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Russia's Engagement in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Growing Geopolitical Ambitions and "Peace by Force"

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Contents

Abstract 01

Introduction 02

Key findings and recommendations 05

Key terms and definitions 08

Rationale and motivations for Russia's engagement in conflict-affected states 09

Normative principles and guiding policies 12

Approaches and solutions to peace 14

Practices of peacemaking in the post-Soviet space 21

Practices of peacemaking further afield 25

Conclusions 34

Abstract

In the past decade, Russia has expanded its military, political and diplomatic engagements with conflict-affected states in the post-Soviet space of former USSR nations as well as in in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. With direct military interventions and various forms of hard security engagements in countries such as Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Syria, Libya, Myanmar and the Central African Republic, Russia is intent on projecting power and influence and redefining European and global security.

The majority of this paper was researched and written before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and highlights some of the motivations, policies and practices underpinning Russia's engagement in conflict-affected countries. It finds that Russia conceptualizes its engagement in conflict and post-conflict settings differently to Western countries, but, to an extent, also from other emergent actors, such as China. Primarily motivated by geo-strategic interests and the political ambitions of a country that sees itself as a great power, Russia's conflict management model favours a hierarchical, "top-down" approach whereby power, the use of force, security, and peace are easily intertwined, and where military actions and negotiations among the stronger parties are interlinked. Such an approach may result in a form of "illiberal peace", in which violence is halted or reduced, but where political and social grievances are largely ignored, creating potential new fault lines for conflict. The present war in Ukraine highlights Russia's strategic consideration of the post-Soviet space as a Russian domain that should remain united through security and economic ties and, when necessary, through direct military intervention. In more distant conflict regions, including unstable areas of Africa and the Middle East, Russia's global political ambitions and its influence on peace and conflict transitions are more opportunistic and tend to exploit the flaws and limitations of Western interventions.

Russia's conflict management model poses an ideological and practical challenge to Western concepts and practices of peacemaking and peacebuilding. As we approach a long period of sustained contestation between Russia and Western democracies, there is a risk that conflict-affected countries will be caught in the middle of an acute geopolitical struggle. However, the Russian model fails to produce in the long term a significant and plausible threat to liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding. This model may succeed in achieving short-term gains, but it also creates new conflict fault lines and the risk that armed violence will re-emerge. At an operational level, Russia's actions are constrained by its relatively small economy, which will further shrink as a result of severe international sanctions imposed over the invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

The Russian Federation, which emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union thirty years ago, began as a country where some members of the ruling elite harboured thoughts about joining the liberal order championed by the United States and other Western democracies. However, the objectives of Western integration, which were contingent upon the NATO-centred Atlantic system and the European Union, failed to materialise or were not realistic. This was for a number of reasons, including refusal by the Russian elites, particularly Vladimir Putin, to forfeit Russia's great-power status and global ambitions (Trenin, 2019). The Soviet legacy arguably demonstrates the mindset of Russia's elites (Donaldson & Nadkarni, 2019; Wallander, 2019; Parlar Dal & Erşen, 2020; Tsygankov, 2018) who view NATO as a strategic opponent and the U.S.-led order as a threat to Russia's perceived "sphere of privileged interests", particularly in its immediate periphery. After the Georgia-Russia war in 2008, relations with NATO and Western countries deteriorated further, and Russia gradually abandoned the remnants of Western political orientation. Russia's refusal to accept the post–Cold War security order in Europe was effectively demonstrated in the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea, and military aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

Since then, and in the wake of increasing historical grievances and geopolitical ambitions, Russia has actively engaged militarily and diplomatically in what it calls its "near-abroad", which it defines as its area of influence. This is in addition to countries beset by instability and conflict in Africa, Asia and in the Middle East, where Russian engagement had previously scaled back significantly since the end of the Soviet Union. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the ensuing war of aggression was a strategic turning point in European and global security, spurring Europe's worst security crisis since the end of the Second World War. Further, it has raised pressing questions about the motives, interests, and peace implications of Russia's revanchism, and its intentions of changing the European and global security order. In different theatres of operation, Russia's engagement in conflict and post-conflict settings bears the hallmarks of a conflict management model that mixes hard and soft power, military and non-military solutions to conflict together.

Soviet heritage heavily influences Russia's foreign engagement, especially in the post-Soviet space of former USSR states. Here, Russia's agenda prioritises security and economic integration with its weaker neighbours, in addition to asserting itself as a hegemonic power. Russia is increasingly engaged with security issues in various neighbouring countries, including Ukraine, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. At the time of writing, Russia's full-scale military invasion into Ukraine has caused a significant loss of life, widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and millions of refugees (UNHCR, 2022) with fears of a deleterious impact on the world economy and direct military confrontation between Russia and NATO countries.

In the Middle East, a key region of interest for its geopolitical ambitions, Russia has demonstrated the ability to project military power, through the use of both its armed forces and private military security contractors who have been deployed in the civil wars in Libya and Syria.

In Africa, after an absence of two decades, Russia is expanding its military and political engagements in countries such as the Central African Republic and Mali, relying heavily on the use of private military personnel. At the Russia-Africa summit, held in Sochi in October 2019, President Putin emphasised that developing relations with African countries and regional organisations was among Russia's foreign policy priorities (The State Duma, 2019). Primarily researched and written before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this report aims to provide insights into the following research questions:

1. How does Russia approach violent conflict and security challenges, and how does it conceptualise its engagement in conflict and post-conflict environments?

2. What are the policy priorities, interests, and concerns of Russia's engagement in conflict-affected countries?

3. Is there a Russian conflict management model, and how is it put in practice in different regional contexts?

This paper uses UN definitions of peacemaking and peacebuilding. The UN has defined peacemaking as the "action to bring hostile parties to agreement, essentially through such peaceful means as those foreseen in Chapter VI of the Charter of the United Nations". The objective of peacemaking, therefore, is to end the violence between the contending parties (UN, 1992). According to a UN definition, "Peacebuilding involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development" (UN, 2010).

The paper begins with an overview of key terms and definitions. I then discuss the rationale and motivations of Russia's engagement in conflict-affected countries and relevant Russian policies, in addition to the key features of Russia's conflict management model and its practical implementation. Here, I reference both the post-Soviet space and more distant countries. My conclusions render the implications of the Russian approach more explicit by dwelling on the strengths and weaknesses of Russia's engagement as a peace actor, and touching upon the prospects for dialogue and cooperation with Russia.

Methodology

The research is based on a review of secondary sources including official Russian policy documents, peer-reviewed articles, and other expert publications in the English and Russian literature. I also include analysis of observations in Russian and Western media, as well as data acquired through six semi-structured interviews with Russian diplomats, scholars, and think tank experts, as well as interviews with two western and one African analysts. In accordance with the approved ethics protocols of this project, and to stimulate free and candid discussions which protect the confidentiality of participations, some names of interviewees and their institutions have been withheld.

Key findings and recommendations

- As Russia continues its war against Ukraine and expands its military, political and diplomatic engagements in both the post-Soviet space and distant regions around the world, there is a need to better understand the policy priorities, interests, and concerns with Russia's engagement in conflict and post-conflict environments and the implications for liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding.

- Like China (Mariani, 2022), Russia does not frame its engagement in fragile or conflict-affected countries as "making" or "building" peace. Instead, it prefers to use a range of alternative peace-related terminologies. These use the language of "negative peace" and prioritise stability and normalisation, rather than just and lasting peace.

- With the ability to project military power, and growing ambitions to act as a global security actor pursuing a multipolar world order, Russia has been at the forefront of a new illiberal—or authoritarian—model of conflict management which combines both hard and soft power, as well as military and non-military solutions to conflict.

- A range of variable factors drive Russia's engagement in fragile and/or conflict-affected environments. This depends on if Russia is engaging with its neighbours or further afield. As demonstrated by the war in Ukraine, Russia sees itself as a hegemonic power, and the only country entitled to this power in the vast, once-united, post-Soviet space. Securing supremacy over the region and reducing the influence of other global powers - in particular, the USA—by establishing a buffer zone of stable and Moscow-aligned subordinate states are, for Russia, key priorities that justify an overall high commitment of resources and even waging war.

- Russia's engagement further afield prioritises consolidation or extension of geo-strategic interests and global political ambitions and, to a lesser extent, its economic interests. We can see in the Middle East and Africa a number of common Russian solutions for "conflict settlement", including:

  - Stabilisation and conflict containment. For Russia, norms of good governance, the rule of law and accountability, and individual human rights are fatuous in the absence of stability. Russia is satisfied with a minimalist approach, with a primary goal to halt or reduce violence and secure a minimum of political order and stability. This political order should additionally be in line with its geopolitical interests. This is favoured in opposition to lasting social transformation in which liberal democracy, human rights and good governance can be cultivated.

  - Support for a competent, hierarchical order. In Russia's hierarchical governance model, a strong government (and leader) provides the best guarantee of stability. The process of democratisation, and consequential elections and changes of leadership, can be counterproductive to Russia's goal of achieving stability.

  - Military activities and peace talks are closely inter-related. Achieving stability focuses on "Coercive Mediation", where hard and soft power, military action, and negotiations among the stronger parties converge.

  - Information control is key in conflict management. Information campaigns and media activity play a crucial role. This has been obvious in Russia's engagement both in the post-Soviet space and in more distant regions, where information operations have been deployed as tools in social influence campaigns. This is often in tandem with Russia's hard security interventions.

  - The West is the perceived problem and cannot be part of the solution. Russia perceives Western powers' interventions—and the export of "democratic revolutions"—as the primary causes of violence and conflict in the Middle East, Northern Africa, and other regions.

Russia poses an ideological challenge to Western concepts and practices of peacemaking and peacebuilding, and a risk that conflict-affected countries will be caught in the middle of a geopolitical power struggle. However, in the long term its conflict management model fails to produce a significant and plausible threat to liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding. Russia has gained traction in places where other international approaches have been attempted without success—for example, in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Central Africa and the Sahel region. Russia's opportunistic interventions should galvanise Western policy actors to re-evaluate their own approaches and impacts on peacemaking and peacebuilding. The Russian model may succeed in achieving short-term gains, but it also creates new conflict fault lines and the risk that armed violence will re-emerge. At an operational level, Russia's actions are constrained by the relatively small size of its economy, which is likely to further shrink as a result of severe international sanctions imposed over the invasion of Ukraine.

Recommendations

- The evidence presented from our original research with local stakeholders in Africa and the Middle East suggests that there is work to do in analysing the perceptions and agency of civil society, particularly in the countries and regions directly affected by Russia's activities.

- Russia is not a monolith and, especially in a post-Ukraine war scenario, there may be scope to promote engagement between Western and Russian actors. This is particularly pertinent to scholars and think tank experts, predicated on aligned interests in reducing tensions and ascertaining which direction, if any, relations can be taken in.

Key terms and definitions

Russia does not have a developed peace doctrine. It looks at peace and security as "one knot" (Matveeva, 2022). Despite references to "peacemaking" and "peacebuilding" in official English language translations of Russian policy documents, respondents interviewed for this article highlighted that Russia usually does not frame its engagement in fragile and conflict-affected countries as making or building peace. Instead it prefers the use of a range of alternative peace-related terminologies. These vary in complexity and content, with the majority of them using the language of negative peace. This language prioritises the absence of violent processes and enables measuring peace more easily, but does not aim for any just and lasting peace.

Among the most common Russian peace-related terminologies are mirotvorchestvo (Nikitin, 2022) (миротворчество, literally meaning "peace creation"), which prioritises stability and state building, unlike liberal notions of peacebuilding through democratisation. In addition to this are: uregulirovaniye konfliktov (урегулирование конфликтов, "conflict settlement") (Nikitina, 2022); razresheniye konfliktov (разрешение конфликтов, conflict resolution); and normalisatsia (нормализация, "normalisation"), which aims for immediate stabilisation and allowing life to get back to normal (Matveeva, 2022). These signal a more minimalist form of intervention compared to the concepts and methods of stabilisation and stability emanating from Western governments' doctrines (Rynn, 2022).

One interviewee noted that pursuing peace is only a nominal concern for Russia. It may be introduced in the rhetoric of the political discourse, but it does not guide Russia's approach and does not apply to Russia's priorities abroad. What Russia actually pursues—argues the respondent—is stability: "especially the stability of regimes that are either similar to itself or are friendly with Russia, that is governments that rely on governance that is far from genuine people's sovereignty" (Interview 1).

Rationale and motivations for Russia's engagement in conflict-affected states

A range of factors reflecting foreign policy goals drive Russia's engagement in fragile and/or conflict-affected environments, with substantial variations depending on whether Russia engages in its "near-abroad" space or further afield.

The post-Soviet space

Within the territory of the former Soviet Union, Russia's national security interests and regional ambitions converge (Klein, 2019). Three main goals, it has been argued, drive Russia's engagement: warding off national security threats, securing supremacy over the region, and limiting the room for manoeuvre of Western actors or China (Ibid.). All three elements are present in Russia's rationale for the war in Ukraine where the prospect of NATO's expansion is perceived as a national security threat. Ukraine—with a friendly and acquiescent regime—should become a satellite country politically and economically bound to Russia, and Western countries' role and influence in Ukraine should be minimal or non-existent. One interviewee highlights Russia's concerns about Western models of governance in the post-Soviet space, which may de-legitimise and undermine its own governance system. Therefore, they are considered a national security threat. According to this view, the case of Ukraine—which for Russia "is like part of its own territory, which it lost" (Interview 1)—is creating fear in Russia that its neighbouring country may take a path that will become popular and thus inspire forces inside Russia to challenge the current Russian government (Ibid.). Similarly in Georgia, where despite not having any territorial claims, there are still Russian concerns about a neighbouring country from the post-Soviet sphere "that develops successfully on principles that are very different from those the Russian regime is based on" (Ibid.).

Engagement further afield

In the opinion of international observers, and also in the Russian security discourse itself, national security concerns are less prominent in Russian engagements in Africa, the Middle East, or other far away regions. Here, geo-strategic interests, global political ambitions and, to some extent, economic interests become more pronounced. Summarised below are some of the key motivations influencing Russia's engagement in conflict zones:

- It addresses the ambitions of a country that does not see itself as an emerging or emergent power, but rather as a great power (de Carvalho & de Coning, 2013). In Russia's self-conception of how a great power (and a UN Security Council permanent member) should act, great powers have the capabilities and rights to exert their influence on a global scale, but also the duty to take on additional responsibilities for peace and security, particularly in their sphere of influence. Engagement in regions of instability provides Russia with opportunities to demonstrate its status as a great power (Nikitina, 2021) and to reclaim what it considers to be its rightful place in the centre of the international stage. This additionally allows Russian diplomats to be in the room when major international security issues are discussed (Lewis, 2021). One respondent argues that Russia ultimately "wants to sit at the top table, which comprises three actors, the United States, Russia, and China. It seeks a de-facto veto on all matters of global concern" (Nixey, 2021).

- It represents an effective, and at times low-cost, mechanism to consolidate or extend Russian geopolitical influence and to compete with the West. Geopolitics—according to one interviewee—is always present, whenever, and wherever Russia engages (van der Lijn, 2021). Another interviewee recalls President Putin's statement that the collapse of the Soviet Union "was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Interview 6). Russia's actions have reduced Western influence in Syria, the Southern Caucasus, Libya, central Africa and the Sahel region. A key motivation of being involved in Mali and CAR, it is argued, is for Russia to make sure that it can irritate France and show that Russia is a global force (van der Lijn, 2021). Ultimately Russia is not going to take over in CAR or Mali—it does not have the intention or the financial resources—however it does enjoy creating a strategic bridgehead there and simultaneously upsetting France (Ibid.). One Russian interviewee, however, disagrees with these views and points to France's contradictory stance in Mali, whereby it communicates to Russia "we are withdrawing but you cannot engage" (Interview 6). What is certain, is that once Russia positions itself as an important actor in such conflicts, the U.S. and its European allies are obliged to maintain effective channels of communication with Russia to help manage regional conflicts. In the words of one interviewee, "the military intervention in Syria in 2015 compelled the West to talk to Russia" (Kozhanov, 2021). Further, Russia's engagement in the Middle East has provided Russia with leverage in its relations with regional powers. For example, Russia's diplomatic and military engagement in Libya and Syria have played a very important role in improving Russia's relations with Egypt, Turkey, and the UAE.

- It fosters the economic interests of the Russian state and its private entities elites. One Russian scholar argues that Libya attracts Russia for economic reasons: Russia would like to regain the role it had in the Libyan economy until Gaddafi was removed from power (Ibid.). Russia now aims to revitalize its stalled investments in the energy sector, especially in Libya's oil and gas industry, in addition to developing new commercial opportunities through arms contracts and other ventures. In Syria, Russia sees opportunities for its companies to obtain reconstruction contracts and to pursue a larger role in key sectors of the economy, including oil and gas, electricity, agriculture, tourism, and real estate (Hatahet, 2019). In the Central African Republic, Russian companies have been granted gold and diamond mining licences (Bax, 2021) and have been able to mine diamonds legally in the government-controlled areas and illegally elsewhere by cutting deals with rebel warlords (Adeoje, 2021).

- It may address national security concerns. Although outside of the post-Soviet space national security concerns tend to lose prominence, they are occasionally a factor that appears to motivate Russia's conflict-zone interventions and thus merit attention in a comparative analysis. Referring to Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, one interviewee includes national security—in particular, the risk of conflict spilling over from Syria to the Russian "near-abroad"—among the other motivations (Kozhanov, 2021). In this scholar's view, one of the triggers for Moscow when considering a military option was the fact that Russian-speaking jihadists had appeared in Syria, leading decision makers to conclude that they represented a security and stability threat to Russia. Mindful of the Chechnya crisis, and how expensive it was to return this region to Russian control and how the conflict spilled out of Chechnya into other regions in Russia, there was a concern that jihadists would eventually return from Syria emboldened by battle experience and possessing connections to international terrorist groups and thus bring a war back to Russia, or back to the post-Soviet space (Ibid.).

Normative principles and guiding policies

Outside of the post-Soviet space, Russia is a staunch supporter of the norm of Westphalian sovereignty, which it considers the basis of international law and international relations. With its historical roots in the end of the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, the Westphalian sovereignty principle emphasises the exclusive sovereignty that each state has over its territory. It is enshrined in Article 2 (7) of the United Nations Charter, which states that "nothing ... shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state..." (UN, 1945). Russia's position on state sovereignty in relation to countries such as Iraq, Syria, the Central African Republic and Mali, is set out in a number of official statements and policy documents. Russia consistently used its veto in the UN Security Council to shield governments in Sudan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Syria from Western criticisms of human rights abuses or war crimes. Russia also challenged emerging international norms, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principles, which demanded international intervention to halt mass atrocities. Instead, Russia promoted a hard understanding of state sovereignty. Russia is wary of Western countries' attempts to turn the R2P principle—upon which there is no consensus within the UNSC - into a legal norm.

There are manifest contradictions in Russia's approach to state sovereignty within the post-Soviet space. This is observable in the disregard for the principle of state sovereignty in Russia's 2008 recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. These contradictions are further demonstrated by Russia's recognition in February 2022 of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic in Eastern Ukraine as independent states. Such actions, in addition to Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine have been carried out despite vigorous opposition by the sovereign states of Georgia and Ukraine. Contradictory practices like these would demonstrate "a dual approach to state sovereignty" (Klein, 2019), one that uses "a Westphalian model of sovereignty outside the former Soviet region and a post-Soviet model inside it" (Ibid.). However, Russian experts view this differently. For them, military responses taken by Russia in Georgia and Ukraine are routine, rather than revisionist anti-sovereignty initiatives. They are seen as a reaction to, or even self-defence against, aggressive actions taken by the West, a West which is perceived as wanting to change the status quo and broaden its sphere of influence.

Russia's engagement in conflict management has evolved from the immediate post-Soviet period, when Russia did not have any clear doctrine or policies, to the late 2010s, when "the difficulties faced by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq galvanised Russia to promote mediation and conflict management as a positive alternative to Western interventions" (Lewis, 2021). Official foreign policy documents, National Security Strategies and Defence White Papers produced over the past decade contain references to peace, providing insights into how Russia perceives its role as a global peace and security actor. They include: "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", approved in February 2013, (Russian MFA, 2013) the 2014 "Concept of the Russian Federation's State Policy in the Area of International Development" (Russian MFA, 2014), and the 2016 updated version of the "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation" (Russian MFA, 2016).

There have also been signs of growing Russian academic interest in peace and conflict as part of efforts to develop new Russian foreign policy approaches in the post-Covid world. In 2020, two Russian scholars argued that Russia needed to develop new ideas for its foreign policy, calling for Russia to promote its role as "an effective and successful peacemaker" and arguing, "Russia should give more importance to peacemaking and the settlement of military conflicts in its foreign policy rhetoric" (Karaganov & Suslov 2020).

Approaches and solutions to peace

The Russian approach to peace does not propose a coherent blueprint or model and, unlike Western liberal approaches, is much more context and region-specific. However, several Russian solutions to the governance of international peace and security have emerged from Russia's engagement in a number of conflicts, especially over the past decade. They include:

- Stabilisation and conflict containment. There is a belief in Russia—noted one analyst (Matveeva, 2022)—that states should have effective and stable governance. This analyst also noted that, according to Russia's world vision of how a country should be run "governments should control territory and make lives liveable. It is better if they have legitimacy and respect human rights, but in practice that is not always easy" (Ibid.). The central concern is to have "an effective and stable government that is able to control the territory and ensure stable institutions, which deliver welfare, growth and security" (Ibid.).

  According to another respondent, the overriding priority for Russia's conflict management model is securing stability and strong governments (van der Lijn, 2021). Norms of good governance, rule of law and accountability, and individual human rights are fatuous in the absence of stability. Other analysts see Russia's engagement in conflict-affected states usually aimed at stabilisation, rather than conflict resolution (Jütersonke et al, 2021). Russia appears to be satisfied with a minimalist approach, whereby the main goal should be to stop the fighting and to secure a minimum of political order and stability—a political order in line with its geopolitical interests—rather than a lasting social transformation in which liberal democracy, human rights and good governance can be cultivated. A range of different "partners"—from the Taliban in Afghanistan to General Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar—are legitimate, as long as those partners can impose order, provide stability and protect Russia's interests.

- Support for a competent hierarchical order. In Russia's hierarchical governance model, a strong government (and leader) provides the best guarantee of stability. The process of democratisation, with its elections and occasional changes of leadership, can be counterproductive to the goal of achieving stability. Interviewees point out that Russia is haunted by the myth of the "colour revolutions" (Kozhanov, 2021 & van der Lijn, 2021), which—according to the Russian leadership—are inspired by external forces and the West, and are directed against "country-specific regimes" (Kozhanov, 2021). The Russian leadership, it is argued, is projecting this scenario to its own potential future and is thus particularly sympathetic to the cause of incumbent regimes in peril. However, some analysts note that both the post-war parliamentary elections in Tajikistan in 2000 and Russia's pressure on the Assad regime in Syria to accept the UN-led Syrian Constitutional Committee are examples that suggest Russia's emphasis on hierarchical governance does not always mean a total "rejection of the democratic rule per se" (Jütersonke et al., 2021).

- A hybrid package of military and diplomatic tools. The main tool for achieving "stabilisation" revolves around what has been described as "Coercive Mediation" (Lewis, 2021; 2020), a type of negotiation relying on power politics, which combines military engagement "with coercive forms of negotiation to co-opt parties, divide the opposition, and provide some legitimacy to counterinsurgency operations" (Ibid.). Military solutions are permissible and can be a precondition for peace talks. One interviewee argues that in Russia's militarised society, "the projection of power, understood as the ability to influence and coerce other countries and be seen as capable of coercion, is a national ideal" and that, as a result, "a great country is one that is able to engage militarily with others and win." The same interviewee concludes that "nothing matters more than strategic dominance and the ability to achieve military goals abroad" (Interview 1).

However, no military victory can be sustained without negotiations, diplomacy, and information campaigns. This is well-illustrated by Russia's direct military interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015), which were all accompanied by diplomatic initiatives (Lewis, 2020). In Georgia, Russia agreed to pull its troops from the whole of Georgia—except for the two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—following the agreement of a peace plan negotiated by French President Sarkozy and Russian President Medvedev (UoE Peace Agreements Database). In Ukraine, the Russian-backed separatists and Ukraine agreed to a ceasefire deal in Minsk in September 2014 (Ibid.), which was later followed by a 13-point agreement in February 2015 (Ibid.). In Syria, Russia spearheaded the Astana peace process in 2017, which became a key element of its diplomatic efforts.

One interviewee sees the hybrid package of tools at Russia's disposal as dictated by the necessity to limit the costs and risks of Russia's foreign interventions (Kozhanov, 2021). For instance, the use of private paramilitary companies helps Russia to camouflage its casualties and avoid the financial stress of costly official military operations. Similarly, diplomatic and humanitarian aid measures serve to compensate for the limitations of expensive hard security instruments (Ibid.). Russia has been learning from the practices of Western countries. For example, in Syria, it is copying the most effective military elements of America's engagement in Afghanistan, limiting its official military presence to the air force, military police, and special operation forces, which allow it to minimise casualties and reduce negative reactions inside Russia. The use of private military companies is originally a non-Russian phenomenon that Russia has adopted (Ibid.).

- Inclusivity of powerful actors. Opinions vary quite sharply on how inclusive - or not - Russia's peace approaches are. One Western scholar stresses that, for Russia, strong international actors—for example Russia or Turkey—are better equipped than neutral, smaller countries to mediate peace talks. He cites Afghanistan as an example, where Russia has objected to the involvement in the peace process of a number of states from outside the region that do not have the power to influence armed groups on the ground (Lewis, 2020).

While liberal peacebuilding favours approaches that are participatory and involve different social groups in peace negotiations, for Russia "those with guns and political power have the ability to start and stop the violence, so it makes sense to limit the process to powerful armed factions and political leaders" (Ibid.). For example, the intra-Afghan talks held in Moscow in 2019—which the Russian Foreign Ministry presented as an "initiative of Afghanistan's civil society"—brought together powerful warlords-turned-politicians, tribal elders and other prominent Afghan figures who discussed with senior Taliban representatives a ceasefire and a "powerful and democratic central government" in Afghanistan (Gannon & Faiez, 2019). According to one scholar, however, Russia "is dressing up its own national interest in the form of a peacebuilding discourse." That scholar cites as an example Syria, where "Moscow claims to contribute to building up stable government institutions, using the rhetoric of inclusivity and good governance. However, this discourse, both of stable political institutions and the inclusivity of all actors, is more aimed at the justification of Russia's efforts to save the Assad regime." (Kozhanov, 2021). From this point of view, stable government institutions and inclusivity are not the goal but rather the justification. They are not actually about peacebuilding, "because Moscow is much more interested in saving and protecting the regime that it believes is going to be pro-Russia" (Ibid.). In situations where government institutions are practically absent, or weak—for example in Libya, or Afghanistan before the Taliban's takeover—"Russia puts stakes in different players, hedging its risks and hoping to play a role in bringing the conflict if not to an end, at least to a simmering stage" (Ibid.).

Another scholar offers a different view. For her, inclusivity is where Russia is gaining ground (Matveeva, 2022). She mentioned the Middle East as a region where Russia is trying to project itself as non-partisan. With the exception of terrorist groups, such as ISIS and Al-Nusra, Russia is generally prepared to talk to a wide range of actors and, if possible, bring them together (Ibid.). In that sense, inclusivity both in theory and in practice, is an important norm for Russia. According to Russia, the West claims to be inclusive, but it is not because it applies too many filters to its approach to inclusivity (Ibid.).

- Information control is key in conflict management. In Russia's approach to conflict management, information campaigns and media activity play a crucial role. This has been obvious in Russia's engagement in its near-abroad—including Chechnya, Ukraine and Nagorno-Karabakh - as well as further afield—including in Syria and in the Central African Republic (Lewis, 2021; Lewis, 2020)—where information operations have been deployed in tandem with Russia's hard security interventions (Cunningham, 2020). One African security expert mentioned reports that, in the Sahel, Russia is behind some of the misinformation campaigns trying to turn public opinion against France. For him, it is a case of Russia stoking the fires of anti-French sentiment among Malians and trying to opportunistically take advantage of a population that is already tired of France's influence (Adeoje, 2021). Another interviewee gave the example of Russia's "smart information campaigns" in CAR (van der Lijn, 2021), highlighting efforts at winning local people's hearts in the countries where Russia engages, although that effort tends to focus on one population group (Ibid.).

- Humanitarian and development/reconstruction aid is a political tool. Compared to the main international donors, Russia's contributions to humanitarian and development aid are modest (Russell, 2016). However, Russia's humanitarian aid has increased since the mid-2000s (Ibid.), which Western analysts perceive as a tool enhancing Russia's conflict management mechanisms. For instance, according to the Atlantic Council, the Russian military's Centre for Reconciliation of Conflicting Sides in Syria (CRCSS), together with a number of other Russian entities, are included in a "shadow aid system" that is part of Russia's wider mechanism of conflict management (Robinson, 2020).

  Russia understands the importance of reconstruction for the future stability of a war-torn country. It is aware of its economic constraints and, therefore, is reluctant to act alone. Ideally, it would like to have a stake in reconstruction, supported by other international actors with more solid financial means that are also able to cover the costs of its involvement (Kozhanov, 2021). One analyst suggested "that is why Russia is looking for sponsors for the reconstruction in Syria. Europe and the Gulf states are viewed by Russia as potential sponsors and there are constant discussions about their participation in reconstruction" (Ibid.). Russia is blending its geopolitical and strategic interests with aspirations and pragmatic efforts to rebuild war-torn countries.

- A generally negative attitude towards Western interventions. Russia sees Western powers' interventions—and the export of "democratic revolutions"—as the primary causes of violence and conflict in the Middle East, Northern Africa and other regions (President of Russia, 2015). Unrest and chaos in the Middle East, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and the military conflict in Ukraine, are—from Russia's perspective—the result of meddling by the West (Ibid.). Therefore - from Russia's view - Western states' attempts to resolve conflicts cannot be effective or credible. That bleeds over into what one Western experts describes as Russia's zero-sum game with the West, "whereby if we're stronger, they're weaker, if they're stronger, we're weaker" (Nixey, 2021). According to a former Russian diplomat, the main flaw of the Western engagement in conflict regions is the attempt to export and impose values and forms of governance that—for example, in Afghanistan—are alien to the local conditions and will inevitably fail (Russian former diplomat, 2021). However, given that Western countries tend to be economically prosperous, they have an important role to play in providing humanitarian assistance and development aid to countries in need. That provides the scope for potential cooperation between the West and Russia in third countries where they both engage (Nikitina, 2021).

- The United Nations as a bulwark against a unipolar world. Russia sees the United Nations as "unique in terms of legitimacy, representation and universality" (President of Russia, 2015). It considers any actions that aim to circumvent the authority and procedures of the organisation—especially its Security Council, where Russia holds veto power—as representing "a violation of the UN Charter and contemporary international law" (Ibid.) and such actions may cause "the collapse of the entire architecture of international relations" (Ibid.). Russian officials may concede that UN decision-making bodies are no longer representatives of the new global power dynamics and that there is a need to address this inequality. However, expanding membership of the Security Council would increase the number of competing interests in the Council and diminish Russia's influence. In the view of one Russian analyst, Russia's multipolar world is a code for "Not-American hegemony". He argues that Russia does not want to extend the membership of the P5 because its status in the UN would diminish. He believes that "Russia's ideal is 1815 Vienna Congress of great powers system where the little states don't get to decide anything and only the big ones do."

Furthermore, this analyst suggests that, "if Russia needs to act within a multilateral organisation and it is in its interest, it will do so, but it does not feel constrained by them. While the West tends to be constrained by international organisations, Russia does not feel bound by them." He concludes with an overarching view of the situations, "Russia wants to be in everything, from ASEAN to the Arctic Council. Russia is not against multilateral organisations but it's against multilateralism" (Nixey, 2021).

Practices of peacemaking in the post-Soviet space

In the 1990s/early 2000s, Russia acquired substantial conflict management experience when dealing with its internal conflicts. This was especially the case in Chechnya - where, after 1999, Russia pursued a heavy-handed counterinsurgency campaign, which was accompanied by political manoeuvres and generous funding to promote loyal supporters. The tensions and conflicts in predominantly Muslim-populated areas in the North Caucasus were, in those years, a cause for concern and came with the emergence of several separatist movements. Moscow acquired considerable experience on how to deal with different players on the ground, "learning the challenges of labelling local players black or white only and the importance of being flexible in shaping relations with them, with the use of the instrument of carrot and stick" (Kozhanov, 2021). From its experience at home, Russia learned the values of being patient and accommodating. When Russian military operations started in Syria, Russia planned to end its operation within a few months. However, when it realised the situation was much more complicated than initially envisioned, it then showed flexibility with new approaches and deadlines. Russia's engagement in Syria with various actors (the political leadership, regime supporters and the opposition, both inside and outside of Syria), is seen by one respondent as replicating approaches learned from its domestic experience, especially the war in Chechnya (Ibid.).

Russia's "near-abroad" is the most sensitive region, where Russia devotes the most energy and takes the greatest risks (Carter, 2020). In the post-Soviet space, ensuring stability, avoiding conflicts spilling across borders and threatening its own security, and reducing the influence of other global powers—in particular the USA—are for Russia key priorities that justify an overall greater commitment of resources. Across the Caucasus, Central Asia and parts of Eastern Europe, Russia sees itself as a hegemonic power, the only country entitled to play a leader's role in this huge space that was once a united country (Kozhanov, 2021). With regard to Ukraine and Belarus, there is an additional understanding that without keeping them under control, Russia will not be able to play the role of a global power. One respondent points to, "any rifts between Russia and the West in the post-Soviet space ends up with a bloodshed, at least as long as the Russian leadership preserves its ambition and the will to fight. That's why we had the Crimean annexation and the aggression in Eastern Ukraine." (Ibid.).

Similarly, another interviewee highlights Russia's strategic consideration of the post-Soviet space as a Russian domain that should be kept united through security and economic ties and, when necessary, through direct military intervention. One respondent stressed that in its "near-abroad", Russia has a strong dislike for governance systems that are different from its own, "hence the clashes with Ukraine, Georgia and other countries in the FSU. What Russia genuinely seeks to achieve there is some form of governance that is similar to its own" (Interview 1).

When it felt that its strategic interests at home or in the "near abroad" were threatened, Russia intervened militarily. In 1992, Moscow sent its 14th Army when the secessionist conflict in Moldova escalated. In 2002, Russia and five other post-Soviet states (Kazakhstan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia) set up the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a military alliance based on the principle of collective defence, with the objectives of "strengthening of peace, international and regional security and stability, protection of independence on a collective basis, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Member States" (CSTO Charter, Art. 3). In 2008, Russia backed the breakaway self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. In 2013, it signed a deal with Tajikistan to extend the presence of Russia's 201st military base until 2042 and in 2014, it successfully pressured Kyrgyzstan to terminate the US Manas Air Force base (Zürcher, 2019).

Recent developments in Armenia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine show Russia's resolve to cement its prominent role in the post-Soviet space by committing to a high level of military and diplomatic involvement. In November 2020, after weeks of intense fighting, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a peace deal brokered by Russia. The agreement established a new regional security order, allowing Russian troops to remain as peacekeepers in the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh and in the Lachin Corridor connecting Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. According to one Russian analyst, Russia's intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a paradigm shift: "Russia became diplomatically and militarily directly involved. Without Russia's mediation, the Azerbaijani army would have taken the whole territory; it's only the deployment of Russian peacekeepers that left Armenia with at least some part of the region and Armenian people were able to return there. Russia intervened and achieved 'practical peace' on the ground" (Matveeva, 2022).

In January 2022, following mass protests across Kazakhstan, which the country leadership described as an attempted coup by foreign-trained bandits and terrorists (Al Jazeera, 2022), the Kazakh president appealed to the CSTO to quell the protests and restore order. Roughly 2,500 soldiers were sent to Kazakhstan from other CSTO states, but mostly from Russia (Reuters, 2022). In accordance with a decision by the CSTO Collective Security Council adopted on 6 January 2022, the CSTO troops were a peacekeeping force tasked with protecting important state and military facilities and assisting the Kazakh law enforcement forces in stabilizing the situation (CSTO, 2022). It was the first time that CSTO deployed troops to a member state to resolve a domestic political crisis. The action has far-reaching geopolitical implications, with Kazakhstan's relations with the West and China likely to be constrained and its long-standing multi-vector diplomacy impaired (Antonenko, 2022).

The war that Russia unleashed on Ukraine in February 2022 is unprecedented, but the premises for an armed conflict have existed for many years. The origin of the crisis dates back to 2013-2014, when Ukraine passed from a pro-Russian government, under Viktor Yanukovych, to a pro-Western one, under Petro Poroschenko. Ukraine shares borders with both the EU and Russia, but, as a former Soviet republic, it has deep social and cultural ties with Russia. In 2021, President Putin wrote that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, "a single whole" (President of Russia, 2021). Russia has long resisted Ukraine's move towards European institutions, and NATO in particular. Ukrainian voters' deposition of their pro-Russian president in early 2014, and appointment of a new government that had NATO membership as a priority, was a political change that Russia characterised as a coup. It reacted by annexing Ukraine's southern Crimean Peninsula and backing pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine, who then declared their independence from Ukraine and set up the Donetsk People's Republic and the Lugansk People's Republic in the Donbass basin.

The fate of Ukraine is in the hands of Russia, the United States and Europe. Russia wants a new security order in Europe. The draft agreement that Russia presented to the United States before its invasion of Ukraine called for a return of NATO to its pre-1997 borders —i.e. the withdrawal of NATO from Eastern Europe—and the commitment not to accept further adhesions from countries of the former Soviet bloc, including Ukraine. The proposal was unsurprisingly rejected by the US and NATO as unrealistic. While concerns run high that the war in Ukraine might trigger a wider conflict between Russia and NATO, it is too early to predict - beyond the likelihood of a long period of sustained contestation between Russia and Western democracies - the exact trajectories of the war in Ukraine.

In addition to hard security interventions, development assistance is a mechanism for maintaining general geopolitical influence in Russia's near-abroad (Sergeev, Kananstev & Bartenev, 2013). The 2014 Russian "Concept in the Area of International Development Assistance" underscores the link between development assistance and Russia's national interests especially in the "near abroad". The Concept states, "Active and targeted policy in the field of international development assistance, which serves the national interests of the country, contributes to stabilisation of the socioeconomic and political situation in partner states (…) and facilitates the elimination of existing and potential hotbeds of tension and conflict, especially in the regions neighbouring the Russian Federation". (Russian MFA, 2014). Indeed, Russia, like Western countries, is not alien to the concepts of development cooperation "win-win" and aid in the national interest.



Russia's "near-abroad".

Practices of peacemaking further afield

Russian mechanisms of conflict management took on a new significance as Russia began projecting power outside the former Soviet space into the Middle East and other regions. Russia has become involved, in different capacities, in the wars in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, the Central African Republic and—more recently—Mali, as well as in the conflict in Myanmar. Each case demonstrates different elements of Russia's conflict management model and varying levels of diplomatic and military success.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, after the Soviet Union's 10-year war and the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989, Russia made a diplomatic comeback as a key mediator in 2016. One Russian scholar argues that with the war at a stalemate there was a realisation that a combination of military pressure against the Taliban and Western support for the Afghan government could not achieve stabilisation (Stepanova, 2018). Russia therefore started to engage in an alternative peace process to resolve the conflict. It initiated and facilitated regional peace consultations known as the Moscow Format, Russia's "first peace and security initiative and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' first significant diplomatic undertaking on Afghanistan in years" (Ibid.), that rested on a two-pronged approach consisting of: multilateral dialogue talks on a political settlement with regional powers and intra-Afghan talks with different parties inside Afghanistan.

Through its engagement with armed groups on the ground—including the Taliban—Russia secured a key position in the peace process. The first round of talks on Afghanistan, involving Russian, Pakistani, and Chinese diplomats, took place in December 2016. At the second round of talks, held in February 2017, the original core group expanded into a six-party group involving Afghanistan, Iran and India. The third round, held in April 2017 and upgraded to the "Moscow conference on the Afghan settlement", added to the six-party group all five Central Asian states. Although negotiations in 2017 did not produce any major breakthroughs, they paved the way for a November 2018 peace conference in Moscow that included, for the first time, the Taliban.

In 2019, as peace talks were underway between the United States and the Taliban, Russia continued to pursue its own international diplomacy track with a flurry of diplomatic initiatives and activities. In February 2019, Russia hosted 'intra-Afghan' talks in Moscow that brought together prominent Afghan participants, opposition figures, and tribal elders—but no Afghan government officials. Later, in September 2019, just days after U.S. President Trump announced that peace talks with the Taliban had collapsed, a team of Taliban negotiators met Russian officials in Moscow. Although there was no progress on a political settlement, such meetings raised Russia's profile in the Afghan peace process. Russia publicly supported a peace deal between the United States and the Taliban in February 2020. However, it never stopped its parallel peace process and instead engaged in a new round of international diplomacy. On 18 March 2021, the special envoys for Afghanistan of the US, China, Russia and Pakistan—the so-called extended troika—a ten-member Taleban delegation, and 15 Afghan officials met in Moscow (Ruttig, 2021).

Despite its diplomatic efforts and direct contacts over the past five years, Russia continues to list the Taliban as a terrorist organisation. This may seem like a contradiction, similar to Russia's ability to have friendly relations simultaneously with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, Russia appears to be at ease with those inherent contradictions in policy and practice. One interviewee suggested that "Russia calls that ability being a 'multidimensional actor'. It is how Russia punches above its weight on the world scene" (Nixey, 2021).

Myanmar

In the aftermath of the military takeover in Myanmar in February 2021, an opinion piece published by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti provided the rationale and legitimisation narrative for Russia's support to the military junta. It argued that given Myanmar's complex and multi-ethnic society, the Myanmar army was the only viable guarantor of unity and peace and without the armed forces, the country "would hardly exist at all now" (Akopov, 2021).

According to Russian analysts, the military coup gave Russia an opportunity to step up its engagement in Southeast Asia. Driven by the desire to maintain lucrative arms sales and to consolidate a strategic presence in a country of geopolitical importance, Russia has emerged as the highest profile supporter of the Myanmar military government (Matveeva, 2022; Lukin & Gubin, 2021). While Western governments condemned Myanmar's military for overthrowing the civilian National League for Democracy (NLD) government, and called for a return to the democratic process, Russia responded by intensifying its engagement with the regime, focusing on military cooperation, but also seeking closer economic ties (The Irrawaddy, Nov 2021). Throughout 2021, there was an array of high-level military exchanges, including bilateral visits, between Russia and Myanmar. In August 2021, a junta spokesman reportedly declared that relations with Russia had grown deeper (The Irrawaddy, Aug 2021). Arms sales have been at the forefront of the relationship. Russia reportedly was Myanmar's second largest supplier of arms, after China, from 2014–2019 (Macan-Markar, 2021). In August 2021, it was reported that Russia would deliver missile defence systems to Myanmar (Soldatkin & Balmforth, 2021) as part of a contract signed in January 2021 (TASS, 2021). At the UN, Russia has sided with China by raising concern about the deteriorating security situation in Myanmar, but has stopped short of condemning the coup and imposing a global arms embargo (Nichols, 2021).

Syria and the Astana Process

Russia's engagement in Syria centres around security and geopolitics, rather than any deep economic interdependence or social-cultural affinities. From the Russian perspective, Syria is an important ally and the host of an essential military base in the Mediterranean. Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015 saved the Assad regime—which Russia considers the legitimate government in Syria (Russian former diplomat, 2021—from impending collapse, giving Russia the opportunity to project power across the Middle East. In October 2015, President Putin declared that the goal of the military operation was to support a legitimate government under siege by terrorist groups and create the preconditions for a political compromise (*BBC*, 2015). Russia accompanied its military campaign in Syria with a range of negotiations and mediation activities. On the ground, the Russian military was sometimes directly involved in ceasefire talks with rebels, but these were extremely asymmetric affairs, forming part of the Russian-backed Syrian counterinsurgency campaign. Negotiations with rebels were preceded by tactics of siege and aerial bombardment and were designed to force fighters to agree to leave the area and move to de-escalation zones. Eventually, most fighters ended up in Idlib because government forces overran the other de-escalation zones.

At the international level, Russia established its own mediation initiative in January 2017, the so-called Astana process, which was launched in the capital of Kazakhstan. This initiative followed a similar two-level approach to that pursued in Afghanistan: talks on a political settlement with regional powers and intra-Syrian talks and engagement with different parties inside Syria. At the international level, the Astana process brought together Turkey, Iran, and Russia as guarantors of "de-escalation zones". These three states presided over a range of meetings with members of the opposition and government delegates—and later supported a Syrian National Dialogue Congress, which was held in Sochi in January 2018. Delegates to the congress agreed to establish a Constitutional Committee under the auspices of the UN Geneva process, made up of government, opposition, and civil society representatives tasked with drawing up a new Syrian constitution. The committee finally met in Geneva in late October 2019.

The Constitutional Committee made little progress, partly because the Syrian government saw a complete military victory as within reach and lost interest in compromising with the opposition. Moreover, Russia and Turkey were divided over the future of Syria and were not able to reconcile their differences in the Astana talks. Nevertheless, despite being unable to produce a final political settlement, the Astana initiative heavily favoured and consolidated the al-Assad regime by dividing the opposition and enabling former foes to re-open ties with Damascus.

While exploring the prospects in Syria, one Russian scholar predicts that the Syrian regime, with the support of Russia and possibly Iran, will try to gradually regain the territories that are currently not under its control. Neither Syria nor Russia will tolerate the existence of territories outside the control of the regime, as they can be used by opponents to facilitate an alternative government which will complicate the political process of reconciliation. Moscow wants to legitimise the return of the Syrian regime to the international arena and legitimise the military victory of the regime (Kozhanov, 2021). Regions controlled by Turkey or the Kurds, with the support of the U.S. at different stages, are considered as temporary lost territory whose return is only a matter of time. One analyst suggests that, "if today Turkey seems to be very strong in controlling the Idlib area, Russia will be waiting for its chance, when the situation changes either in Turkey or around the world, or on the ground, it will grab its opportunity" (Ibid.). According to this view, the conflict will continue simmering. Russia cannot afford an immediate strike, but instead hovers at the edges of certain areas that will eventually return under the control of the regime.

Libya

According to a former Russian diplomat, geopolitical and economic considerations drive Russia's engagement in Libya (Interview 6). From a Russian perspective, Libya's statehood "was destroyed as a result of a gross violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1973" (President of Russia, 2015), which caused anarchy and empowered extremists and terrorists.

Russia's role in the Libyan conflict follows patterns of conflict management similar to those applied in other contexts. Libya is a typical example of a country where Russia is "playing both sides against the middle, so it does have relationships with the internationally-recognised government and opposition forces." (Nixey, 2021). While trying to balance positive relations with the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) and the House of Representatives (HoR), a rival administration based in Tobruk, Russia has provided material support for the forces of General Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army forces in the East. As documented in a series of media releases, the United States Africa Command has accused the Russian Federation of " violat[ing] UN Security Council Resolution UNSCR 1970 by actively providing military equipment and fighters to the front lines of the Libya conflict" (USA Africa Command, 2020). In particular, U.S. military experts have concluded that Russia has supplied the Wagner Group—a Russian private military contractor—operating in Libya "with fighter aircraft, military armoured vehicles, air defence systems, and supplies" (Ibid.). According to a United Nations report seen by Reuters, the Wagner Group has up to 1,200 personnel deployed in Libya, strengthening the forces of eastern-based General Haftar (Nichols, 2020). Meanwhile, in January 2020, the Turkish parliament approved an official military intervention in Libya aimed at putting an end to the attack waged on Tripoli by Haftar's armed coalition.

Although Libya and Syria are very different cases, "the stage seemed to be set for a new Astana-style peace process" (Lewis, 2020), in which Russia and Turkey would wrest a peace initiative from Europe, the US and the UN and share influence, and even future contracts, in a post-conflict Libya. As a sign of increasing influence in the Libyan conflict, in January 2020, Russia hosted a mini-summit in Moscow between the two Libyan warring sides, with the participation of the Turkish Foreign Minister. However, General Haftar refused to agree on a binding truce, which would have paved the way for a peace settlement, and later resumed his offensive on Tripoli.

By late spring 2020, the Turkish-backed forces aligned with the Tripoli government had forced Haftar's forces out of north-western Libya (Harchaoui, 2020). As Haftar can rely on the support of other influential actors, including Egypt and the UAE, his relationship with Russia is not straightforward and deferential and thus demonstrates the difficulty of managing proxies—a major challenge to Russia's coercive mediation strategy (Lewis, 2020).

Central African Republic (CAR)

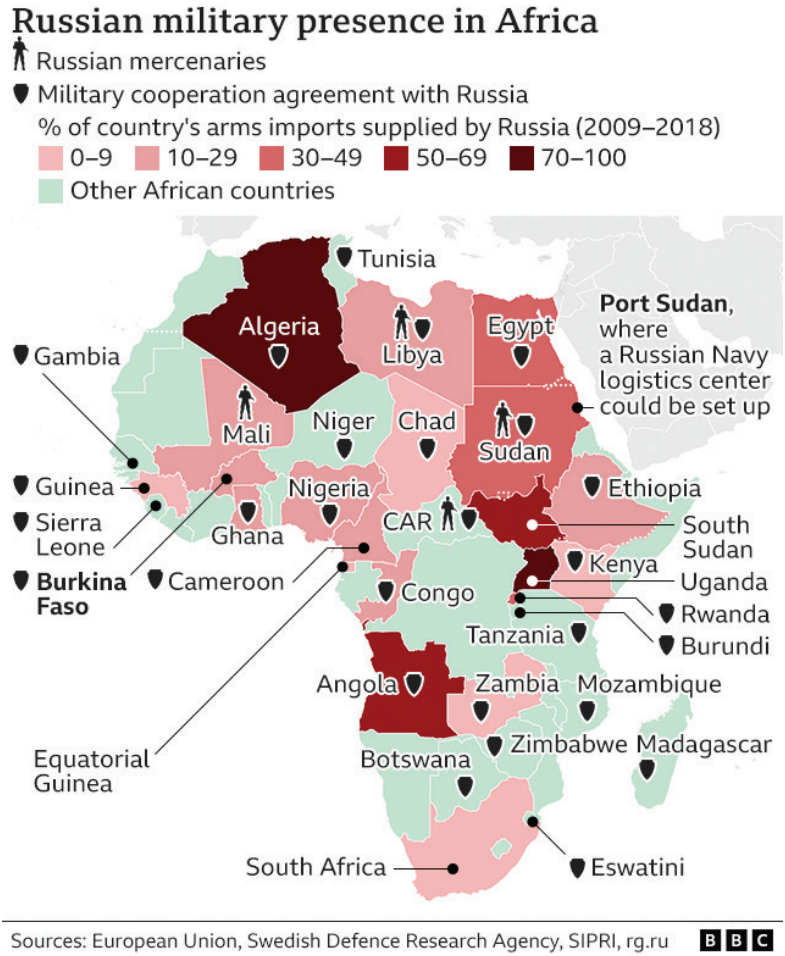
Russia is the Central African Republic's favourite ally in its battle against insurgents (Bax, 2021). Russia's high-profile role in the CAR dates back to 2017, when an exemption to the UN arms embargo allowed the CAR government to purchase a small quantity of small arms to bolster its army (UN, 2017). After fighting intensified between pro-government militias and rebel groups, CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra turned to Moscow for arms and training. In 2018, Russia donated small arms and provided 175 military advisers (Kiselyova & Balmforth, 2018). There were further arms shipments in the following years (The Moscow Times, 2021). On 21 August 2018, Russia and CAR reportedly signed a military deal that paved the way for Moscow to step up training of CAR's armed forces (Ibid.). The CAR government also hired the Wagner Group, which has played a key role in securing the capital Bangui and putting down a rebel advance ahead of presidential elections in 2021 (Ibid.).

Over the past five years, Russia has been able to expand its military, security and economic presence in CAR. According to a senior NGO Africa expert, "Today, Russian advisers have the government's ear in not just military but also political and economic matters" (Bax, 2021). Valery Zakharov, a former Russian intelligence official, is President Touadéra national security advisor (Ramani, 2021).

In addition to "bolstering its status and placing itself at the front of the line for mining sector contracts" (Ibid.), Russia has also emerged as a "leading diplomatic arbiter in CAR's protracted conflict" (Ibid.) It has been able to bring 14 rebel groups to the negotiating table (Adeoje, 2021). Zakharov himself was reportedly involved in several negotiations with rebel groups leaders in 2018 and 2019 (Olivier, 2021). On 6 February 2019, with Russia's encouragement, President Touadera's government and fourteen armed groups signed the African Union-sponsored Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation—dubbed the 'Khartoum agreement' (UNSC, 2019)—as the country's roadmap to peace (Bax, 2021). However, the peace remains precarious in CAR, with the capital Bangui under government control, while rebels hold other parts of the country (Adeoje, 2021). Following CAR Former President François Bozizé's exclusion from the 2020 presidential polls, an alliance of armed groups known as the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), made up of six signatories to the Khartoum agreement, vowed to disrupt the elections. After Touadéra won a second five-year term, a mix of UN peacekeepers, Wagner personnel and Rwandan soldiers repelled the insurgents' advance on Bangui to topple the government (Ibid.).

Mali

Since 2019, through a diplomatic, economic and security drive, Russia has increased its presence and influence in Mali. In June 2019, Russia and Mali signed a military cooperation agreement (Russian MoD, 2019). After two military coups in Mali, France decided to redesign its military operations in the Sahel in July 2021, reducing by about half its troops and closing down military bases in Northern Mali. Two months later there were reports of the imminent signing of a deal between the Malian military junta and Russian private military contractors from the Wagner Group (Irish & Lewis, 2021). According to these reports, the Wagner group would apply a deployment strategy in Mali similar to the one used in the CAR since 2018: they would train the Malian military in counterterrorism operations and provide protection for senior officials, receiving monthly wages and concessions on mineral resources (Lebovich, 2021). On 23 December 2021, 15 Western countries condemned what they said was the deployment in Mali of Russian mercenaries working for the Wagner Group (Government of Canada, 2021).They criticised the Malian authorities' "choice to use already scarce public funds to pay foreign mercenaries instead of supporting the Malian Armed Forces and public services to the benefit of the Malian people" (Ibid.). Amid mounting tensions between the Malian junta and European partners, especially France, Russia through its proxy private military contractors is poised to gain further influence and become a more prominent security player in Mali.



Russian military presence in Africa from BBC News at bbc.co.uk/news

UN peace operations

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation emphasises the importance of international peacekeeping as "an effective tool for settling armed conflicts and facilitating post-crisis nation-building". It commits Russia "to participate in international peacekeeping efforts under the UN leadership and in cooperation with regional and international organizations," and to "actively contribute to improving the preventive potential of the UN peacekeeping", with "peacekeeping mandates that do not allow arbitrary interpretations, especially those related to the use of force"(Russian MFA, 2016). However, Russia's actual participation in UN peace operations is rather modest. It currently stands at 77 uniformed personnel, (UN, 2021) and Russia ranked eighth among the top providers of assessed contributions to United Nations peacekeeping operations for 2020-2021 (UN, 2021). Russia's contributions to UN peace operations are not likely to increase in the near future. One interviewee noted that Russia does not need UN peace operations because its position in the UN Security Council already provides it with effective means to play an important role in global politics (van der Lijn, 2021). Besides—adds the interviewee—"Russia has limited resources to increase its UN peace operations' contributions. Its limited means, with some personnel in different peacekeeping missions, are enough to give it a foot in the door and inform its decisions within the UN Security Council" (Ibid.).

Since 2007, Russian troops have served in a military peacekeeping contingent of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Such a contingent is intended to participate in peacekeeping operations within the territories of CSTO member states, under a mandate of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO, as well as outside of the CSTO region, as mandated by the UN Security Council (Russian MoD, 2021).

Conclusions

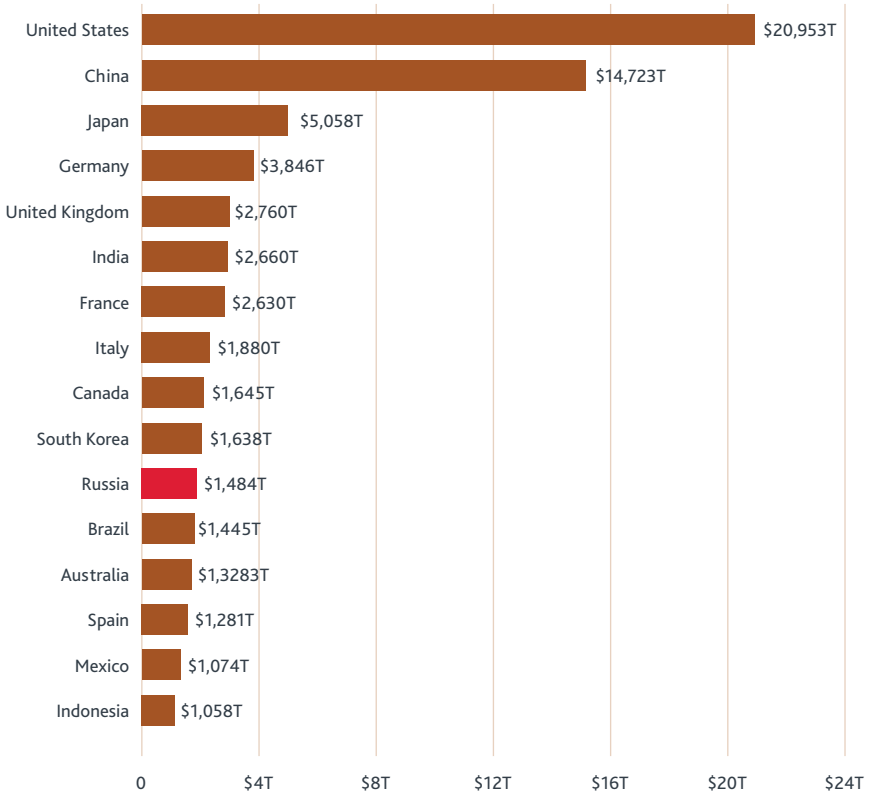
As a major security actor globally, with the ambitions and the prospects of playing an even larger role in countries affected by instability and conflict, Russia is at odds with the policy and practice of the liberal peace model. With the ability to project military power, and growing ambitions to act as a global security actor pursuing a multipolar world order, Russia has been at the forefront of a new illiberal—or authoritarian—model of pursuing peace that combines hard and soft power, in addition to both military and non-military solutions to conflict.

Russia has strengths it can deploy around the world. Alongside an ability to project military power outside its immediate region and to cover a broad spectrum of operations, Russia also has extensive experience and capacity in conflict-related diplomacy. It has made headway in complex peace negotiations, like in Afghanistan and Syria, with the skilful use of the instruments at its disposal, including good intelligence, analysis and a very efficient diplomatic service. Crucially, the Russian model is quite effective at linking military, diplomatic, and the more limited economic instruments at its disposal to achieve its intended foreign policy objectives. One interviewee argues that Russia, although not nearly as strong as the West, is able to use its strengths much more than the West, partly because the West is constrained by a combination of values, disunity, and resource dilution. However, there are also conceptual flaws and capacity gaps in the Russian model of conflict management. Firstly, Russia emphasises the importance of power politics in peace negotiations. However, a focus on regional powers and geopolitics misses complex local dynamics that can hinder international initiatives. Secondly, the imposition of an illiberal—or authoritarian—peace, which is by definition exclusionary, may be successful in achieving short-term gains (for example, a reduction in deadly violence and a certain degree of stability at least in the capital cities). However, the underlying political and social grievances remain unaddressed, creating new conflict fault lines and the risk that armed violence will re-emerge.

At the operational level, Russia's actions are constrained by its economy. The financial resources it can devote to foreign interventions are limited, and well below those available to the United States, China and even some European countries. One interviewee expressed the view that while Russia may bolster its willingness to provide peace and state-building assistance as well as post-conflict reconstruction aid, with an economy smaller than that of South Korea, matching rhetoric with practice is very challenging. Russia cannot offer much aid in development assistance and post-conflict reconstruction. It has made inroads, but only in a handful of client states of limited economic and strategic significance that generate little attention from the international community. Therefore, analyses pointing to the risks of Russia replacing the West in Africa, or the Middle East seem out of proportion to the reality of the situation.

Russia has the world's 11th largest economy

Chart shows the world's largest economies by gross domestic product, in trillions of U.S. dollars



Russia's economy in 2020. Source: World Bank

Nevertheless, Russia's model of peace poses an ideological and practical challenge to Western concepts and practices of peacemaking and peacebuilding. The increased role and impact of Russia in regions of instability and conflict should spur Western peacemakers to rethink certain aspects of liberal peacemaking and peacebuilding. Russia has gained traction in places where other international approaches have been attempted and unsuccessful, such as in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali and Syria. As the West turned in on itself, increasingly burdened by the scars of failure from Iraq to Libya, it has vacated many areas, creating a vacuum that Russia has attempted to fill. Russia's opportunistic interventions should galvanize Western policy actors to re-evaluate their own approaches and seek more effective ways to halt civil wars and end deadly conflict. Over the past century, the worldviews of the West and Russia have never been aligned. In Ukraine, that divergence has turned into a major conflict. Beyond the deleterious impact on people's lives in Ukraine and the concerns for European and global security, the war in Ukraine ushers in a protracted period of contestation between Russia and Western democracies akin to the Cold War, where fragile conflict-affected countries around the world risk getting caught in the middle of an all-consuming geopolitical struggle.

The evidence presented from original research with local stakeholders in Africa and the Middle East (Harchaoui & Mariani 2022; Logo Mulukwat & Mariani 2022; Belhadj Klaz & Mariani 2022) suggests that there is work to do to analyse the perceptions and agency of civil society in the countries or regions directly affected by Russia's activities. While there are limitations to perception studies when employed as a stand-alone method—the results obtained may not indicate actual impacts and would require other research data—they do underline the perceived impacts and provide novel insights for a better understanding of Russia's engagement in individual conflict-affected regions.

In the current geopolitical climate—with the war in Ukraine becoming the largest European conflict since the end of the Second World War and a global crisis—advocating for a recalibration of relations with Russia towards avoiding zero-sum thinking or even forging some form of cooperation on specific issues in conflict zones, runs against the dominant narrative of conflict and the dangers of escalation. There may not be space for such a debate with Russia at the time of writing, or in the near future. However, Russia is not a monolith. Despite increasingly repressive policies, there are different views within Russian civil society and among intelligentsia and policy circles (scholars, artists, think tanks, leading activists, officials, and business leaders) on the Kremlin's foreign policy and its economic and political implications. There are also signs of growing anti-war sentiments within the general public. Over time, especially in a post-Ukraine war scenario, there may be scope to pursue paths where engagement between Western and Russian actors proves possible, in particular with scholars and think tank experts, with the goal of reducing tensions and slowly ascertaining what direction, if any, relations can be taken in, after such an annihilation of trust in the actions of the Russian Federation under the leadership of President Putin.

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PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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