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Peacemongering in Violent Conflicts: Making Peace to Make War

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ABSTRACT

Peace processes increasingly appear to be instrumentalized to serve interveners' geopolitical agendas, underscoring the need to reassess peace practices in an era of heightened global competition. This article introduces *peacemongering* – the use of peacemaking and peacebuilding as tools of hybrid and grey-zone warfare to control (post-)conflict orders and gain strategic advantage over rivals. Drawing on four years of multilingual content analysis, it employs inductive process-tracing of Russia's intervention in Syria. The case reveals how coercive mediation, manipulation of multilateral mechanisms, and economic capture were used to advance Moscow's global ambitions, weaponize peace, and challenge norms of conditional sovereignty and multilateralism.

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Introduction

Shifts in the global order have intensified competition among major powers and fostered transactional approaches to peacemaking, raising questions about the motives and gains of third-party peace interventions. Peacekeeping, conflict management and resolution, and reconciliation have traditionally been understood as mechanisms for reducing violence (Beardsley et al. 2006; Höglund 2008). Yet peace processes can also be instrumentalized by external actors to shape or impose (post-)conflict orders aligned with their geopolitical interests (Turkmani 2022). Hellmüller and Salaymeh (2025) conceptualize this as 'transactional' peacemaking between self-interested external actors and local political, economic, and war entrepreneurs, producing a 'power peace' that reflects prevailing power relations (Beaujouan 2024). Building on this emerging *strategic peace* paradigm, this article introduces *peacemongering*: the instrumentalization of peacemaking and peacebuilding in hybrid and grey-zone warfare.

Studies of mediation increasingly demonstrate that some peace practices can exacerbate rather than reduce conflict (Rosoux 2022). Recent interventions – including Russia's involvement in Syria, Libya, and Mali and the United States' role in Gaza and the wider Middle East – illustrate how distinctions between war and peace, interstate and intrastate

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conflict, and politics and warfare are increasingly blurred. This blurring is facilitated by new technologies, innovations in sabotage techniques, and the variable interpretation, implementation, and contestation of norms and laws related to peace interventions, international human rights and humanitarian law. Peace interventions may therefore instrumentalise these to capitalize on chaos and insecurity in service of broader objectives, including the promotion of governance norms, the acquisition of resources, political influence, or strategic territory. As global competition intensifies, rival peace interventions have become more common, turning peace processes into a political marketplace wherein actors compete for influence in arenas of insecurity (Anderson 2025; De Waal 2015; Meier et al. 2022; Peter and Rice 2022). While some research links military intervention, including peacekeeping, to geopolitical interests and economic gain (Albrecht 2026; Cunningham 2010; Findley and Marineau 2015), few studies examine these dynamics through the lens of peace interventions.

Going beyond transactionalism, peacemongering conceptualizes peace interventions as rivalry-driven instruments of competition. Under these conditions of international rivalry, peace is oriented toward securing strategic advantages over competitors within and beyond the conflict arena. While overlapping with interest-based peacemaking, illiberal peacebuilding, and critiques of liberal peace, the concept reframes peacemaking, peacebuilding, and conflict management as strategic modalities of grey-zone and hybrid warfare. Rather than maximizing absolute gains, peacemongers seek relative advantages over specific rivals by shaping or imposing political and economic orders through diplomatic, military, and economic interventions. Dominance over the battlefield, peace process, and post-conflict political economy enables interveners to consolidate influence, challenge prevailing peace norms, marginalize multilateral initiatives, and establish neo-imperial patron-client relationships. These material and ideational gains are then converted into leverage in broader geopolitical contests, as illustrated by Russia's use of its position in Syria to strengthen its bargaining power vis-à-vis Western states over Ukraine.

Through the introduction and exploration of this concept, this article aims to contribute to the fields of peace and conflict studies and international relations by advancing a perspective that posits how conflict management, peacemaking, and peacebuilding can occupy a space between war-making and peacemaking. It thereby challenges the conventional dichotomy that treats peacemaking as the alternative to war. It does so firstly through a conceptual examination of peacemongering and an outline of the research methodology, which is then employed through a case study of Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict. While not the only historical and contemporary example of peacemongering, Russia's role in Syria is particularly illustrative of how diplomacy, coercion, and domination enhanced its strategic leverage vis-à-vis global competitors, most notably the United States. This case provides the basis for future comparative research and a timely analysis for policy formulation in peacemaking and peacebuilding of the ways in which way peace practices can be instrumentalized for hybrid and grey-zone warfare.

Peacemongering: Weaponizing peace

The concept of *peacemongering* contributes to the emerging paradigm of *strategic peace* by foregrounding the instrumentalization of conflict management, peacemaking, and

peacebuilding by third-party interveners. Existing paradigms – liberal, illiberal, and post-liberal – primarily classify interventions according to the normative orientation of peace actors. Liberal peacebuilding emphasizes democratization, inclusive governance, and market integration (Paris 2004); illiberal peace prioritizes order and stability through top-down control (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018); while post-liberal approaches stress the interaction between international interventions and local agency (Richmond 2011). Although these frameworks differ in their visions of peace, they generally treat the strategic instrumentalization of peace processes as a secondary critique rather than an analytical starting point (Levorato and Donelli 2024).

Peacemongering addresses this gap by situating conflict management, peacemaking, and peacebuilding within hybrid and grey-zone warfare. It builds on concepts such as ‘transactional peacemaking’, whereby third parties combine diplomatic and military tools within a political marketplace to secure mutual benefits with selected local actors (Hellmüller and Salaymeh 2025), as well as coercive mediation, in which violence is used to impose a stability-oriented order (Duursma 2026). It also draws on the notion of ‘power peace’, which views peace as the outcome of bargains between interveners and local actors that reflect prevailing power balances (Beaujouan 2024). However, peacemongering adds a new perspective regarding the strategic intent of conflict management and peace processes. Rather than prioritizing short-term bargaining and settlement outcomes, it conceptualizes peace interventions as instruments of hybrid and grey-zone warfare characterized by rivalry and antagonism rather than mere pragmatism. Diplomacy, coercion, law, and economic capture *instrumentalize the concept of peace to influence or impose a (post-)conflict order* that secures durable, relative material and ideational advantage over rivals across multiple theatres of international competition and conflict. The primary objective is to terminate the conflict in a way that sustainably consolidates the intervener’s long-term control of strategic assets, political economies, global governance arrangements, and international norms. In this sense, the order created through the strategically engineered peace becomes a mechanism through which interveners consolidate influence into the future.

Peacemongering therefore foregrounds rivalry-driven strategic advantage as a primary motivation for leading peace processes. Peace and conflict are understood as interconnected arenas, with peace processes functioning as instruments within wider campaigns of multi-domain competition. This interpretation aligns with research highlighting the strategic and opportunistic nature of third-party intervention, including in contexts of state factionalism where biased engagement can significantly reshape the stakes for interveners (Alkhayer and Kivimäki 2024), and where states mutually intervene in conflicts as a form of indirect retaliation within competitive relationships (Anderson 2025; Duursma and Tamm 2021).

Within this framework, conflict management, peacemaking, and peacebuilding are not discrete stages but mutually reinforcing strategies. Military intervention can stabilize conflict environments while shaping negotiations, diplomacy legitimizes resulting arrangements, and peacebuilding restructures political and economic systems in ways that entrench external influence. Together, these practices generate three core dynamics. First, peace processes become embedded within broader logics of *hybrid and grey-zone warfare*. Second, interveners seek *dominance* across military, diplomatic, and political-economic dimensions of the conflict and post-conflict order, often marginalizing

multilateral or local alternatives. Third, this dominance can produce asymmetrical *neo-imperial relationships*, creating dependencies in which conflict-affected states rely on interveners for security, governance, and economic recovery.

The instrumentalization of peace in hybrid and grey-zone warfare

Peacemongering is embedded within broader strategies of hybrid warfare, which combines military force with non-kinetic instruments such as diplomacy, economic leverage, and lawfare (Renz 2016). Within this context, peacemaking and peacebuilding – mediation, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction, *inter alia* – are integrated into efforts to reshape power dynamics both within specific conflict zones and across wider geopolitical rivalries. These dynamics often unfold in the ‘grey-zone’ between war and peace, characterized by indirect contestation, deniability, and incrementalism (Brands 2016). Here, actors pursue strategic objectives without triggering open warfare, using peace processes beyond their own territories as mechanisms of influence and control.

Peacemongering systematizes this logic by treating peace as a domain of strategic competition. Interveners manipulate peace processes to recalibrate power relations, both in direct confrontations and in conflicts where rivals have strategic interests in the outcome. They may also use peace diplomacy to challenge governance norms that constrain their ability to pursue power and influence. Peace thus becomes a means of shaping the geopolitical environment through the management or resolution of violent conflict.

Peacemongers are typically states that combine diplomatic and military strategies in aid of particular outcomes or allies, corresponding to what Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000) describe as unilateral peacemaking. Although international organizations can also shape peace processes, peacemongering is distinguished by its explicit pursuit of strategic advantage in relation to rivals. The intention to undermine adversaries or enhance relative power is therefore a defining feature. Without this adversarial dimension, even highly instrumental or transactional forms of peacebuilding do not constitute peacemongering. This distinction differentiates peace diplomacy as an end in itself from peace diplomacy as a component of broader hybrid and grey-zone warfare strategies.

Domination and creation of order

A defining feature of peacemongering is the intervening third party’s domination of the battlefield, peace process, and (post-)conflict political-economic order. Through military intervention – typically supporting a preferred local actor while targeting opponents – the intervener alters the balance of power and excludes rival external actors. This position provides significant influence over negotiations and increases the likelihood that peace settlements institutionalize prevailing power relations (Sosnowski 2023). Patronage ties to dominant local actors also generate political and economic dividends, including access to reconstruction and investment opportunities, helping to durably secure the intervener’s interests into the long term.

Peacemongering acknowledges that conflict orders emerge through interactions between local and external actors, as emphasized by post-liberal peace paradigms. However, scholarship on hybridity has largely focused on liberal and Western-led interventions (Belloni 2012; Mac Ginty 2011; Richmond 2011), despite hybridity being

equally evident in non-Western and non-liberal peace interventions (Mac Ginty 2025). As with liberal peacebuilding, the hybrid orders produced through peacemongering possess varying degrees of local legitimacy but are consistently shaped by the pursuit of power by local and external actors.

In this respect, peacemongering shares the state-centric and order-oriented assumptions of liberal and illiberal peace frameworks, which equate peace with stability consolidated through state institutions (Heathershw 2008). Structural, cultural, and direct violence remain embedded in both approaches, which often rely on similar legitimizing narratives concerning state strength, terrorism, and insurgency (Clausen 2026; Galtung 1990). While much of the literature on illiberal peace focuses on domestic actors who use authoritarian conflict management to secure post-conflict dominance while limiting pluralism, equity, civil liberties, and the rule of law (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018; Smith et al. 2020; Soares De Oliveira 2011), scholarship on international illiberal peacebuilding has grown alongside non-Western and regional peace and conflict management initiatives, which absorb and compete with traditional, liberal approaches (Costantini and Hanau Santini 2022; Duursma 2026; Pospisil and Magara 2025). More relevant to peacemongering is the tendency of third-party interveners to dominate political, economic, and geographic space through coercive conflict management, peacemaking, and patronage systems rooted in co-optation and corruption (Lewis 2024).

While Costantini et al. (2026) and Levorato and Donelli (2024) unpack this liberal-illiberal dichotomy, peacemongering – like other concepts within the *strategic peace* paradigm – shifts attention from the normative character of peace actors to their strategic intentions, practices, and consequences. Liberal actors may produce illiberal outcomes through domineering, coercive, or exclusionary interventions, as critiques of liberal peacebuilding have long demonstrated. The United States' involvement in Afghanistan illustrates how a liberal actor may engage in peacemongering by combining coercion, diplomacy, and neo-imperial political-economic designs to secure strategic advantages over rivals. Conceptualizing peace as strategic therefore challenges rigid categorizations of actors and interventions; it focuses instead on how peace processes are used to secure geopolitical advantage regardless of an actor's position on the liberal-illiberal spectrum.

Peacemaking, peacebuilding, and conflict management become modalities of competition and domination alongside military force within a continuum of geopolitical contestation. In this way, actors consolidate their strategic positions by restructuring political orders and securing advantages over domestic and external rivals. Peacemongering thus extends beyond transactional peacemaking by embedding peace within long-term strategies of rivalry and power projection.

Political-economic gains through neo-imperial relationships

A defining feature of peacemongering lies in its neo-imperial implications. This is most visible in the integration of military, diplomatic, and economic instruments. Military intervention shapes post-conflict orders by contributing to the decimation of infrastructure and livelihoods, especially in areas controlled by unfavoured belligerents, giving rise to war and aid economies wherein the intervener is an economic and political patron to the most dominant conflict actors. Diplomacy, particularly peace or surrender negotiations and agreements, legitimizes this order, and positions the guarantor to gain

returns on their military and political investment in the conflict (Sosnowski 2023). Economic returns include preferential arrangements for reconstruction contracts and resource extraction, which restructure local political economies in ways that generate long-term gains for interveners and the economic and political dependency of local actors on external patrons. This may also cultivate support for the intervener among the segments of society that benefit from such an arrangement. These dynamics echo critiques of liberal peacebuilding as a form of imperial or technocratic governance justified through humanitarian discourse (Chandler 2006; Duffield 2007; Paris 2002).

These dynamics are particularly pronounced where interveners face limited economic risks in sanctioned conflict environments, whether through control of global financial systems, alternative exchange mechanisms such as barter, or their own sanctioned status, making economic actors impervious to the threat of further penalties. This fosters participation in shadow economies (Joshi and Mahmud 2020; Raynor 2022; Telarico 2023). Dominant interveners can then extract economic returns from reconstruction, often after replacing damaged infrastructure and aid resources with dependence on their own humanitarian systems or those of allied local actors. Such arrangements can also insulate interveners from sanctions-related disruptions across multiple arenas while maximizing geopolitical and commercial leverage (Kostova and Vladimirov 2025). For example, Russian entities sanctioned for their connection to atrocities in Ukraine were able to operate in a sanctioned Syria.

By controlling peacemaking and peacebuilding, peacemongers determine the distribution of aid and economic opportunities, rewarding loyalists while excluding rivals. This reinforces societal divisions and secures influence over the post-conflict political economy. Peacemongering therefore reflects a transactional but domineering form of power projection in which both warmaking and peacebuilding are instrumentalized for domination and extraction (Hellmüller and Salaymeh 2025) (Table 1).

In summary, peacemongering challenges conventional distinctions between war and peace. By foregrounding the third party's strategic intent within their peacemaking, peacebuilding, and conflict management, and by contextualizing their interventions as

Table 1. Comparing peace paradigms.

Spectrum	Paradigm	Core Logic	Priority
<i>Liberal-to-Illiberal Peace</i>	<i>Liberal peace</i>	Normative, inclusive, justice-based	Political stability, inclusion into the globalized market, normative inclusivity and pluralism
	<i>Illiberal peace</i>	Authoritarian, order-focused, top-down	Regime consolidation, stability without pluralism
	<i>Post-liberal peace</i>	Interaction between local agents and international liberal peace actors	Internal validity of peace dynamics
<i>Strategic Peace</i>	<i>Transactional peacemaking</i> (Hellmüller and Salaymeh 2025)	Simultaneous warmaking and peacemaking makes peacemaking a political marketplace	Bilateral interventions towards short-term interest-based rather than values-based elite bargains and settlements
	<i>Power Peace</i> (Beaujouan 2024)	Peacemaking is a reflection of power dynamics between local and external actors	Stability over justice, imposed not fostered, reflects the geopolitical interests of the interveners
	<i>Peacemongering</i>	Peacemaking is part of warmaking when it is instrumentalised in conflict and competition between the conflict intervener and its rivals	Long-term domination of conflict locale to extract gains and leverage dominant position to challenge rivals

motivated by rivalry, peacemongering captures an approach to peace that is pursued as a strategic tool within multi-domain theatres of war. The concept provides a framework for understanding how the infrastructure of peace itself can be weaponized. Through the coordinated use of coercion, diplomacy, and economic entrenchment, interveners transform peace into a mechanism for restructuring political and economic systems to secure and consolidate long-term advantage relative to their rivals. The architecture of peace is used to secure neo-imperial structures of dependency and an extra-territorial military, economic, and political presence in the conflict affected area, which can also be leveraged in adjacent areas of international security and geopolitics.

Additionally, this framework moves away from the binary liberal-illiberal categorization of peace activities and actors. While the empirical case here illustrates Russia's intervention in Syria – and its leveraging of peace processes to challenge the liberal international order – the application of peacemongering is not limited to such actors. Given the centring of intent, action, and outcome, rather than guiding ideology or theory of change, *peacemongering* applies to all manner of third-party interveners that instrumentalise peace and conflict management to influence (post-)conflict orders in pursuit of leverage over rivals.

Methodology

This research develops the concept through inductive process-tracing of a single case study, enabling a systematic examination of its components and empirical manifestations (Gerring 2004). The case examined below – Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict – is not intended to test the concept's general applicability but to illustrate how peacemongering operates in practice. The analysis draws on over four years of data collection and approximately one thousand multilingual (English, Arabic, and Russian) documentary sources, media reports, and academic and policy publications to trace the intervention's objectives, implementation, and implications.

Peacemongering avoids rigid distinctions between liberal and illiberal, or Western and non-Western, interventions. It recognizes that diverse actors may engage in it, with analytical attention directed toward configurations of goals, methods, and outcomes across material, structural, normative, and ideational dimensions, as well as the interaction between local and external agency. These dynamics inform the case-study analysis.

In line with Acharya's (2014) vision of a Global International Relations that bridges theory and area studies, this study treats context-specific empirical analysis as a foundation for conceptual innovation. Although based on a single case, the phenomenon under examination is globally relevant. Such interventions are relatively rare but often protracted, complex, and consequential, making a single-case design well suited to concept development. The detailed analysis presented here provides a basis for future comparative research and broader theoretical application, while identifying patterns that resonate across other interventions.

Russian peacemongering in the Syrian conflict

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia has increasingly used diplomatic, military, and economic interventions across the former Soviet space, West Asia, and Africa to secure

political, military, and economic gains and strengthen its position against rivals, particularly the United States. Russia's intervention in Syria exemplifies this strategy of peacemongering. Moscow's involvement was driven by a post-Soviet sense of loss, ambitions for great-power status, and efforts to enhance its international influence, domestic legitimacy, and economic engagement abroad (Lewis 2020b). Regional instability provided an opportunity to re-establish Russia as a decisive global actor.

Reflecting the three core features of peacemongering, this case traces: (1) how Russia's conflict management, peacemaking, and peacebuilding efforts were embedded within broader hybrid and grey-zone competition; (2) its domination of the battlefield, peace process, humanitarian access, and post-conflict political economy; and (3) the neo-imperial consequences of the Assad regime's dependence on Russian security provision. Russia emerged as the dominant external actor in Syria, using assertive diplomacy – including biased mediation and obstruction within the UN Security Council (UNSC) – to shield the Assad regime, undermine multilateral initiatives and extant norms of global governance and intervention, and deter Western intervention. This facilitated Russia's military intervention with limited repercussions, giving Moscow influence over humanitarian aid, mediation, and coercive local truces that restored regime control and supported a Kremlin-backed constitutional process. Russian companies, including those linked to GRU-affiliated mercenary groups,¹ subsequently secured major stakes in Syria's most lucrative sectors.

This integration of diplomacy, military force, and economic extraction reflects the hybrid character of Russian interventionism and its conception of non-linear warfare, which blurs the boundaries between peace and conflict, politics and war (Galeotti 2015; Pomerantsev 2014). As Russia's first major military deployment beyond the former Soviet Union since its collapse, this case illustrates how peacemaking can become a vehicle for political and economic domination, extending influence within a conflict zone and across wider arenas of international competition.

Confronting the West: Peace processes in the Kremlin's hybrid and grey-zone warfare

Since the Cold War's end, Russia has portrayed Western liberal expansion – NATO enlargement, regime-change interventions, and international democracy promotion – as existential threats to its sovereignty and status. In response, Moscow has pursued a revisionist strategy to challenge US hegemony and position itself as a key actor in a multipolar order (Averre and Davies 2015; MID 2013; President of Russia 2022). Syria became central to this effort, enabling Russia to confront the liberal order ideologically and materially, secure regional influence, military access, and project statist, order-centric governance as an alternative to liberal peace.

Russia's contemporary, global foreign policy is shaped by historical experiences of chaos, post-Soviet humiliation, and the ambition to restore parity with the West (Götz and Staun 2022; Lewis 2020b). After Putin's first term, the Kremlin recalibrated in response to three perceived betrayals by the West: the colour revolutions (Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004, Kyrgyzstan 2005); the 2011–3 domestic protests; and NATO's intervention and support for regime-change in Libya. These events were seen as Western-orchestrated rather than the product of organic popular mobilization. The Libya operation – initially

a no-fly zone under UNSC Resolution 1973, on which Russia abstained from voting – was viewed as a NATO betrayal, reinforcing the perception that multilateral institutions and extant international norms of intervention were Western tools of domination (Allison 2013; Trenin 2015). This solidified the belief that the liberal order was incompatible with Russian statehood, justifying a sovereignty-driven foreign policy aimed at rebuilding identity eroded by the Soviet Union's collapse (McGlynn 2023; Richter 1998).

These experiences blurred boundaries between domestic politics, foreign policy, and conflict, informing the Kremlin's concept of non-linear warfare – Russia's version of hybrid warfare combining military force, disinformation, diplomacy, economic coercion, and norm manipulation (Galeotti 2015; Pomerantsev 2014). It became a framework for suppressing dissent and asserting sovereignty domestically and internationally (Donaldson and Nadkarni 2019; Laruelle 2022). Russian nationalist thinkers like Vladislav Surkov, Alexandr Dugin, GRU chief General Valery Gerasimov, and former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov advocate a hierarchical state order prioritizing sovereignty and conservatism over internal pluralism as well as parity among states (Lewis 2020b; Rumer 2019). In this worldview, peace derives from strong states enforcing an internal centralized order and a multipolar global order, where powers like Russia, China, and India gain strategic parity with the West to stave off the instability of global unipolarity. Russia thus presents itself as a 'katechontic' bulwark to the liberal chaos unleashed by Western liberalization and democratization, such as in Iraq, Libya, and beyond (Lewis 2020b; Trenin 2015). To do this without instigating an overwhelming military response from its rivals, non-kinetic capabilities, such as disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, economic sabotage, and diplomacy amongst others are seen as appropriate and effective tools to rebalance the international system (Galeotti 2015). As war is politics, and politics is war by other means, peacemaking and peacebuilding become part of broader multi-domain warfare.

Intervention in Syria, therefore, was as strategic as it was symbolic. For Russia, Syria represented a remaining bulwark against US hegemony in the Middle East or West Asia, which formed the basis of Soviet-era ties, securing the Soviet Union access to a naval facility on the Mediterranean. Al-Assad's regime also portrayed itself as a secular government staving off potential takeover by Islamist forces, something with which the Kremlin identifies regarding Russia's Muslim-majority republics. Russia's intervention, therefore, reflected a revisionist agenda. It sought to reclaim great power status by challenging Western interventionism globally and the rise of Islamism with a secular sovereignty-first model (Averre and Davies 2015). It also aimed to assert parity with the US by building credibility through military and diplomatic resolve and economic capture (Trenin 2018). Moscow set out also to test hybrid strategies towards conflict (Rodkiewicz 2017). Russia did not seek to replace the US in the Middle East. Rather, it aimed to limit its influence by creating a polycentric order in a post-liberal era (Houghton and Houghton 2024; Tocci 2014). As such, Moscow weaponized peacemaking and peacebuilding to gain an upper hand over the West, and specifically the US, without incurring the full cost of war with it.

Dominating the conflict-peace arena

The Syrian intervention is a paradigmatic example of Russian peacemongering, combining coercive diplomacy, military intervention, selective humanitarian provision, and

economic capture to secure political, military, and economic influence. Simultaneously, Russia used institutions such as the UNSC to obstruct Western initiatives and legitimize its actions through appeals to sovereignty and international law (Averre 2019; Pieper 2019). Framed as peacebuilding and counterterrorism, these practices advanced broader objectives: sustaining authoritarian allies, challenging liberal interventionist norms, and expanding Russia's geopolitical influence (Kozhanov 2016; Lewis 2022). These efforts align with Moscow's broader ideological campaign to redefine international norms to reflect an international system typified by: conservative order; strong statehood; and democracy between states regardless of their internal governance system (Keating and Kaczmarek 2017; President of Russia 2022).

Assertive diplomacy

In the early Syrian conflict, Russia used its P5 position in the UNSC to veto Chapter VII resolutions authorizing coercive measures ranging from sanctions (Art. 41) to military intervention (Art. 42), normatively linked to R2P's protection of populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity (UN 2005). NATO's 2011 Libya intervention – authorized under Chapter VII – was interpreted by Moscow as a precedent for R2P-enabled regime change. Anticipating a similar trajectory in Syria, Russia repeatedly vetoed resolutions, including those condemning violence on all sides, to block pathways toward international authorization of intervention and potential regime change.

The 2013 Ghouta chemical weapons attack, despite the US 'red line', reinforced this strategy. Russia brokered an agreement for al-Assad to relinquish his chemical arsenal, averting US military strikes and preserving regime survival (Phillips 2020). This both contested the emerging regime-change interpretation of R2P and defended a state sovereignty-based reading of non-intervention. Concurrently, Western states shifted to unilateral sanctions, deepening Syria's isolation and increasing Damascus' dependence on its allies, thereby reinforcing Moscow's leverage (Averre 2019; Averre and Davies 2015).

Alongside UNSC obstruction, Russia facilitated dialogue between the Assad government and selected segments of the pre-war tolerated opposition – actors integrated into or willing to negotiate with the regime (Amarah 2015). Although lacking broad legitimacy, these platforms enabled Moscow to project inclusivity. By contrast, Western-backed opposition groups abroad were fragmented and weakly anchored domestically. The regime exploited Russian- and UN-led talks to label opponents as terrorists and to delay pressure through engagement with the Moscow and Cairo platforms (Kassis and Kredi 2015). Russia simultaneously expanded material support, including arms, advisers, and economic assistance, to sustain a regime facing defections and territorial losses (Hetou 2019).

As the war escalated, external actors, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey intensified support for rebel factions, contributing to opposition fragmentation across Islamist, nationalist, and anti-militarisation camps, while jihadist groups such as ISIS expanded rapidly. By 2015, regime forces, supplemented by pro-government militias and increasingly autonomous Iranian-backed units, were under severe strain. In this context, and amid Russia's post-Crimea isolation, Moscow launched its direct military intervention in September 2015, shifting from patron to coercive arbiter. The intervention recentralised

command, constrained external influence, and deepened regime dependence, albeit temporarily, through military basing rights and economic concessions to Russia.

Coercive mediation

Russia's coercive mediation combined military force with diplomatic manoeuvring to impose a settlement favourable to Moscow (Lewis 2020a; Turkmani 2022). It underwrote regime survival while reshaping the post-conflict order to entrench its influence. Russian strikes disproportionately targeted moderate rebel groups, particularly the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and emerging local governance structures, while largely sparing Kurdish forces aligned with the US and bound by a tacit non-aggression pact with al-Assad's regime (Hasan and Khaddour 2021). Maintaining a limited presence of extremist groups, like ISIS, was useful for al-Assad and Russia, as it legitimized counter-terror narratives and weakened moderate rebel organizations, a shared target.

The 2016 siege of Aleppo marked the clearest expression of this integrated military–diplomatic strategy. Systematic bombardment of civilian infrastructure, use of proscribed munitions, and siege-induced starvation weakened rebel governance and compelled surrender under regime and Russian terms. Subsequent negotiations formalized evacuations and limited humanitarian access, culminating in the December 2016 agreement (Walker and Shaheen 2016). Building on this, Russia institutionalized its approach by launching the Astana Process in January 2017 with Iran and Turkey. That year, de-escalation zones were declared in Northern Homs, Eastern Ghouta, Quneitra and Dara'a, and Idlib. Initially thought to be synonymous with safe zones, the mechanism was endorsed by the UN. However, it soon became apparent that these were staging grounds for sequential regime reconquest. The Astana process was ostensibly more inclusive of rebel groups, who lacked representation within exiled opposition organizations (Cengiz 2020). However, it marginalized UN-led processes, where Western actors had a greater presence, and co-opted opposition participation, aligning negotiations with shifting battlefield realities (Beaujouan 2024).

Parallel coercive campaigns by the regime, supported by Russia and Iran, targeted urban centres and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, and bakeries, using barrel bombs, cluster munitions, and incendiaries, accelerating displacement, institutional collapse, and the degradation of morale among those living in rebel-held areas (Amnesty International 2017; Borshchevskaya 2022; Wieland 2022). This approach compelled surrender, forcing local populations and rebel groups into surrender agreements brokered by the Russian Center for Reconciliation and reframed as 'reconciliation' to consolidate legitimacy. These typically offered evacuation to Idlib or submission to the regime, which involved security vetting, limited rights, and frequent agreement violations (Sosnowski 2020a, 2020b, 2023). By mid-2018, most de-escalation zones had reverted to regime control, while Idlib remained an opposition enclave led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), becoming a launchpad for the rebel takeover in December 2024. The Kremlin intended for the regime-dominant balance of power to be translated into a national-level political accord and a constitution-drafting process to entrench the statist political order and political economy from which it could benefit into the future. The language of peacebuilding was coopted to implement a victor's peace.

These arrangements also enabled Russian penetration of Syrian military structures through the creation of the 5th Corps, integrating ex-rebels, conscripts, and Wagner-

linked contractors. This unit became Moscow's primary tool for ground operations. Its leader, Ahmed al-Awda – a former FSA commander – lent the unit credibility in rebel-held areas. The 5th Corps reportedly maintained more discipline and public trust than regime units like the 4th Armoured Division, whose abuses alienated local populations (Enab Baladi 2020; Kofman and Rojansky 2018). This dynamic signalled Syria's fragmented sovereignty and Moscow's embedded influence within Syria's security architecture. Strategically, the intervention restored Russia's Mediterranean military footprint. Tartous, Russia's only warm water maritime base, was upgraded under a forty-nine-year lease and Hmeimim expanded into a permanent airbase hub (Reuters 2017; Reuters 2020). Together with deployments of advanced weapons defence systems, ostensibly provided to combat jihadist groups that did not possess the weaponry this technology was designed to target, these tools were more likely sent to create an anti-access/area denial (A2AD) framework from Ukraine through the Mediterranean into Africa. This was to constrain NATO's manoeuvrability and military reach in Eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean (Miron and Thornton 2021). These displays of technological and strategic competence served dual purposes: attracting arms clients and asserting Moscow's role as a global military actor.

In tandem with Moscow's coercion, the Kremlin sought to manage the political reform process from this strategic advantage by launching the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi in January 2018. This brought together the Syrian regime and a tapestry of opposition groups and resulted in a proposal to establish a 150-member constitutional commission comprising regime, opposition, and civil society representatives (UNSC 2019). Notably, this was a point of cooperation between Russian-led initiatives and the UN Geneva process, which was coopted to lend credence to the fraught proposal. Ultimately, the initiative was derailed by the Assad regime's disinterest in and disengagement from political change (Ziadeh 2021). Nonetheless, Russia's long-term strategy of consolidating battlefield gains through local institutional engineering and externally legitimized political restructuring indicated Moscow's long-term vision for power in and through its role in Syria.

The weaponization of humanitarian aid

Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad combined diplomatic shielding, military intervention, and the instrumentalisation of peace processes. Moscow protected the regime through operations in Syria, the Astana platform, and 17 UNSC vetoes, many blocking cross-border aid to opposition areas (Houghton 2024b). Humanitarian governance became a key site of hybrid warfare. Russia, often with China, used its UNSC veto to block cross-border aid under the rubric of Syrian sovereignty, starting with Yaroubia and Bab al-Salam in 2020. These actions progressively narrowed aid access routes, affecting over 1.4 million people (Lynch and Gramer 2020). Following the 2023 earthquake, aid delays persisted amid Russian objections over the cross-border mechanism's legitimacy. The Syrian regime eventually unilaterally allowed limited access (Alkhalil et al. 2023). Russian officials insisted aid be channelled through Damascus (Nichols 2020), reinforcing regime legitimacy while constraining opposition areas and encouraging displacement. By 2022, 67.3% of Syrians required assistance and 55.3% were food insecure (Daher 2022). These measures tenuously preserved regime survival, deepened Syria's isolation, and consolidated Russian patronage. Humanitarian access and population movement were

treated as strategic variables, with ‘surrender-or-starve’ sieges followed by ‘reconciliation’ agreements, first in Homs and refined in Aleppo, Daraya, and the de-escalation zones (Sosnowski 2020a; Turkmani 2022), reflecting the treatment of civilian populations as both obstacle and instrument in geopolitical contestation.

Moscow deepened civilian dependency through a parallel humanitarian architecture largely outside the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, operated via GONGOs and affiliated charities (Fuller 2015). These efforts were selectively targeted, including initiatives from Muslim-majority Russian regions such as Chechnya, which focused on ‘reconciled’ Sunni communities in Aleppo and IDP populations (Abu Hasan 2023). The Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation, working with Syrian regime-aligned organizations including the Syrian Red Crescent and Asma al-Assad’s Syria Trust for Development, financed high-profile reconstruction such as the \$14 million restoration of Aleppo’s Grand Umayyad Mosque (Arab News 2017). These practices politicized religious and cultural identities, reinforcing regime legitimacy while marginalizing rebel-held areas. This reflects Russia’s broader hybrid, non-linear strategy in Syria. By engineering a parallel humanitarian infrastructure that reinforced its geopolitical objectives, humanitarian aid was weaponized (Berti 2016), serving as a tool to build clientelist networks, rehabilitate the regime, while limiting access for other donors and organizations. By cultivating parallel governance infrastructures and manipulating multilateral channels, Moscow entrenched dependency, exacerbated inequalities, and entrenched divisions in Syria (Sosnowski and Hastings 2019).

In the longer term, this substitution of multilateralism with Russian-led structures positioned Moscow as a partner for sanctioned or isolated regimes, aligning regional strategy with global ambitions through ‘smart power’ (Nye 2009). In Syria, soft power operated less through attraction than through material control: selective aid, infrastructural dominance, and sectarianized distribution systems that reinforced authoritarian resilience within Russia’s desired sphere of influence undermined Western approaches and narratives. Russian policy was shaped by domestic anxieties over Western liberalism and Islamism, framed as existential ideological threats. In response, the Kremlin blurred war-peace distinctions to mobilize nationalism and project influence by promoting conservatism, hierarchy, and ‘traditional values’ as alternatives to liberal democracy (Sherr 2017). This ideological framing enabled the othering of populations associated with perceived destabilizing ideologies, legitimizing coercive targeting in a costly faraway war to the Russian population.

Ultimately, Russia’s strategy treated war and peace as mutually reinforcing tools in a quest to gain power parity with the US over Syria and other areas of international security. Military intervention enabled diplomatic leverage; peace processes consolidated territorial gains; and humanitarian access functioned as coercive bargaining power. The illusion of peace, cemented by international recognition and al-Assad’s regional reintegration, masked the regime’s persistent fragmentation and instability while embedding Russian influence across Syria’s political, military, and economic structures. This illustrates how conflict management, peacemaking, and peacebuilding can be used to dominate multiple spheres to gain leverage within rivalries.

Nascent neo-imperial relations

Before the Syrian conflict, Russia was already a key economic partner for Damascus, supplying timber, steel, and wheat and engaging in oil exploration, becoming Syria’s largest

exporter by 2008 (Borshchevskaya 2022, 157), despite Syria's marginal importance to Russian trade. Its value to Moscow lay instead in its strategic potential within a shifting global order. Russia's intervention was driven less by bilateral economics than by geopolitical and economic positioning amid its 2014–5 recession, triggered by collapsing oil prices and Western sanctions over Ukraine. Oil prices halved, the ruble fell by 46%, and investor confidence declined sharply (Grant and Hansl 2015). Syria thus offered a low-cost arena to convert its newly upgraded military capacity into geopolitical and future economic leverage, particularly through shaping post-war reconstruction in an isolated market that excluded Western competitors.

Unlike Iran's large-scale financial commitment (c. \$6 billion annually) (Davison, Martell, and Levinson 2025), Russia provided selective financial support: banks hosted sanctions-affected Syrian assets and sent a 200-ton shipment of banknotes in 2011 to avert the Assad regime's fiscal collapse and to facilitate its response to the uprising (Hetou 2019, 77). The Kremlin avoided financial loans, concerned about Syria's capacity to repay. Instead, it pursued military investment in exchange for post-war economic access, with Syrian officials explicitly promising priority for Russian firms in reconstruction contracts (The New Arab 2016). From 2013, Russian companies expanded into Syria's agricultural, education, financial, tourism, real estate, energy and infrastructure industries. Russia became Syria's key supplier of commodities like wheat and animal fodder, which acquired political significance amid food insecurity (Daher 2022; Hatahet 2019). These resources were weaponized by the regime to manipulate internal displacement and coerce rebel-held communities into submission.

Sanctions structured this emerging political economy. While major firms like Gazprom and Rosneft were constrained by secondary sanctions under the US Caesar Act (2019), smaller Russian firms – often already sanctioned for their operations in Ukraine and Africa and linked to GRU-affiliated networks such as Wagner and Redut – faced limited additional risk and gained disproportionate opportunities (Krutov and Dobrynin 2023; Yehoshyna and Surnacheva 2023). Damascus granted Russian-linked firms preferential access to hydrocarbons, telecommunications, and strategic infrastructure (Sogoloff 2017), including contracts for Syria's 'electronic government' system, enhancing its centralized surveillance capacity (The Syria Report 2016). In 2017, al-Assad declared that Russian companies would exclusively operate Syria's hydrocarbons sector, even excluding close partners like China (Borshchevskaya 2022, 161–162). Between 2017 and 2019, the sanctioned Sroytransgaz – linked to Gennady Timchenko and Redut – secured phosphate rights under highly favourable terms (Daher 2022; Hatahet 2019). Sanctioned Wagner-linked firms Mercury, Velada, and Evro Polis obtained over 25% of oil and gas revenues from recaptured fields, with Wagner securing sites militarily (Malkova, Stogney, and Yakoreva 2018; Reuters 2019). The 2018 US-Russian Wagner clash near Deir ez-Zor underscored the strategic value of these resources (Borger and Bennetts 2018). By 2018, Russia had secured exclusive rights to construct Syrian energy infrastructure, including in territories to yet under regime control (Borshchevskaya 2022). Already entrenched in Iraq's Basra and Kirkuk oilfields, Moscow had its sight set on a pipeline corridor through Syria, which would have secured Moscow greater control over oil and gas flows to Europe (Sogoloff 2017).

Russia's dominance over Syria's reconstruction made Iranian and Chinese economic participation complementary rather than competitive for Russia. Russian companies

relied on the international community to foot the estimated \$300–400 billion reconstruction costs to fully benefit from the advance contracts (Mroue and Chehayeb 2023; Ramani 2019). Moscow's strategy was to use its military and diplomatic resources to isolate and reinforce the most economically entrenched actor in Syria: the Assad regime. By binding Damascus into a debt of strategic dependency, Moscow was set to achieve maximum potential economic and political returns at minimal cost. Russia's returns were not only a military and political presence on the Mediterranean, but also geopolitical leverage over the West through promised control over fuel flows.

Conclusion: The perils and rewards of peacemongering

The consequences of Russian peacemongering in Syria was a curated, violent 'peace' that preserved the appearance of Syrian sovereignty while deepening external dependency. The Assad regime's reintegration into regional and international frameworks – symbolized by its May 2023 Arab League return and accession to China's Belt and Road Initiative in January 2022 – masked the regime's tenuous control (Houghton 2024a, 2024b). Although the regime recaptured most of Syria's territory, it continued to share governance with three rebel administrations in the north and east and with informal elites in regime-held areas. By late 2024, renewed rebel offensives, while Russia and Iran were distracted, exposed the fragility of al-Assad's rule and his alliances. In many ways, Russian – and Iranian – peacemongering entrenched the Assad regime's vulnerabilities, in-built through decades of authoritarian governance and conflict management. While Russia has thus far insulated the Assad regime from international accountability, it failed to stabilize the state.

Uncertainty also surrounded the durability of Russia's post-Assad position, particularly given its wartime opposition to HTS, now leading the transition. Although the Tartous lease was initially suspended, it has since been restored, and transitional President Ahmed al-Sharaa has signalled willingness to uphold existing agreements with Moscow (Reuters 2025; Soldatkin, Osborn, and Al-Khalidi 2025; The Maritime Executive 2025). Israeli pressure and security sector challenges have further encouraged Damascus to view Russia as a potential partner despite past hostility. This suggests that while diminished, Russian influence is likely to persist, as a key mediator of the conflict's political-economic order, Moscow positioned itself as indispensable not only to the former regime but also to its successor, securing both immediate gains and long-term strategic entrenchment.

Despite its centrality to the conflict's devastation, Russia remains one actor among several in Syria's diversified external landscape. The transitional authorities appear to favour a pluralized set of partnerships over exclusive dependency, producing a more fragmented post-conflict order. In this sense, Russian peacemongering contributed to a post-conflict order that it once dominated, alongside al-Assad; but it failed to consolidate a strong centralized state that could do its bidding. Nonetheless, it contributed to the evolving polycentric system, marked by hope for a better future, but mired by external wrangling for influence and persistent societal division and militarization that continues to divide Syria. Israel has exploited communal clashes, Turkey continues to deploy militias against Syria's Kurds, and US, Chinese, Iranian, and Gulf influence continuously fluctuates.

Within the peacemongering paradigm, peace processes are not alternatives to conflict, but a continuation of war by other means. Peacemongering is exemplified by rivalry-

driven arrangements that instrumentalize peace to gain leverage against antagonists. This logic incentivizes the strategic use of violence to reconfigure actors and stakes at the negotiating table. The use of mercenaries across combat, humanitarian, and reconstruction domains further blurs boundaries between war and peace, collapsing distinctions between civilians and combatants, and war and peace actors. While such hybridization is recognized in defence studies, it is less integrated into accounts of peace processes. Yet this case shows that activities typically considered antithetical to warmaking – diplomacy, aid, and reconstruction – function as tools in the accumulation of power across theatres of conflict and rivalry. By manipulating multilateral processes through coercive mediation and constructing parallel diplomatic tracks, Russia reshaped norms of peace-making, peacebuilding, and conflict management to serve its strategic interests. Moscow's intervention challenged the norm of conditional sovereignty underpinning R2P and cross-border humanitarian access, reinforcing instead an unconditional sovereignty norm increasingly supported by actors such as China (President of Russia 2022)

In this framework, peace consolidates external control rather than citizen empowerment. Military and diplomatic dominance impose a narrative of peace, enforced through coercive reconciliation, which is reinforced through economic integration. In this way, the intervener's indispensability is entrenched, reducing opportunities for genuine multilateralism and local participation and contestation. Russia's actions in Syria reveal a sophisticated peacemongering strategy that reconfigured local and global power balances but failed to transform the conflict towards a sustainable system of governance. Nonetheless Russian peacemongering in Syria transformed the conflict into a platform for deterrence, economic capture, and geopolitical posturing, underscoring the global implications of this approach.

Note

1. These groups are often referred to as private military companies (PMCs) but are not legally registered companies and have close ties to the GRU (Yehoshyna and Surnacheva 2023). Hence, they are referred to as 'mercenaries' here.

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