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INTERNATIONAL PEACE



MAY 2023 | THE RETURN OF GLOBAL RUSSIA

Rogue Power: Russia's Wartime Foreign Policy

Eugene Rumer

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This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative,
U.S. European Command.

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The information in this study is current as of May 11, 2023.

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

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Summary

Russia's large-scale offensive against Ukraine in February 2022 marked a fundamental shift in its foreign policy. Before the war, Russia's global ambitions were an appendage to a foreign policy focused primarily on securing its periphery and undermining Western influence. Since February 2022, they have become essential to the Kremlin's goals of countering Western efforts to isolate and weaken it, waging its war against Ukraine, and maintaining domestic stability. Instead of retreating under the weight of international opprobrium and the burdens of waging a major war, Russia has repositioned itself as a rogue and ever more aggressive actor.

- Often dismissed as inconsequential, Russia's investment in outreach to the Global South is paying off. Isolated from the West, it is not isolated from the "rest." It has deepened partnerships with India and China even as its leverage with both has diminished, boosted ties with Brazil and South Africa, and had success at the UN General Assembly, where a significant number of countries have abstained from or voted against resolutions condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine.
- The Kremlin has intensified its disinformation campaign. Russia's image remains negative in Europe. But in the Global South, its disinformation has had more effect, thanks to a combination of Russian-sponsored propaganda, self-serving local narratives, and colonial and Cold War legacy. The Kremlin has long viewed propaganda as an important tool of its foreign policy and is poised to rely on it heavily regardless of its impact.
- Russia's suspension of New START and nuclear saber-rattling signal its readiness for an all-out competition with the United States. Arms sales to rogue regimes and U.S. adversaries regardless of UN sanctions, deployment of private military contractors, and military-to-military engagements will remain an important tool of Russian outreach to the Global South.
- Russia's participation in global nonproliferation efforts will probably be subordinated to its geopolitical ambitions.
- Western sanctions, intended to limit Russia's ability to fund its war against Ukraine, have revealed the resilience of the Russian economy and put a spotlight on Russia's consequential role in the world economy, especially in the non-Western world.
- In stark contrast with its armed forces' lackluster battlefield performance, Russia's diplomacy, information operations, and economy have exceeded expectations and positioned the country to sustain a long war against Ukraine and the confrontation with the West. With few remaining guardrails, Russia is poised to assume an even more confrontational posture toward the West.

Introduction

Russia's large-scale offensive against Ukraine in February 2022 marked a fundamental shift in its foreign policy. The Kremlin brought back major war to Europe, something once thought to be banished from the continent. The international community saw for the first time a major power—not a marginal, rogue dictatorship—brandishing its nuclear weapons and threatening the annihilation of an entire continent. In response, the world's leading democracies imposed a series of severe sanctions designed to isolate Russia on the world stage as a rogue country. The International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued an arrest warrant for the sitting president of a permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) member.

Yet Russia has largely shaken off the effects of these pressure tactics. Far from being isolated, it has emerged as an ever more aggressive actor. The Kremlin has shored up a web of relationships for a host of symbolic and practical purposes. Moscow has embraced rogue regimes like the ones in Iran and Myanmar and boosted its relationships with some of the closest and oldest U.S. partners in the Persian Gulf.¹ Instead of retreating under the weight of international opprobrium and the heavy burdens of waging a major war on its doorstep, Russia has repositioned itself as something new and dangerous: a rogue power.

Before the escalation of its war against Ukraine, Russia's global ambitions were largely a “nice to have” add-on to a foreign policy focused primarily on securing its immediate periphery and undermining Western influence in distant corners of the world. Forays into Sudan or Venezuela served several purposes: they were vanity projects to demonstrate that President Vladimir Putin had returned Russia to the ranks of global powers; tit-for-tat attempts to get back at and distract Washington from what mattered to the Kremlin the most—regime security and control over Russia's neighbors; and enrichment opportunities for the Kremlin's cronies and corporate agents like Wagner or Rosneft.²

Since February 2022, Russia's global pursuits have acquired a new strategic quality. They are now a “must have,” essential to the regime's twin goals of countering Western efforts to isolate it on the world stage and preventing the West from choking its economy. Both goals are essential for the Kremlin's ability to wage the war on Ukraine and to maintain domestic stability. Russia's outreach to the Global South has been elevated to the top of its foreign policy agenda and is likely to remain there for as long as the standoff with the West continues. Far from being deprioritized, competition with the West remains paramount, but good relations with the Global South have become necessary for the Kremlin to sustain that competition.

Far from a comprehensive overview of Russian foreign policy since February 24, 2022, this study offers a framework for analyzing and understanding it through the prism of the Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (DIME) model. Following an overview of earlier Russian attempts to regain global influence prior to February 24, 2022, the paper examines the application of DIME by the Kremlin to enable its war against Ukraine. It then provides an assessment of the extent to which the Kremlin has been successful and concludes with implications for U.S. interests.

Ambitious Reach, Limited Grasp

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia withdrew from the world stage, unable to sustain the vast global activities the Soviet Union had engaged in throughout the Cold War. Struggling under the weight of a succession of domestic political crises and sputtering attempts at economic reform, Russia was widely perceived as a has-been, a once mighty great power in protracted and possibly terminal decline. Its major international activity during the 1990s consisted of appeals to major world capitals and international financial institutions for more aid. By the end of the first post-Soviet decade, the notion of a “world without Russia” did not seem at all far-fetched.³ At the start of the new century, a major U.S. publication declared Russia “finished” and “descending into strategic irrelevance.”⁴

These predictions missed the mark. A few years later, buoyed by rising commodity prices and reaping the benefits of the painful economic reforms of the previous decade, Russia experienced an unprecedented period of economic revival along with domestic political consolidation and re-emergence on the world stage. A permanent member of the UNSC and now a full member of the G8, it began to reassert its great power ambitions.

Throughout this period, Russian officials expressed growing frustration with Moscow being relegated to a junior status among the world’s leading advanced democracies. Yet many of Russia’s initial attempts at conjuring up alternatives to the international order led by a single power, the United States, were ham-fisted. Thus, the Kremlin decided to form its own club of rising powers, to include Brazil, Russia, India, China, and subsequently South Africa. Founded in 2009, the BRICS was intended to provide Russia with an alternative platform to the G8, consistent with its vision of a more “democratic” international order not dominated by the United States.⁵ That “multipolar” order would also be presided over by a coalition of China, India, and Russia. Brazil and South Africa were included in the BRICS to enable it to claim global reach.⁶

The consensus in the West even during those newly prosperous times for Russia in the first decade of the twenty-first century was that the Kremlin's reach exceeded its grasp. The BRICS was mostly dismissed as a grouping that was hardly capable of coherent, consequential action on the world stage because of the tense relationship between China and India, as well as the modest economic and military resources of the other members.

Moscow's key relationships within the BRICS—with Beijing and New Delhi—were easy to dismiss as neither new nor very significant. The relationship with India was a continuation of the long-standing Soviet-era partnership and was hardly a match for the burgeoning ties between India and the United States. The partnership with China was also a continuation of the growing Russian-Chinese partnership, and one in which Beijing was perceived to have the upper hand. The latter factor was widely expected to prompt Russia eventually to rebalance its relationship with China to avoid becoming overly dependent on it.

The addition of Brazil to the club was hardly seen in Washington or other Western capitals as a game-changer that could boost Russia's geopolitical weight or global influence. Aside from their shared opposition to perceived U.S. hegemony,⁷ Brasilia and Moscow had little in common.⁸ Trade relations between the two countries have never been robust, with two-way annual turnover mostly below \$10 billion. Russian arms sales to Brazil have never amounted to much, given Brazil's status as a major non-NATO ally and its problems with maintaining equipment previously purchased from Russia.⁹ But Brazil's membership in the BRICS was nonetheless a win-win, since Moscow counted yet another regional giant in its club and Brasilia gained enhanced recognition alongside three other major rising powers.

South Africa's membership in the BRICS was not perceived in the West as a boost to Russia's geopolitical ambitions either, but rather as a largely symbolic representation of Africa in the group. Russia enjoyed good relations with the ruling African National Congress thanks to the Soviet Union's support for the party's struggle against the country's apartheid regime, but—unlike China—Russia was thought to have little to offer of what South Africa needed: investment and assistance for its economic development.¹⁰

In sum, the BRICS was widely seen as a vanity project for Russia and at best a modestly useful tool in pursuit of the Russian vision of a multipolar world or a thinly disguised attempt to undermine U.S. global influence.

Moreover, the 1990s had left a deep and lasting imprint on Western perceptions of Russia. Its economy was thought to lack the requirements for sustained growth, let alone for supporting an ambitious foreign policy. Russia's military had been traumatized by the disastrous war in Chechnya

in the 1990s and had struggled to modernize itself. Its increasingly authoritarian domestic politics was considered an inherently unstable anachronism. Putin's infamous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference,¹¹ in which he complained about the expansion of the West's sphere of influence into historically Russian-dominated lands, was widely dismissed as a throwback to the Cold War and badly out of sync with the new era.¹²

Russia's brief war against Georgia in 2008 was a signal that the Kremlin was determined to make the West heed its warning about expanding NATO into Russia's erstwhile empire, which it now claimed as a privileged sphere of influence. But it also revealed so many shortcomings in Russia's military performance against the much smaller Georgian army that to many observers it proved the opposite point—that Russia was far from having military capabilities for projecting power and influence even on its immediate periphery, let alone further away.¹³

The Syria Turning Point

Russia's military deployment to Syria in 2015 in an effort to save the regime of Bashar al-Assad was a major turning point. Its troops were sent to save the last remaining Russian client in the Middle East. Notwithstanding predictions that the deployment—a first beyond the periphery of Russia since the end of the Cold War—would lead to a “quagmire” and that Russian troops would be coming home in “body bags,” it proved a major success for the Kremlin.¹⁴ It went a long way to restore the country's old reputation as a major actor in the Middle East. Russia's diplomatic leverage in the region received a boost, as did its standing as a military power.

The fact that the Syria deployment was conducted as a low-risk undertaking¹⁵ was largely overlooked.¹⁶ The operation also delivered important strategic results for Russia besides repositioning itself in the Middle East—a snub to the United States, an enhanced military position in the Eastern Mediterranean, and a new *modus vivendi* with Israel, which depended on Russian acquiescence to conduct operations against Iranian targets inside Syria. It also created leverage against Turkey and its regional ambitions in the South Caucasus, and granted Russia an all-important position on NATO's southern flank.¹⁷ But the deployment was launched only after Washington had made clear it would not intervene militarily in the Syrian civil war; the risk of an outright military confrontation between Russia and the United States was thus minimal.¹⁸ The air campaign in support of the Assad regime was conducted so as to minimize the risk of Russian losses, with utmost disregard for civilian casualties. And ground operations were conducted largely by mercenaries, making any losses of Russian military personnel deniable.¹⁹ Ostensibly private military outfits like the Wagner Group developed lucrative profit-sharing arrangements with the Syrian regime in a variety of sectors, including oil and gas production.²⁰

The Syrian deployment came as a surprise to many.²¹ It was predicted to fail, just as Russia failed to save the crumbling presidency of Ukraine's Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.²² The United States and its allies had imposed sanctions on Russia for annexing Crimea and waging an undeclared war against Ukraine. The common perception at the time was that Russia was too isolated on the global stage, that its economy was "in tatters" as a result of Western sanctions and a steep drop in oil revenues,²³ and that it would lack the resources to pursue an activist foreign policy far from its shores.²⁴

The opposite turned out to be the case and the Syria deployment has served as the prototype for other Russian interventions—in Libya's civil war, in the Central African Republic, in Mozambique, and in Mali.²⁵ None of these actions could be described as "strategic." Virtually all were opportunistic, reflecting the Kremlin's ability to exploit vacuums and to operate nimbly and at low cost to the Russian state treasury. Russian moves often cannily took advantage of Western policy mistakes or lack of attention to and sustained engagement in crisis-prone regions. Russian operatives, unconstrained by ethical or legal considerations, were quick to act and capitalized on long-standing tribal, religious, or territorial disputes. In almost all such situations, Russian interventions appeared to be guided by the desire to put the spotlight on Western policy failures as well as to profit by gaining access to natural resources or selling the services of its security personnel.²⁶

In virtually all these interventions, a major—at times *the* major—role belonged to Russian private security or mercenary groups. Building on their experience of the Syrian intervention, these nominally private actors became a key instrument of Russian state power—operating at arm's length, sometimes supported by the Russian military but sometimes competing with it.²⁷ The mostly sporadic nature of Russian interventions, as well as the Kremlin's reliance on quasi-private rather than official state actors, suggested that while these long-distance forays served an important purpose in the confrontation with the West, they were not strategic undertakings.

Less visible than the highly publicized activities by Russian mercenary groups was Russia's pre-2015 diplomatic outreach to the Global South. Whereas this occasionally gained notice in the West, as was the case with Russian outreach to the Chavez and later the Maduro regime in Venezuela, Moscow was still widely perceived as lacking the ability for sustained presence and impact, and as being more opportunistic than strategic.²⁸

Russia intensified its outreach to the Global South after 2015 in an attempt to expand and shore up its web of relationships beyond the West as proof of its global reach and recognition, as well as to build a counterweight to the United States and its allies. However, its increased attempts at diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in the Global South, particularly in Africa and Latin America, produced few tangible results.²⁹ Some of the most ambitious and high-profile attempts to

secure a foothold in key countries, such as in South Africa, backfired when they were revealed to be associated with corrupt local schemes.³⁰ Others simply failed to deliver despite big promises.³¹

Russia's attempts to secure these footholds pale in comparison with those of China, whose economic muscle and ability to deliver significant financial resources have enabled it to establish itself as a major partner to the Global South. Some of Moscow's most successful relationships have been with the most corrupt and oppressive governments. One example is Zimbabwe, where Russia has long exploited the regime's need for a shield from international sanctions as an opportunity to gain and retain access in the country.³²

The intensification of Russia's global posture after 2015 signaled its ambition to restore its reputation as a global power. However, with modest resources and lacking a clear ideological rationale other than to resist and wherever possible subvert the U.S.-led liberal order, it produced few results. Its sporadic, opportunistic quality, coupled with the focus on confrontation with the West, left little doubt that Moscow's courtship of the Global South was subordinate to that confrontation rather than strategically important for the security of Russia in its own right.³³ The start of the large-scale offensive against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, changed that fundamentally.

Paradigm Shift

Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine marked the point of no return in its relationship with the West and a paradigm shift. The annexation of Crimea and the start of the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 had dealt a major blow to that relationship. Still, against mounting odds, there remained at least a theoretical hope that a negotiated solution could be found. Russia's February 2022 invasion killed that hope. To deal with this new situation, the Kremlin has deployed all instruments in its of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Countering the West's response to its aggression has become a matter of survival for the Putin regime.

A Diplomatic Counteroffensive

The breakdown of diplomacy and the dramatic deterioration of relations between Russia and the West to a level not seen since the Cold War forced Moscow to urgently seek new international partners. The diplomatic offensive spearheaded by the United States, the European Union, and their partners threatened Russia with far more dramatic international isolation and opprobrium than what it suffered after 2014. Finding ways to break through the diplomatic blockade pursued by the West became the top priority for Moscow's foreign policy. The ICC arrest warrant for Putin for alleged war crimes has added to the urgency of that effort as a matter of personal safety for the Russian leader.³⁴

Russia's diplomacy has sought to deepen its relationships with its two principal international partners: China and India. Both have emerged as vitally important enablers of Russia's war, even if at times they have shown, however tacitly, their reluctance to endorse it and even criticized Russia.³⁵

China and India have derived significant benefits from Russia's loss of traditional markets in Europe by increasing, dramatically in the case of India, their purchases of Russian oil. Yet, neither has put at risk its own interests to assist Russia in its hour of need. The risk of Western sanctions has evidently figured prominently in both governments' calculus, although there are indications that Indian oil purchases from Russia may not have stayed below the U.S.- and EU-imposed price cap.³⁶ Despite significant growth in trade between Russia and China, increasingly conducted in Chinese currency, since the start of the invasion, Beijing has been careful to avoid large-scale exports of technologies that could put it at risk of Western sanctions.³⁷

China's President Xi Jinping and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi have continued to engage with Putin personally, pursuing a carefully calibrated course in doing so.

Modi had a highly publicized meeting with Putin on the margins of the September 2022 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, at which he appeared to criticize the Russian leader for waging the war against Ukraine.³⁸ However, India has not joined the Western sanctions regime and has abstained in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly vote to condemn Moscow on the anniversary of the start of its offensive.³⁹ Meanwhile, Indian purchases of Russian oil have fed the Russian war machine and helped keep the global economy well supplied.⁴⁰ High-level diplomatic contacts have continued, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visiting New Delhi for a G20 foreign ministers meeting and Modi receiving Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the Security Council of Russia.⁴¹ There remains the question of whether Putin will travel to India for the SCO summit in July 2023 and for the G20 summit in September. India is not a party to the ICC, and the Modi government's posture suggests that Putin will not be arrested should he decide to do so, which he appears likely to do to demonstrate that the West's efforts to isolate him have failed.⁴²

Xi has maintained an even more robust personal engagement with Putin, hosting him in Beijing a few weeks before the start of the February 2022 offensive, visiting Moscow in March 2023, and inviting him to visit Beijing later in 2023.⁴³ The two leaders also met on the margins of the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022. Xi has used these meetings to demonstrate support for Putin in his struggle against their shared adversary the United States, but also to show that he has the upper hand in their relationship. The plan that China presented in February 2023, on the eve of Xi's visit to Moscow, on how to end the war was not an endorsement of the Russian position, but it was not a condemnation either.⁴⁴ Full of ambiguous language, it seemed more like a pro forma statement

designed to deflect potential criticism for not using Beijing's influence with the Kremlin to end the war. China's calculus in this situation is not difficult to discern—in addition to the benefits it derives from its increasingly lopsided trade and economic relationship with Russia, it is more than content to have the war in Europe distract the United States from the Pacific theater.

Putin's special relationships with the Chinese and Indian leaders have paid off at the UN. China and India abstained from the February 25, 2022, Security Council vote and the March 2, 2022, General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine immediately.⁴⁵ China voted against the April 7, 2022, General Assembly resolution to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council, while India abstained.⁴⁶ Modi and Xi may also have ulterior motives for not joining international efforts to condemn Russian human rights violations either at the UN or in the ICC, given their respective records.

Russian engagement with Brazil and South Africa has paid off too. Brazil's President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, recently returned to power after a close election, has somewhat reluctantly condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine.⁴⁷ He has offered his own vague ideas to negotiate peace that appear to have little chance of success. On a visit to China in April 2023, Lula endorsed Beijing's equally vague "peace plan" that did not call for Russia to withdraw its troops.⁴⁸ Shortly after returning from China, Lula met with Lavrov on his tour of Latin America and accused the United States of encouraging the war.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Brazilian imports of Russian diesel have increased dramatically over the past year.⁵⁰

Putin is expected to travel to South Africa for the BRICS summit in August 2023. South Africa is a party to the Rome Treaty of the ICC. The prospect of Putin's visit has triggered a controversy in South Africa, as well as internationally. In an effort to defuse it, South African officials reportedly have been encouraging the Russian leader not to visit and to participate in the summit remotely instead.⁵¹ Still, the South African government's friendly, nonjudgmental posture toward Russia since the start of the war and past handling of a visit by then president of Sudan Omar Bashir following an ICC indictment suggest that Putin will not be arrested if he proceeds with the trip.⁵² When asked about the tension between South Africa's ICC obligations and



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (L) meets South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (R) in Pretoria, South Africa, on January 23, 2023. (Photo by Russian Foreign Ministry/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

Putin's expected visit, International Relations and Cooperation Minister Naledi Pandor described Russia as a an "old historical friend" and added that "we cannot become sudden enemies on the demand of others."⁵³ Justice Minister Ronald Lamola reportedly said that Putin would not be arrested if he traveled to South Africa because he would be protected by diplomatic immunity as a head of state.⁵⁴ In public remarks, subsequently retracted, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa went so far as to suggest that his country should leave the ICC.⁵⁵ Should Putin travel to South Africa and not be arrested there, the visit is certain to be heralded by the Kremlin as a major win for the Russian leader and a defeat for the West.

Russia's permanent seat in the UNSC and the veto power that comes with it have been the indispensable shield from the threat of crippling sanctions mandated by that body. However, this is not enough for the Kremlin, given its unrelenting ambition and need to remain a global actor. Thus, the UN General Assembly has also been an important diplomatic battlefield for Russia to gain or regain influence. Its efforts there have met with some success. While a large majority of UN members have voted repeatedly to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine, a significant number have either abstained in or voted against such resolutions.⁵⁶ Some of these countries are former Russian colonies and belong to Russian-dominated economic, political, and security organizations, leaving them vulnerable to Moscow's economic or political pressure. Others, such as Iran or Nicaragua, have difficult relations with the United States and do not want to appear to follow its lead, while still others are reluctant for ideological or practical reasons to be drawn into what they see as a fight between big powers that has little to do with their own concerns.

That a significant number of countries are reluctant to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine is testimony to the success of Moscow's diplomacy aimed at countering Western efforts to isolate it before and since February 2022. The Global South is represented heavily among the countries that have neither joined the West's sanctions regime on Russia nor condemned it for starting the war. Since the start of the war, Moscow's efforts to court these countries have intensified, especially targeting Africa. Lavrov has undertaken two extensive tours of the continent since February 2022.⁵⁷ Senior Russian diplomats have sustained a seemingly never-ending series of meetings, visits, telephone conversations, and other exchanges, while Putin personally has welcomed visitors from Africa to Russia.⁵⁸

Russia's courtship of the Global South is reminiscent of and builds on the Cold War legacy of the Soviet Union, when the East-West competition for influence was waged in many countries shedding their colonial past and the Soviet Union sought to position itself as a partner in their struggle against their old oppressors. That legacy survives in some parts of Africa. In South Africa, Soviet support for the African National Congress's struggle against apartheid is still remembered with gratitude.⁵⁹ In various parts of the continent, Moscow's nonjudgmental approach to bilateral ties—in contrast to Washington's conditioning its often meager offers of assistance on observance of human rights and

anticorruption measures—is welcome. Moreover, many African economies have suffered from high energy and food prices as a consequence of the Western sanctions on Russia as well as from interest rates hikes in major Western economies to combat inflation.⁶⁰ Russia's offers of grain deliveries appear like a goodwill gesture, notwithstanding Russia's role as the cause of the disruption in food and energy markets.⁶¹

Russia's pre-February 2022 courtship of the Global South has also helped its recent diplomatic offensive there. Putin hosted African leaders in 2019 in Sochi at the Russia-Africa Summit.⁶² The event, staged with great fanfare, produced few tangible results but helped project the image of Russia as an active participant in Africa's diplomacy and economic development.⁶³ The second summit of what has become the Russia-Africa Economic and Humanitarian Forum is scheduled to take place in July 2023 in St. Petersburg.⁶⁴

Often dismissed as lacking in substance and merely ceremonial, Russia's diplomatic offensive in the Global South is paying off, as it finds itself hardly isolated in the world. Its courtship of China and India has worked despite its diminishing leverage with both countries.⁶⁵ And, with no end in sight to its standoff with the West, Russia's pursuit of influence in the Global South is poised to continue.

An Infowar

In parallel with and closely tied to its diplomatic campaign to prevent the West from isolating Russia in the international arena, the Kremlin has intensified its information and disinformation campaign. Building on a long record of disinformation abroad, this campaign has focused on whitewashing Russia's reputation as an aggressor, portraying it instead as the aggrieved party in its conflict with the West, whose geopolitical expansion left Moscow no choice but to resort to arms in defense of its interests.

The striking feature of Russian disinformation since February 2022 is what it has been designed to whitewash—a war of aggression waged against a country that Putin has described as a brotherly nation; a war in which Russia has described its opponent as fascist while destroying cities that Hitler's armies destroyed in the Second World War; a war in which Russian troops have committed atrocities against people often speaking the same language and belonging to the same church as them, as well as sharing the legacy of fighting fascism together eighty years earlier. The task of debunking false Russian narratives has lost much of its meaning in this context, since the mere fact of news reporting—of Russian missile strikes against civilian targets in Ukraine, of Russian authorities kidnapping Ukrainian children and transporting them to Russia, or of Russian troops looting occupied villages—is the best antidote to them. Not even an ardent supporter of the Putin regime can deny the reality that it is Russian troops that occupy Ukrainian territory and not the other way around.

Few if any Russian narratives have taken hold abroad since February 2022. In Europe, where disinformation could in theory prove most consequential if it were able to undercut public support for Ukraine, they appear to have had little impact.⁶⁶ The image of Russia is still highly negative there.⁶⁷ In parts of Europe, as well as beyond the continent, public opinion appears to be more affected by concerns about the economic costs of the war and its open-ended nature than by Russian false narratives.⁶⁸

Russian disinformation appears to have had more effect in the Global South, thanks to a combination of large-scale government-sponsored propaganda, self-serving narratives, and homegrown factors.⁶⁹ In a wide array of countries, neutral or indifferent attitudes toward the war appear to be rooted less in the false narratives promoted by Russia than in the lingering legacy of the colonial era, the reluctance of leaders to become closely associated with diplomatic efforts spearheaded by the United States (whom they mistrust), and the unintended impact of Western sanctions on Russia on countries that consider themselves innocent bystanders in a struggle that has little to do with them.⁷⁰ For example, the notion that NATO enlargement precipitated the war has gained some traction, with countries like China, India, Brazil, and South Africa blaming the West for starting the conflict. That framing has led to calls for the West to stop arming Ukraine, rather than for Russia to cease its attack and withdraw its forces.⁷¹

For more than a century, the Kremlin has viewed propaganda as an important tool of its foreign policy, and it continues to invest huge resources in this domain. The return on investment has been hardly overwhelming. While some countries in the Global South seem persuaded by Russian-friendly narratives and slanted news coverage, few if any of them have provided Moscow with tangible support that directly helps the war effort or fills Russian state coffers. Despite the evident lack of success in these realms, Russian disinformation and propaganda will continue as long as its confrontation with the West continues. Such activities are an important instrument in the Kremlin's toolkit, serving as a supplement to its activist diplomacy and a meaningful source of handouts from the state budget for regime loyalists and opportunists. Propaganda's utility to the Kremlin lies mainly in its ability to exploit the West's policy mistakes. So long as Europe and the United States fail to make headway on the issues of primary importance to countries in the Global South, it will be easy for Moscow to play on the legacies of the colonial and post-colonial eras and the Cold War.

A Global Unconventional Power

The most dramatic move by Russia in the military domain—besides unleashing an all-out war on Ukraine—has been its suspension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with the United States, the last remaining bilateral arms-control treaty regulating the nuclear competition

between Moscow and Washington.⁷² The Kremlin has effectively abandoned nuclear arms control and signaled its readiness for an unrestrained nuclear arms competition with Washington instead.⁷³ The move was likely intended to achieve several goals: to produce shock worldwide; to increase pressure on the United States and its allies to halt their support for Ukraine and convince them to engage in negotiations on Moscow's terms; and to elicit sympathy from the Global South, where the reputation of the United States suffers from lingering Cold War-era accusations of neo-imperialism.

Russia also announced in March a plan to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus.⁷⁴ Nuclear-capable short-range Iskander ballistic missiles and aircraft reportedly had already been deployed to the country. Russia would retain control of the weapons, but it would, according to Putin's statement, train Belarusian crews to fly the aircraft.⁷⁵ This announcement was obviously intended to stir up fears of nuclear war in Western publics and to increase pressure on their governments to end their support for Ukraine, as was implicitly noted by some Russian analysts, who wondered whether the actual deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus would ever happen.⁷⁶ In other words, with its New START suspension and plans to deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus, the Kremlin has leveraged its nuclear arsenal to pursue a diplomatic resolution to a war that is not going well for Russia.



A Russian Iskander-M dual-capable missile system on display in September 2016. (Photo by Sebastien Roblin)

Russia's participation in international nuclear nonproliferation efforts alongside the United States and its European allies can no longer be taken for granted. Russia has always played an ambiguous part in efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or to contain North Korea's nuclear activities. The breakdown in relations with the West may well remove that ambiguity. The Kremlin's approach to the nuclear dangers posed by Iran and North Korea has been guided largely by geopolitical considerations—both countries are adversaries of the United States but not of Russia. Moscow's participation in international efforts to address their nuclear ambitions has been driven more by concerns about potential U.S. responses—such as missile defense or military action—than by those ambitions as such. Other reasons for Russia's participation have included its desire to maintain its seat at any table where major powers resolve key global issues and gain opportunities to position itself as the protector of Tehran's and Pyongyang's interests and thus gain leverage with both

as well as with the United States. With the onset of all-out competition with the West and the breaking down of the guardrails in their relations, geopolitics will become a key factor in Russian policy with respect to nuclear proliferation, as will the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Furthermore, given Russia’s readiness to ditch New START, it will probably also end its compliance with other agreements, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, which seeks to limit the proliferation of missiles and associated technology, for the sake of all-out competition with the United States.⁷⁷ In the Russian narrative, the United States has effectively become a co-combatant in the war in Ukraine, where it is engaged in a proxy war against Russia. Therefore, a U.S. decision to send to Ukraine weapons that could reach targets inside Russia could justify asymmetrical counter-steps to put the U.S. homeland equally at risk. Such steps could include selling intercontinental ballistic missiles to adversaries of the United States, an idea that has been floated by a prominent Russian defense analyst.⁷⁸

Russia’s conventional arms sales to rogue regimes and U.S. adversaries, such as Iran and North Korea, are equally unlikely to be constrained by multilateral or even international, UNSC-approved sanctions regimes. Russia has long refused to recognize multilateral sanctions lacking UNSC approval, but it has also been ready to violate sanctions that do have UNSC approval, denying that it has done so and relying on its permanent seat on the UNSC to block any potential action against itself.⁷⁹

Iran is fast becoming a beneficiary of the war. In an apparent *quid pro quo*, in exchange for supplying drones to Russia, Iran has negotiated the purchase of twenty-four Su-35 Russian fighter jets.⁸⁰ It remains to be seen whether Russia will deliver jets that it may need for its operations against Ukraine and whether Iran will be able to pay for them.⁸¹ Other arms deals between Iran and Russia will likely follow, subject to the ability of the Russian defense industry to produce the necessary equipment, as it has been struggling to replenish what the Russian military has lost in combat.

The appetite of Russian defense manufacturers to sell their wares abroad may be tempered by several factors: the priority of supplying the war effort, limited production capacity, the blow to the reputation of Russian arms—among some customers, perhaps—as a result of their less-than-stellar performance on the battlefield, the limited access to advanced technology that could impact the quality of Russian weapons, and the desire of some countries to gradually move away from reliance on Russian hardware and to avoid being sanctioned by the United States.⁸² This, however, is likely to result only in a more aggressive Russian pursuit of export opportunities and in offering systems previously not available for export in order to retain long-term customers.

The failure of the Russian military to execute a blitzkrieg in Ukraine and the heavy losses suffered in the course of the war have not tamed the Kremlin's tendency to portray itself as a global power with a long reach. The war against Ukraine will undoubtedly remain its top priority for the foreseeable future. But as its global posture since February 2022 makes abundantly clear, Russia is not ready to abandon its military forays in Africa, parts of Asia, and even in the Western Hemisphere.⁸³ These have five key objectives: to project the image of Russia as a global power undeterred and unconstrained by Western sanctions, to chip away at the U.S.-led international order, to undermine the position of the United States and its allies and partners in the Global South, to position Russia as a partner to the Global South, and to boost its finances and profit wherever possible from partnerships there. In pursuing its objectives, the Kremlin has relied on—in addition to arms sales—military-to-military engagements, naval deployments, basing arrangements, and private military contractors acting as proxies for the Kremlin.⁸⁴

Far more deadly in the near term than nuclear weapons and the suspension of New START has been Russia's reliance on the infamous private military contractor the Wagner Group.⁸⁵ Wagner has become the Kremlin's favorite tool for projecting military power into the Global South. It has enabled Russia to position itself as the alternative to the United States and its allies and their practice of offering a helping hand but with strings—good governance, human rights, etc.—attached. Wagner's status as a private military company carries with it the benefit for the Kremlin of plausible deniability about its actions abroad.

Wagner came to prominence in the beginning of the war against Ukraine in 2014. Since then, it has grown in size and importance, becoming a major tool of Russian military and foreign policy. Since February 2022, Wagner has played a large part in Russia's escalation in Ukraine, reportedly with up to 50,000 of its troops engaged in some of the fiercest combat, in effect as a parallel army.⁸⁶

Prior to February 2022, Wagner had already developed a reputation as the Kremlin's tool for projecting military power and political influence and seizing commercial opportunities in distant lands, mainly in the Middle East and Africa. Moscow's provocative use of Wagner forces has at times backfired spectacularly, most notably in an incident in Syria in February 2018, where as many as 300 Wagner fighters were reportedly killed in a battle near the city of Deir al-Zour between U.S. troops and Wagner and regime forces.⁸⁷ The denial by Russia's Ministry of Defense of any connection to or responsibility for that operation may be attributed to rivalry between the ministry and Wagner, but it also demonstrated the utility of having a military force nominally not connected to the government.⁸⁸ The aim of the Wagner attack was to gain control of the gas plant near Deir al-Zour—an example of its business model as a gun for hire in pursuit of lucrative commercial opportunities.

Since then, Wagner has seemed ubiquitous. In the Central African Republic, it has become a major security provider to the government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and gained access to gold and diamond mining operations.⁸⁹ In Libya, it has fought on the side of General Khalifa Haftar’s rebel militias against the UN-recognized government and maneuvered, in some instances reportedly successfully, to gain access to the country’s rich oil facilities.⁹⁰ Despite Wagner’s large-scale military involvement in Ukraine, its fighters still reportedly remain engaged in Libya.⁹¹



Protesters hold a banner reading “Thank you Wagner” (the Russian private security firm present in Mali) during a demonstration organized by the pan-Africanist platform Yerewolo to celebrate France’s announcement that it would withdraw French troops from Mali, in Bamako on February 19, 2022. (Photo by FLORENT VERGNES/AFP via Getty Images)

Wagner’s deployment and apparently large losses in Ukraine have not diminished its appetite or ability to seek new opportunities—either as a hired gun in local conflicts or for its own business interests.⁹² Since February 2022, Wagner has been involved in the conflicts and instability in Chad and Mali in addition to its continuing presence in the Central African Republic and Libya.⁹³ These activities in Africa, intended to expand Moscow’s global reach and to enhance its status as a geopolitical rival to the West, go hand in hand with Russia’s economic and commercial interests in expanding its access to the continent’s vast resources. With no end in sight to the geopolitical standoff with the West, the Russian military engaged in the war against Ukraine, and the Russian economy under siege by Western sanctions, Wagner’s (or some other Russian private military company’s) role as an important instrument of the Russian state is virtually assured for a long time to come.

It’s the Economy!

On the economic front, the West has imposed unprecedented multilateral sanctions on Russia and mobilized support for Ukraine. Europe’s rapid economic disengagement from Russia left the country without its most important trading partners. In 2021, Europe accounted for over 35 percent of Russia’s foreign trade, including more than half of its oil exports.⁹⁴ The critical dependence of the Russian economy on exports of raw materials, especially hydrocarbons, has made finding alternative

markets and trading partners a task of paramount importance for the Kremlin. The United States and its allies have also imposed wide-ranging financial sanctions on Russia, freezing some \$300 billion of its gold and currency reserves held in foreign banks.⁹⁵

The resulting situation has been striking for two reasons: the severity of the sanctions and the economic calamity for Russia they threaten, but also the resilience of the Russian economy in the face of these supposedly devastating blows, which has contradicted the many dire forecasts.⁹⁶ The economy, never thought to be Russia's strong card, has withstood the initial shock of the sanctions much better than expected and emerged as an integral factor in the Kremlin's confrontation with the West and war against Ukraine, synchronized with other DIME elements.

Still occasionally derided as a "gas station with a bunch of nuclear weapons," Russia has proved to be much more than that in the economic domain.⁹⁷ Western sanctions, intended to limit Russia's ability to generate vital revenue from energy exports, triggered a major disruption in global energy markets and put the spotlight on the country's role as a major energy supplier to the world. Russia has turned out to be highly consequential for the global economy, especially in the non-Western world, where the shock from market disruptions caused by the sanctions was felt particularly acutely coming on the heels of the coronavirus pandemic.⁹⁸ As the prices of critical and most basic supplies—hydrocarbons, foodstuffs, fertilizer—shot up, some of the world's poorest countries suffered disproportionately.⁹⁹

Russian diplomacy and disinformation have seized on this last issue quite effectively, demonstrating the Kremlin's whole-of-government approach to meeting the challenge of "the economic war against Putin."¹⁰⁰ Russian disinformation has blamed Western sanctions for the rise in food prices, obscuring the fact that Russia's war of aggression and blockade of Ukrainian ports were the main source of the disruptions and price pressures in the first place.¹⁰¹ The scale and the timing of this disruption, combined with Russian efforts to amplify reports of its impact, have produced the desired effect in the target audiences in the Global South.¹⁰²

Russia's BRICS partnerships have paid off too. China and India have ramped up their purchases of Russian hydrocarbons, dramatically so in the case of the latter. None of the BRICS has joined the West's sanctions against Russia, securing a major lifeline for the Russian economy.

Russia's other major diplomatic outreach efforts, particularly to the oil-rich nations of the Persian Gulf, have also paid off handsomely. The OPEC+ partnership between the oil cartel, especially Saudi Arabia, and Russia has been instrumental in enabling "the Putin regime to refill its coffers and to



The Liberian-flagged oil tanker Ice Energy (L) transfers crude oil from the Russian-flagged oil tanker Lana (R) (formerly Pegas) off the shore of Karystos, on the Greek island of Evia, on May 29, 2022. (Photo by ANGELOS TZORTZINIS/AFP via Getty Images)

limit the impact of U.S. and EU sanctions.”¹⁰³ The Gulf Cooperation Council countries have emerged as the key alternative financial hub for Russia; a gateway for banned goods to Russia from the West, bypassing the sanctions; a safe haven for wealthy Russians to hide their assets from Western sanctions; and a major destination for the same wealthy Russians to escape from Russia, now that they are no longer welcome in many countries in the West.¹⁰⁴

Contrary to Russia’s image as an economic laggard run by incompetents, the Kremlin has relied on a team of competent experts, whose skill at navigating the combined turbulence of the war and sanctions has enabled the regime to continue its aggression and avoid any major hits to living standards at home.¹⁰⁵ The Kremlin’s economic team has acted with speed, stealth, and foresight,

seeking to blunt, preempt, and counter the effects of Western sanctions. Thus, in anticipation of sanctions to curtail its oil exports, the government acquired a “shadow fleet” of tankers to sustain its shipping operations to mitigate the risk of being cut off by foreign shippers.¹⁰⁶

The resilience of the Russian economy has emerged as a critical pillar of support for Russia’s overall war strategy. In a war of attrition, the economy has been the Putin regime’s key enabler. A basic comparison with Ukraine, with its prewar population of 43 million against Russia’s 146 million, and its prewar gross domestic product of \$200 billion against Russia’s nearly \$1.8 trillion, makes it clear that the odds favor Russia in a war of attrition.¹⁰⁷ That is underscored by the fact that the Ukrainian economy is being destroyed, while the Russian economy remains essentially intact, and that the Kremlin has been able to adjust its trade relationships to largely compensate for the damage caused by Western sanctions. As Putin made clear in his “state of the nation” address in February 2023, his theory of victory depends on surviving the economic war with the West and winning the long war of attrition with Ukraine.¹⁰⁸

Implications for the United States

Russia’s war against Ukraine has triggered a fundamental reorientation of its foreign policy. Its relationship with the West is broken and likely to remain so for as long as Putin is in power, and probably longer.¹⁰⁹ His assault on Ukraine has transformed the simmering conflict in the Donbas

into an open-ended confrontation that future Russian leaders will not be able to put aside. The war has transformed Ukraine into Russia's irreconcilable adversary and the fulcrum of European security. In this conflict not only with Ukraine but also with the West, Russia is "all in."

In stark contrast with its armed forces' lackluster battlefield performance, Russia's diplomacy, information operations, and economy have exceeded expectations and positioned the country rather successfully to sustain a long war against Ukraine and the confrontation with the West. Long-standing partnerships and engagement in the Global South, often dismissed as largely inconsequential and irrelevant to both sides, have paid off, enabling Russia to soften the blow of international condemnation and to blunt the effects of Western economic sanctions. No longer mostly peripheral and "nice to have," these relationships have become "must haves" in Russia's diplomatic, informational, military, and economic strategy of surviving the confrontation with the West.

Russia's pursuit of partnership with China is poised to continue with "no limits." That Russia is the junior partner is of secondary importance, given that the relationship enables Russia to secure its eastern frontier and pursue its all-consuming confrontation with the West.

The first year of the war offers important lessons—about the limits of what even the most severe sanctions can accomplish; about the importance of physical resources, even at a time of major technological breakthroughs and energy transition; and about the role of the "rest"—as opposed to the West—in global affairs. These lessons will undoubtedly be studied and applied by the Kremlin.

With Russia "all in" in the confrontation with the West, almost all of the guardrails that had previously helped manage their rivalry have fallen away. The most important and possibly the only remaining "red line" in their relationship is the fear on both sides of an outright military conflict between them and the prospect of a catastrophic nuclear exchange. At the same time, the risk of this outcome has increased—the almost certain demise of the Russian-U.S. nuclear arms control regime and a war on the territory of Russia's neighbor increase the possibility of accidents, provocations, and misunderstandings with potentially dire consequences.

The loss of the guardrails means that Russia is likely to assume an even more confrontational posture toward the West. Exploiting Western concerns about nuclear proliferation and aiding and abetting proliferators regardless of its own obligations as a nuclear power, engaging in brinkmanship and provocations against Western forces and resorting to such "unconventional" tools as targeted assassinations will likely remain the Kremlin's tactics of choice.

Declared a renegade by the United States and its allies, Russia is poised to become a global disruptor, a rogue power. In an "all in" confrontation with the West, it is prepared to go "all out."

About the Author

Eugene Rumer is a former national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council, is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program. Earlier, he held research appointments at the National Defense University, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the RAND Corporation. He has also served on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department, taught at Georgetown University and the George Washington University, and published widely.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Christopher Bort, Eric Ciaramella, and Andrew Weiss for their comments on an earlier version of this study. Thanks also to Jasmine Alexander-Greene and Sean Eriksen for their exceptionally helpful research assistance. The author is solely responsible for any remaining errors of fact or judgment.

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The Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI) is a U.S. Department of Defense organization that works with structures throughout the U.S. Government and with public and private think tanks around the world to develop a common understanding of Russian decision-making and way of war that supports the Coordinating Authority's integration that leads to integrated planning, assessments, and action recommendations.

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