religious character of Syrian society. The narrative also invoked the nineteenth century Tsarist Russian ambition to protect Eastern Orthodox Christians in the Levant.[71]

An example of the Russian information strategy at work followed a chemical attack in April 2018 in the Syrian city of Douma, on the periphery of Damascus, which reportedly killed 70 people. The attack was attributed to the Syrian army, causing international outrage and retaliatory U.S., French, and British air strikes on Syrian targets a week later.[72]

That produced a full-scale Russian counter-information campaign to sow doubt on what had actually happened on the ground and divide Western public

[70] Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is a doctrine agreed at the UN World Summit in 2005, and subsequently affirmed by the UN Security Council, that allows external nations to intervene in a national conflict to prevent crimes against humanity, particularly attacks on civilian populations. Russia, like China, opposes external intervention in states' internal affairs, and has been ambivalent about the doctrine. Under President Medvedev (2008-12) Russia abstained on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, thus allowing the resolution's adoption by the Security Council early in the Libyan civil war in 2011. That resolution permitted Britain, France and the US to establish a no-fly zone to prevent then-Libyan leader Gaddafi's forces attacking civilians in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. Russia subsequently claimed that the NATO forces went beyond their R2P mandate to assist the rebels militarily and ensure Gaddafi's defeat. Since then Russia has refused to allow proposed R2P resolutions over Syria to be adopted by the Security Council.

[71] A detailed and well-sourced analysis of this strategy is set out in Donald N. Jensen, "Russia in the Middle East: A new front in the information war?" *Jamestown Foundation*, December 20, 2017.

[72] Julian Borger and Peter Beaumont, "Syria: US, UK and France launch strikes in response to chemical attack," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2018.

opinion and leaders. Reports on Russian TV and disseminated through social media included:

- Outright denial: claiming there were no chemical attacks, no patients in hospitals, and that photos and testimonies of the event were fake.
- Arguing that it was a plot by Westerners and the White Helmets (a Syrian humanitarian organisation that assists and reports on victims of regime attacks) to discredit Assad.
- Defending the regime by arguing that "everyone knows" that Syria does not have chemical weapons (Syria had accepted a Russian-U.S. proposal to surrender its stock of CW in 2013 – though implementation was patchy).[73]
- Comparing Western claims about the attacks to Nazi propaganda methods.

As such, Russia's information strategy was not so much about presenting Russia's own facts as about casting doubt on the Western version. They invoked conspiracy theories, such as the involvement of Israel's external intelligence agency Mossad and the CIA in the attacks. Such claims resonated across Arab society, given widespread distrust of their governments and Western accounts of events, and belief in Israeli meddling in Arab states.[74] The narrative aimed to undermine the legitimacy of opposition to Assad by suggesting that its support was based outside Syria, particularly in the US, France, and Turkey. There was no practical distinction between Islamic State and the opposition. The choice was binary: Assad or a terrorist takeover.[75]

The author of this report was in Moscow in September 2015 and observed these techniques in Russian media presentations. Television news reports claimed that the Russian intervention was in line with international law as the Assad government had requested the intervention (emphasising that had not been the case with the 2014 US-led bombing campaign in Syria against Islamic State). Moreover, the U.S. and other Western powers had botched the job of suppressing Islamic terrorism, so Russian professionals were now taking over the role.

This echoed a fundamental aspect of Russia's conception of international relations and international law: the only legitimate international actors are governments; any actions to interfere in, disrupt or change organised states are illegal unless specifically authorised by the UN Security Council (where Russia can exercise its veto).

An early success of Russia's pro-Syria information campaign appeared in fading support among Western publics for Assad's removal especially when Syrian refugees

[73] Putin had offered Syria's "removal" of chemical weapons to Obama as a face-saver given Obama's reluctance to take military action after Assad had crossed Obama's 'red line' by using chemicals in Ghouta near Damascus in 2013. Reporting at the time indicated that some CW was surrendered to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, but clearly stocks remained – as shown by subsequent regime chemical attacks.

[74] The role of conspiracy theories in the Middle East is well set out in Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

[75] For a fuller assessment, see reporting by French expert on global digital/cyber issues Julien Nocetti: for example, Julien Nocetti, "Dazed and confused: Russian 'information warfare' in the Middle East – the Syria lessons," *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, February 27, 2019.

were fleeing into Europe in massive numbers. That produced a related positive for Putin, with the refugee crisis playing into the Brexit referendum in Britain in 2016.[76] Putin views Western institutions such as the European Union as hostile and is happy to see them undermined, as the referendum result appeared initially to have done.

Information ecosystem

As noted above, all major states seek to spread information favourable to their interests. Russia is not a unique actor here. That said, a detailed report by the US State Department provides a compelling account of Russia's information ecosystem, which it describes as "the collection of official, proxy and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives."[77]

The ecosystem consists of five main pillars:

- Official government communications
- State-funded global messaging
- Cultivation of proxy sources
- Weaponisation of social media
- Cyber-enabled disinformation

According to the report, Russia invests heavily in its information channels, its intelligence services and its proxies to support its foreign policy aims. It leverages outlets that pose as news sites or research institutions to spread Russia's preferred narratives. Messages disseminated by different pillars of the information ecosystem provide a media multiplier effect that boosts the reach and resonance of the messages.

This strategy can cover a wide range of activities seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort, or destroy information. Channels and methods are equally diverse: computers, smartphones, real or invented new media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, confected vox pops, YouTube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets.

As evident this year in relation to Kremlin claims about the Ukraine invasion, information warfare or counter-narrative is now a powerful instrument for Russia to achieve its foreign policy objectives – a tool augmented by cyber technology.

Cyber

On a global scale, the sources of cyber threats are threefold:[78]

- *Nation-states and state-sponsored groups*. Their motivations are geopolitical

[76] See, for example, Amanda Garrett, "The refugee crisis, Brexit, and the reframing of immigration in Britain," *Europe Now*, Council for European Studies, August 1, 2019; Richard Hall, "How the Brexit campaign used refugees to scare voters," *The World*, June 24, 2016.

[77] *Global Engagement Center Special Report*, "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda System," US Department of State, August 2020.

[78] This threat division reflects that set out in Tim Maurer and Arthur Nelson, "The Global Cyber Threat," *International Monetary Fund Research Paper*, Washington DC, 2021.

and ideological. Their goals are disruption, destruction, damage, theft, espionage and financial gain. Examples of such attacks are: permanent data corruption, targeted physical damage, power grid outages, payment system disruption, fraudulent transfers, and illicit access to covert or protected information. States with the most advanced cyber capabilities, and hence able to inflict serious damage on opponents, are the United States, China, Russia, Israel, Iran, and North Korea. All have practised cyber in pursuit of their national interests.[79]

- *Cybercriminals*. Their motive is enrichment. Their goal is theft and/or financial gain. Examples include ransomware attacks, cash theft, fraudulent transfers, credential theft.

- *Terrorist groups, hacktivists (political activists using cyber hacking as tools), insider threats*. Their motive is ideology and political/economic discontent with the status quo. Their goal is disruption. Examples are: leaks, defamation, denial-of-service attacks.

Cyber is a relatively cheap weapon, available to technically skilled groups and individuals in any country. At the state level, cyber resources can be marshalled to a significant scale. A state-sponsored cyber attack on an opposing state's key infrastructure can wreak the damage of a major conventional-weapon strike. Moreover, the cyber resources of individual states are inevitably estimates: they can't be calculated with the precision of weaponry.

The cyber threat to global security is exacerbated by the current fragmented geopolitical climate and high levels of mistrust between states – particularly the U.S. vis-a-vis China and Russia, as well as smaller countries aligned with each. This trust deficit hinders collaboration across the international community against actors in the second and third categories listed above.

Cyber insecurity blurs the boundaries between state and private actors and between geopolitics and crime. Perpetrators include states conducting espionage and testing their ability to inflict damage in war, but also criminal gangs operating with government tolerance, and thus augmenting the cyber resources of the state.

During the Cold War, the threat of mutually assured destruction contained the risk of an all-out nuclear confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The containment reality is now being applied to the risk of cyber attacks, as was shown during the first meeting between President Biden and President Putin in Geneva in June 2021.

At the meeting, Biden gave Putin a list of sixteen sectors that Biden said must not be attacked by the Russian state or any actors living in or under the control of Russia. The list was not published, but it is understood to have included water and

[79] This is set out in detail in *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, "Cyber Capabilities and National Power: A Net Assessment," June 28, 2021.

energy services as well as other critical infrastructure. After a follow-up telephone call with Putin in July, Biden announced: "I made it very clear to him that the United States expects when a ransomware operation is coming from his soil, even though it's not sponsored by the state, we expect them to act if we give them enough information." When a journalist asked whether the U.S. could attack the servers used by the hackers, Biden said yes.[80]

That warning followed attacks attributed to actors within Russia on several American infrastructure and corporate entities, most prominent among which were Solar Winds, which provides outsourced IT services to various government agencies, and Colonial Pipeline, which distributes energy across the eastern United States.[81]

Law of the jungle

A further problem is that international law and practice have yet to find methods to deter cyber criminals acting with the protection of their host governments. Non-state cyber actors based in Russia who attack targets within Russia can be prosecuted under Russian law. However, attacking Western targets is tolerated by the state – it is not even illegal in Russia.[82] According to a 1984 ruling by the International Court of Justice, state control over non-state actors is only recognized when those actors are dependent on the state – a burden of proof very difficult to meet in the case of cyber-criminals

The Putin administration argues that it is not in control of Russian 'patriots' – so not in breach of Russian or international law. That is a fiction: an authoritarian state like Russia could swiftly clamp down on domestic cyber actors of whom it disapproved. The US could counter such excuses through a campaign to persuade the international community to codify into international law the principle that a state is responsible for malicious cyber actors when it is unwilling or unable to stop its territory being used by them.[83] Russia and China would probably oppose such an action in the Security Council. That leaves states targeted by external cyber criminals with little option but to retaliate directly against the servers used by the relevant actors – as Biden implicitly threatened in July. That is provided for under the self-defence provision (Article 51, Chapter VII) of the UN Charter. However, such action could lead to state-sanctioned tit-for-tat attacks, which could easily get out of control.

Russia's cyber strategy involves domestic surveillance and control – primarily to safeguard the Putin regime from internal opposition, but also to protect its domestic environment against U.S. offensive cyber operations. Cyber governance is under the President's personal control, indicating the importance Putin places on it.[84]

Russian cyber capacity is currently held back by the fact that its digital economy is less advanced than that of major Western states like the United States, United King-

[80] "Biden vows action over Russian cyber attacks," *BBC News*, July 9, 2021.

[81] "Colonial Pipeline 'ransomware' attack shows vulnerabilities of US energy grid," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2021; "A 'worst nightmare' cyberattack: The untold story of the SolarWinds attack," *National Public Radio*, April 16, 2021.

[82] Michael John Williams, "Make Russia take responsibility for its cyber criminals," *Foreign Policy*, November 9, 2021.

[83] Ibid.

[84] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Op Cit*.

dom, France, and Germany. It is only a mid-level performer in digital competitiveness, as demonstrated by the absence of Russian tech and telecommunications firms from *Fortune* magazine's latest Global 500 ranking of the world's richest companies.[85]

Given its GDP limitations, Russia has fewer financial resources to invest in intelligence capabilities than the U.S. or China. Blurring the divide between state and non-state actors is a means to compensate for that, so use of Russia-based "patriotic hackers" and organised cybercrime expertise substantially enhances Russia's cyber capabilities. The skills honed by resident criminal cyber actors become potential assets that the Putin government can draw on when desired.[86] Such skills can of course be used against Russia in return – including by individual Ukrainians skilled in hacking -- though attacks at that level are more likely to be an irritant than a threat to Russian sites with strong cyber protection.[87]

Microsoft's Digital Defense Report attributes 58% of cyber attacks on Western or Western-aligned targets to actors in Russia in the year July 2020-June 2021.[88] By comparison the report attributes 23% of attacks to North Korea, 11% to Iran, and 8% to China. The report comments that over the past year, Russia-based activity groups have solidified their position as "acute threats to the global digital ecosystem by demonstrating adaptability, persistence, a willingness to exploit trusted technical relationships, and a facility with anonymisation and open-source tools that make them increasingly difficult to detect and attribute."[89]

State tolerance

Russia tolerates, and presumably encourages, these activities because cyber attacks against public and private entities in the West promote public discontent with governments which are seen as unable to prevent them. Such attacks also undermine global confidence in Western financial systems.

Russia has used its offensive cyber capabilities extensively as part of a broader strategy aimed at disrupting the policies and politics of Western adversaries and states in its neighbourhood that it views as hostile. Russia's successes include cyber attacks against Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014-15 and early 2022.[90]

Russian mercenaries are reported to have employed cyber at tactical level in campaigns against anti-Assad forces and the Government of National Accord in Libya.[91] But Russia is unlikely to direct disruptive cyber operations against Middle East states it wants to influence or cooperate with, particularly Israel, Turkey, Egypt

[85] Fortune Global 500 2021: Full List of Rankings, www.fortune.com.
[86] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Op Cit*.
[87] "This Ukrainian hacker is spreading chaos in Russia," *The Economist 1843 Magazine*, March 11, 2022.
[88] Microsoft Digital Defense Report, October 2021, 55.
[89] Ibid, 57.
[90] See, for example, "Fake news and botnets: how Russia weaponised the web," *The Guardian*, December 2, 2017; and Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine accuses Russia of cyber-attack on two banks and its defence ministry," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2022.
[91] This is examined in detail in Marie Baezner and Patrice Robin, "The use of cyber tools in an internationalised civil war context: cyber activities in the Syrian context," *Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich*, October 2017. See also Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, *Op cit*.

and GCC states. That said, it almost certainly uses cyber for economic and political espionage in all Middle East states. Given its close relationship with Iran, Russia could also help Iranian intelligence agencies enhance their cyber capabilities. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Intelligence Operations (IRGC-IO) and its Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) are reported to have liaison with Russia's domestic and external intelligence agencies, FSB and SVR.[92] A problem for Moscow is that sharing cyber capabilities with Iran risks loss of Russian control of the uses to which they are directed. Analysis of a string of cyber attacks on Saudi petrochemical plants in 2017 and 2018 found that, though responsibility was attributed to Iran, much of the effort was coordinated on Iran's behalf from inside a state-owned Russian scientific institute.[93] Following these attacks, the US placed sanctions on the Russian agency apparently involved, the Central Scientific Research Institute of Chemistry and Mechanics.[94]

That said, at this stage Russia is not believed capable of matching the sophistication of the American and Israeli Stuxnet operation (insertion of destructive malware into the Iranian nuclear centrifuge program).[95] A possible indication that the Russians themselves suspect they are outmatched is their repeated attempts in international forums to make the military use of offensive cyber tools illegal under international law. The United States opposes this, seeing it as an attempt to reign in its capabilities.

Conclusion

Russia's non-traditional statecraft, whether deployed in the Middle East or elsewhere, is an important adjunct to Putin's broader foreign policy methodology. As demonstrated, this methodology blends traditional diplomacy and military power with the non-traditional techniques described above. The U.S., the West, and China form Moscow's main geostrategic focus. Putin would ideally see Russia, the West (principally the United States), and China on equal footing on the global stage, counterbalancing each other.[96] Russia would accept legal justifications for international military action when enacted by the UN Security Council, which would restrict unilateral American intervention as seen in Iraq.[97] Though such a change to the international system would also restrict Russia's scope for external military action, that is a price Putin may be willing to pay. He presumably could justify action like the Ukraine invasion under the self-defence provision of the UN Charter, given the arguments he has made about the

[92] David J. Smith, "Dangerous Liaisons: Another Russia-Iran Intelligence Cooperation Agreement," *Cybergram*, March 16, 2021; Seth G. Jones and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria," *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington*, July 16, 2019.

[93] Nicole Perlroth and Clifford Kraus, "A cyber attack in Saudi Arabia had a deadly goal: experts fear another try," *New York Times*, March 15, 2018; David Sanger, "Hack of Saudi petrochemical plant was coordinated from Russian institute," *New York Times*, October 23, 2018.

[94] "The US sanctions Russians for potentially 'fatal' Triton malware," *Wired*, October 23, 2020.

[95] *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, *Op cit*.

[96] This argument is set out in detail by Russia analyst Bobo Lo. See Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, (Kindle, 2015); and Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*, (London, Penguin, 2017).

[97] See, in particular, *A Wary Embrace,* 50 ff and 76 ff.

threat to Russia from Ukraine's increasing drift to the West.

Economic uncertainties following the Covid pandemic and volatile energy prices make speculating on Russia's long term plan in the Middle East difficult. In this situation, Putin is likely to fall back on the opportunistic methodology described early in this report. He will probably bide his time and look for occasions to advance Russia's interests as they might arise. He will also seek to counter Western policies in the region in order to make gains for Russia within the broader geostrategic framework through which he sees the world. Russia's tools of non-traditional statecraft set out in this report are now well developed and will remain an important part of his playbook.

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