

# Contesting liberal peace: Russia's emerging model of conflict management

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Against a background of failed international missions to end armed conflicts—from the Sahel to Afghanistan—Russia has begun to promote an alternative paradigm of peacemaking.<sup>1</sup> President Putin has called for Russia's experience of intervention in Syria to become 'a model for resolving regional crises'.<sup>2</sup> Russian scholars argue that the country should 'promote its image as an effective peacemaker [*mirotvorets*]', citing its role in conflicts in Syria, Libya and the Central African Republic (CAR).<sup>3</sup> Russia considers all these activities forms of 'peacemaking' (*mirotvorchestvo*), but its approach differs radically from the model of liberal peacebuilding that dominated international practice in the post-Cold War era.<sup>4</sup> An emerging Russian model of stabilization prioritizes order over justice and advocates short-term goals of conflict management over long-term goals of conflict resolution. In this article I explain why Russia did not align itself with emerging liberal norms of peacebuilding and conflict resolution in the aftermath of the Cold War and instead developed a very different set of norms and practices. I argue that Russian policies are not simply ad hoc responses to immediate security concerns based on *realpolitik*, but represent a more substantive ideological and normative challenge to liberal models of peacebuilding. In this sense, Russia's approach to peacemaking and conflict management is one strand in a much wider contestation of post-Cold War liberal norms.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I outline recent research on international norms and show how it can be used to frame the debate on Russian approaches

\* I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the *International Affairs* editorial team for their valuable comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Maria-Louise Clausen and Peter Albrecht, 'Interventions since the Cold War: from statebuilding to stabilization', *International Affairs* 97: 4, 2021, pp. 1203–20; Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, 'Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism', *International Affairs* 96: 4, 2020, pp. 855–74.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin, speech, 'Zasedanie diskussionogo kluba "Valdai"', 3 Oct. 2019, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 1 Nov. 2021.)

<sup>3</sup> *Zashchita mira, zemli, svobody vybora dlya vsekh stran: novye idei dlya vneshnei politiki Rossii* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2020), [https://globalaffairs.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/doklad\\_novye-idei-dlya-vneshnej-politiki-rossii.pdf](https://globalaffairs.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/doklad_novye-idei-dlya-vneshnej-politiki-rossii.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> An often confusing range of terms is used in the literature to describe policies that aim to halt armed conflict and build peaceful societies. Certain terms also have different meanings in translation from and into Russian. In this article I discuss the range of activities described by Russian officials and analysts as *mirotvorchestvo* (peace creation, or peacemaking) and *uregulirovaniya konfliktov* (conflict management). I describe Russia's activities as a whole as 'conflict management' or 'stabilization' to indicate activities designed to halt mass armed violence, but not to resolve underlying conflicts in society.

to peace and conflict. Second, I analyse how Russia's involvement in a series of conflicts since the 1990s has both engaged with but ultimately contested the underlying norms of liberal peacebuilding. Third, I trace the emergence of an alternative Russian paradigm of conflict management through two case-studies: Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh. These cases are selected to demonstrate a particular pattern of Russian behaviour across conflicts in different geographical regions and with different security and geopolitical logics. I then summarize in brief a long list of other cases that might challenge or support the argument. I conclude by discussing Russia's claimed identity as a peacemaker and its relevance in the context of broader trends in its foreign policy.

## Contesting liberal norms

In his detailed account of Russian attitudes towards military intervention, Roy Allison argued that a growing divide between the West and Russia is best explained by 'normative friction', the divergence between their ideas about the appropriate behaviour for states in the international system.<sup>5</sup> Other recent work has also highlighted norm contestation as critical to understanding Russia's military interventions.<sup>6</sup> A similar norms-based approach can help to explain divergence between Russia and the West on the fundamental question of how states and the international community should respond to internal conflicts and civil wars. This question draws on a wider set of norms covering whether the international community should intervene to halt internal conflicts, how states should manage and resolve armed conflicts and insurgencies on their territory, and how conflicts can be overcome through peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction.

For brief periods in the 1990s and early 2000s it appeared that Russia and the West might forge a common approach to managing and resolving deadly conflicts. But instead of adopting liberal norms, Russia increasingly diverged from western approaches to conflict management and peacebuilding. Moscow has challenged the tenets of so-called liberal peacebuilding, according to which armed conflicts can be resolved through inclusive peace processes and liberal state transformation, including democratization and good governance. This package of measures was supported by an array of interventionist international actors—including democratic states, multilateral actors and civil society groups.<sup>7</sup> Instead, Russia has argued for the primacy of sovereignty norms, the need for strong states and political order, and the rights of governments to suppress internal conflict using any means necessary.

Why did it prove so difficult to develop a common approach to the norms of conflict management in the post-Cold War era? A first generation of norms schol-

<sup>5</sup> Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and military intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Averre and Lance Davies, 'Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria', *International Affairs* 91: 4, 2015, pp. 813–34; Moritz Pieper, "'Rising power" status and the evolution of international order: conceptualising Russia's Syria policies', *Europe-Asia Studies* 71: 3, 2019, pp. 365–87.

<sup>7</sup> See Madhav Joshi, Sung Yong Lee and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Just how liberal is the liberal peace?', *International Peacekeeping* 21: 3, 2014, pp. 364–89.

arship in the 1990s assumed that the diffusion of norms such as the observance of human rights and the peaceful resolution of conflicts was a difficult, but largely one-way process of gradual socialization.<sup>8</sup> Norms researchers argued that even when states denied the validity or applicability of norms, they could still advance through a ‘spiral’, in which initial rejection of norms would nevertheless lead to tactical concessions, adoption of formal rules and laws (‘prescriptive behaviour’) and ultimately internalized rule compliance.<sup>9</sup> The path from denial to acceptance might prove a long one, but eventually norms would enter a ‘norm cascade’, in which a norm reached a tipping point as it was adopted by a critical mass of states.<sup>10</sup>

Initially, it appeared that Russia might follow this virtuous spiral—from denial to compliance—in its approach to conflict management. When Russian troops deployed to control early post-Soviet conflicts around Russia’s periphery, there was no clear national peacekeeping doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Policies often evolved as the result of ad hoc attempts by local Russian military commanders to respond to events on the ground.<sup>12</sup> These early operations demonstrated a divergence from UN concepts of impartiality and minimum use of force in peacekeeping: ‘Legitimacy remained dubious, mandates were broadly defined, and rules of engagement were never clearly spelled out.’<sup>13</sup> Russian peacekeeping operations were at least partly designed to maintain the country’s regional primacy and assert its great power status.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time—as the norms literature would suggest—Russia could not ignore the growing influence of new thinking on peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Russia had supported the 1992 UN Agenda for Peace initiative and backed a raft of new UN peacekeeping missions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Russian military failure in the conflict in Chechnya in 1994–6 undermined the Ministry of Defence’s monopoly on peacekeeping doctrine and encouraged a shift towards

<sup>8</sup> Classic texts from this literature include Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘International norm dynamics and political change’, *International Organization* 52: 4, 1998, pp. 887–917; Thomas Risse, Kathryn Sikkink and Stephen Ropp, eds, *The power of human rights: international norms and domestic change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, ‘The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: introduction’, in Risse et al., eds, *The power of human rights*, pp. 117–49. For an updated version of the spiral, see Cristina G. Badescu and Thomas G. Weiss, ‘Misrepresenting R2P and advancing norms: an alternative spiral?’, *International Studies Perspectives* 11: 4, 2010, pp. 354–74.

<sup>10</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink, ‘International norm dynamics’.

<sup>11</sup> Between 1992 and 2000 nearly 7,000 Russian troops led an operation mandated by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) during the civil war in Tajikistan, working alongside a UN observation mission, UNMOT. Russian forces also served in a CIS-mandated mission to separate warring parties in the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict in 1994–2008. Some 500 Russian forces were deployed in trilateral (Russian, Georgian and South Ossetian) peacekeeping forces in the conflict between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia from 1992 to 2008. Another trilateral force was formed to police the border of the breakaway Transnistria Republic in Moldova. For an overview, see A. Nikitin, ‘The Russian Federation’, in Alex Bellamy, ed., *Providing peacekeepers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 158–82.

<sup>12</sup> Dov Lynch, *Russian peacekeeping strategies in the CIS: the case of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan* (Cham: Springer, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Domitilla Sagromoso, ‘Russian peacekeeping policies’, in John Mackinlay and Peter Cross, eds, *Regional peacekeepers: the paradox of Russian peacekeeping* (New York: UN Publications, 2003), pp. 13–34 at p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Neil S. MacFarlane and Albrecht Schnabel, ‘Russia’s approach to peacekeeping’, *International Journal* 50: 2, 1995, pp. 294–324.

more international cooperation.<sup>15</sup> In Tajikistan and Georgia, CIS-mandated—but effectively Russian—peacekeeping forces operated relatively successfully in cooperation with UN missions, although relations worsened in later years in Georgia.<sup>16</sup>

The boldest attempt to align with the West and the emerging norms of liberal peacebuilding came in Russia's deployment in UN peacekeeping missions in the Balkans under NATO command.<sup>17</sup> At the time, some viewed this as a blueprint for future cooperation between Russia and the West. But there were frequent tensions with NATO during Russia's deployments in the UNPROFOR, SFOR and KFOR missions. The Russia–NATO dispute over the latter's military intervention in Serbia/Kosovo in 1999 highlighted the fundamental political differences between the two sides.<sup>18</sup> In 2003 Russia withdrew its peacekeeping contingents from Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Regina Heller explains the disputes over Kosovo as driven by Russia's 'quest for respect'—its desire to achieve recognition as a great power and as an equal partner with the West.<sup>19</sup> The rise to power of Vladimir Putin further prioritized the importance of sovereignty and great power status in Russian foreign policy, making a junior partnership with NATO in peacekeeping operations in the Balkans untenable for Russia's emerging self-identity.

A similar case in which western norm diffusion ultimately challenged Russia's status can be observed in Chechnya. The first Chechen war (1994–6) was a military and political debacle for Moscow. Under pressure from the EU, the Russian government negotiated a ceasefire with Chechen rebels at Khasavyurt in 1996. The Khasavyurt accords internationalized the conflict: an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) assistance group had been set up in 1995 as a condition of Russia joining the Council of Europe, and its officials helped broker the Khasavyurt peace deal.<sup>20</sup> This agreement halted the fighting, but left Chechnya as a de facto independent state, run by a mix of Islamist radicals, criminal groups and Chechen nationalists. Not only did Khasavyurt fail to resolve the conflict, thus leaving Russia's security concerns unaddressed, but it was seen by many Russians as a humiliating capitulation—not just to the rebels, but to the West. Consequently, for Russian officials, the diffusion of liberal norms

<sup>15</sup> Lynch, *Russian peacekeeping strategies*.

<sup>16</sup> Nikitin, 'The Russian Federation', pp. 176–7. Russia vetoed an extension of UNOMIG in 2009 after the Georgia–Russia war of 2008. After Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, its military presence in both breakaway republics was reconfigured in the form of military bases on 'foreign' territory.

<sup>17</sup> Russia deployed some 1,500 troops as part of the UNPROFOR mission in Croatia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–5), and more than 1,000 soldiers in SFOR in Bosnia and Herzegovina in support of the Dayton agreement—an agreement signed with very limited Russian involvement. After a short-lived stand-off with NATO forces at Pristina airport during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, Russia agreed to deploy more than 3,000 troops to serve in KFOR. See Sharyl Cross, 'Russia and NATO toward the twenty-first century: conflicts and peacekeeping in Bosnia–Herzegovina and Kosovo', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 15: 2, 2002, pp. 1–58 at p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Nikitin, 'The Russian Federation', pp. 176–7; Allison, *Russia, the West*, ch. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Regina Heller, 'Russia's quest for respect in the international conflict management in Kosovo', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47: 3–4, 2014, pp. 333–43.

<sup>20</sup> James Hughes, *Chechnya: from nationalism to jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

promoting international conflict resolution came to be viewed both as an assault on Russia's identity as a sovereign state and also as a threat to national security.<sup>21</sup> The second Chechen war—as discussed below—would be run according to very different norms.

The disputes over Balkans peacekeeping and the first Chechen war seemed to suggest to Russian elites that liberal norm diffusion was not a benign process that promoted progressive norms but an instrument of power politics which undermined Russia's international status and threatened its security. Ayşe Zarakol argues that the diffusion of liberal norms can also be read not as a peaceful process of socialization but as a 'global story of coercion and stigmatisation', which engenders a range of responses and behaviours—including both reluctant compliance and outright norm violation.<sup>22</sup> An extensive literature has traced how the use of shaming and stigmatization by norm entrepreneurs has often provoked defiance rather than compliance among target states.<sup>23</sup> In such cases, norm violation becomes an 'expression of national identity and resistance'.<sup>24</sup> Contestation of liberal norms contributed to Russia's identity as a power that defied the West and challenged US dominance of the international order.<sup>25</sup>

Norm contestation was not an unambiguous, linear process, but a complex mix of partial acceptance, adaptation, localization and rejection of norms. For a short period in the early 2000s, Russia still appeared open to some evolution in international law and norms on the use of force. At times its official statements were even marked by 'a definite solidarist tone', a contrast to its traditional 'pluralist' view of state sovereignty.<sup>26</sup> Russia remained largely supportive of UN peacekeeping operations. Contingents of Russian troops and helicopters served in the UNAMSIL peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone between 2000 and 2005, and in UNMIS/UNMISS in Sudan/South Sudan in 2006–12. At the UN World Summit in 2005, Russia acquiesced in the language of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm (albeit reframed in narrower terms).

In reality, however, Russia's thinking on international security was already moving in a different direction, fuelled by both domestic and international factors. Its rhetorical acceptance of R2P was grudging and highly qualified. As Natasha Kuhrt argues, the roots of this divergence on R2P lay in earlier confrontations

<sup>21</sup> On status-seeking versus security-seeking, see Olivier Schmitt, 'How to challenge an international order: Russian diplomatic practices in multilateral security organisations', *European Journal of International Relations* 26: 3, 2020, pp. 922–46.

<sup>22</sup> Ayşe Zarakol, 'What made the modern world hang together: socialisation or stigmatisation?', *International Theory* 6: 2, 2014, pp. 311–32 at p. 328.

<sup>23</sup> Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in international relations: transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization* 68: 1, 2014, pp. 143–76; Michal Kolmaš, 'International pressure and Japanese withdrawal from the International Whaling Commission: when shaming fails', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 197–216.

<sup>24</sup> Rochelle Terman, 'Rewarding resistance: theorizing defiance to international shaming', manuscript, University of Chicago, 2019, [http://rochelleterman.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Terman\\_Defiance\\_06\\_11\\_2019.pdf](http://rochelleterman.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Terman_Defiance_06_11_2019.pdf), p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Reinhard Wolf, 'Between deference and defiance: hierarchical status roles and international conflict', *International Studies Quarterly*, publ. online 13 July 2021, pp. 1–13, doi: 10.1093/isq/sqab063; Zheng Chen and Hang Yin, 'China and Russia in R2P debates at the UN Security Council', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 787–805.

<sup>26</sup> Allison, *Russia, the West*, p. 174.

with the West over Yugoslavia, but it was intensified by Russia's perception of 'colour' revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia in 2003–2004 as a challenge to its primacy in its neighbourhood and as a deliberate western instrument of destabilization that might also be used against the country itself.<sup>27</sup> Russia's opposition to R2P was thus deeply informed by its own concerns over domestic political order and national sovereignty.<sup>28</sup> The last opportunity for some mutual agreement on R2P norms came in 2011, when Russia abstained on the vote on UNSC Resolution 1973, which mandated a NATO-enforced no-fly zone over Libya. Putin, who was prime minister at the time, strongly opposed the decision by President Medvedev not to veto the resolution, viewing the evocation of humanitarian concerns as simply a fig-leaf for western-backed regime change.<sup>29</sup> The subsequent descent of Libya into civil war only strengthened Russian criticism of NATO's intervention.

The Libyan case contributed to a growing international debate over the efficacy of western military intervention and liberal peacebuilding. The norms and practices of the liberal peace had come to dominate international policy-making. A whole industry of peacebuilders worked in conflict-affected countries, aiming to prevent or halt conflict, engage in post-conflict reconstruction, or address the underlying root causes of conflict through governance reform and building civil society.<sup>30</sup> Yet international interventions and peacebuilding missions often failed to resolve conflicts; at times, indeed, they generated new cleavages and divisions.<sup>31</sup> After liberal peacebuilding initiatives, countries often broke down into renewed armed conflict. Few emerged as sustainable democracies.<sup>32</sup> Governments increasingly turned to military solutions rather than peace processes to end insurgencies.<sup>33</sup> Liberal ideas of peacebuilding also became discredited by association with the military interventions and nation-building policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Contradictions between liberal norms and the illiberal practices of the US-led global 'war on terror' fuelled accusations of hypocrisy. In this contested normative landscape, the growing power and influence of states such as Russia and China provided diplomatic backing for states that challenged the norms and practices of the liberal peace.

<sup>27</sup> Natasha Kuhrt, 'Russia, the responsibility to protect and intervention', in Daniel Fiott and Joachim Koops, eds, *The Responsibility to Protect and the third pillar: legitimacy and operationalization* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 97–114.

<sup>28</sup> Averre and Davies, 'Russia, humanitarian intervention'; Vladimir Baranovsky and Anatoly Mateiko, 'Responsibility to Protect: Russia's approaches', *International Spectator* 51: 2, pp. 49–69.

<sup>29</sup> Averre and Davies, 'Russia, humanitarian intervention', p. 818.

<sup>30</sup> Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland: conflict resolution and the everyday politics of international intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> For discussion of the critique of the liberal peace from different perspectives, see Roland Paris, 'Saving liberal peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies* 36: 2, 2010, pp. 337–65; and Oliver P. Richmond and Roger Mac Ginty, 'Where now for the critique of the liberal peace?', *Cooperation and Conflict* 50: 2, 2015, pp. 171–89.

<sup>32</sup> Roland Paris, *At war's end: building peace after civil conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Monica Duffy Toft, *Securing the peace: the durable settlement of civil wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Christoph Zürcher, Carrie Manning, Kristie D. Evenson, Rachel Hayman, Sarah Riese and Nora Roehner, *Costly democracy: peacebuilding and democratization after war* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Isak Svensson and Mimmi Söderbergh-Kovacs, 'The return of victories? The growing trend of militancy in ending armed conflicts', paper prepared for the 7th General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), Science-Po Bordeaux, Domaine Universitaire, 4–7 Sept. 2013.

## Modes of contestation

Closer to home, Russia's involvements in successive conflicts in Chechnya (1999–2003), Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) all provided fertile ground for norm contestation. Again, this was not a zero-sum process of compliance or rejection. Instead, different modes of contestation can be identified across these conflicts, building on the categorization developed by Bettiza and Lewis.<sup>34</sup> First, Russian officials engaged in 'liberal mimicry', the misuse and misapplication of liberal norms in ways that questioned and destabilized the original concept.<sup>35</sup> In the Georgian case Russian officials deployed the language of R2P, but with a very particular meaning of protecting their own citizens abroad.<sup>36</sup> Russia's script on the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was also 'interlaced with a pastiche of norms ranging from the responsibility to protect Russian citizens abroad [to] the absolute sanctity of the principle of local self-determination'.<sup>37</sup> Some scholars argued that Russia's deliberate misapplication of the R2P norm might strengthen the original concept,<sup>38</sup> but Burai's conclusion is more convincing: misuse delegitimized the original norm, by framing the original discourse as just 'one possible, socially constructed and validated reality-making script which can potentially be exposed and delegitimised'.<sup>39</sup>

A second mode of Russian contestation involved arguments for a regionalization of norms, or what Bettiza and Lewis call 'civilisational essentialism'.<sup>40</sup> 'Civilizationists' argue that norms claiming universality have no automatic validity in Russia's neighbourhood. On the one hand, this is a cultural claim, arguing for a different set of shared norms regarding conflict and peace in societies across the Eurasian space. This claim is disputed, although there is evidence that some post-Soviet societies prioritized norms such as order, stability and authority over individual freedoms and human rights.<sup>41</sup> More controversial was a second set of norms regarding the roles and duties of Russia as a great power in its neighbourhood, which underpinned the country's claims to primacy in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region.<sup>42</sup> These normative claims were inevitably

<sup>34</sup> Gregorio Bettiza and David Lewis, 'Authoritarian powers and norm contestation in the liberal international order: theorizing the power politics of ideas and identity', *Journal of Global Security Studies* 5: 4, 2020, pp. 559–77.

<sup>35</sup> On liberal mimicry, see Bettiza and Lewis, 'Authoritarian powers'; Ozker Kocadal, 'Emerging power liminality in peacebuilding: Turkey's mimicry of the liberal peace', *International Peacekeeping* 26: 4, 2019, pp. 431–57. Burai's use of parody is similar: see Erna Burai, 'Parody as norm contestation: Russian normative justifications in Georgia and Ukraine and their implications for global norms', *Global Society* 30: 1, 2016, pp. 67–77.

<sup>36</sup> Roy Allison, 'The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation', *European Security* 18: 2, 2009, pp. 173–200; Charles E. Ziegler, 'Russia on the rebound: using and misusing the Responsibility to Protect', *International Relations* 30: 3, 2016, pp. 346–361.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander Cooley, 'Ukraine insta-symposium: Russia's rule-breaking as power politics', *Opinio Juris*, 7 March 2014, <http://opiniojuris.org/2014/03/07/russias-rule-breaking-power-politics>.

<sup>38</sup> Badescu and Weiss, 'Misrepresenting R2P'.

<sup>39</sup> Burai, 'Parody as norm contestation'.

<sup>40</sup> Bettiza and Lewis, 'Authoritarian powers'.

<sup>41</sup> John Heathershaw, 'Peacebuilding as practice: discourses from post-conflict Tajikistan', *International Peacekeeping* 14: 2, 2007, pp. 219–36.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of regional-level legal and normative claims, see Roy Allison, 'Russia and the post-2014 international legal order: revisionism and realpolitik', *International Affairs* 93: 3, 2017, pp. 519–43.

controversial among Russia's neighbours, ensuring that the region became 'a theatre for contested norms', in which 'Russia struggled to achieve collective understandings with CIS states over ... basic principles'.<sup>43</sup>

Russia's conflict in Chechnya, however, illustrated a third mode of contestation, which Bettiza and Lewis call 'counter-norm entrepreneurship', in which states no longer simply contest liberal norms but promote alternative normative frameworks.<sup>44</sup> In Chechnya, Russia began to evolve its own model of stabilization and conflict management. The principles underpinning its campaign would influence its subsequent campaigns in Syria and elsewhere. Analysts began to talk of a 'Chechen model', based on ideas of 'illiberal peace', or what Lisa Baglione described as 'authoritarian peacebuilding'.<sup>45</sup> Stanislav Tkachenko calls the 'Chechen model' a 'unique and successful model of coercive diplomacy', which would be replicated with some adjustments in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.<sup>46</sup>

The Chechen campaign was a top-down, state-centric imposition of a political order that rejected liberal norms and pluralistic politics as destabilizing and insecure. It was constructed through a set of norms that valorized sovereignty and hierarchical authority over any claims to justice or human rights. The conflict was no longer internationalized. Russia rejected any of the external involvement in the war that had been evident in the 1990s. Violence became the central ordering dynamic underpinning political order, deployed both by Russian forces and Chechen proxies.<sup>47</sup> Informal negotiations and amnesties were also intertwined with violence. These were nothing like the Khasavyurt talks: rebel commanders and their followers were offered amnesties if they joined pro-government forces, but a refusal often resulted in extrajudicial killings or attacks on and abduction of relatives.<sup>48</sup>

Russia was not only denying the applicability of liberal norms regarding the rules of war and human rights, but also claiming that its stabilization strategy had a positive, moral value. Russia regained 'sovereign' control of the discourse, framing the conflict not as a Chechen rebellion provoked by legitimate grievances, but as a counterterrorist operation, which defined Chechen rebels as both illegitimate and controlled or manipulated by external forces. When European politicians criticized Russia's use of force in Chechnya, Moscow responded with a narrative that claimed an alternative, honourable national identity. Putin argued that 'Russia is really standing at the forefront of the war against international

<sup>43</sup> Allison, *Russia, the West*, p. 121.

<sup>44</sup> Bettiza and Lewis, 'Authoritarian powers'; see also Alexander Cooley, 'Authoritarianism goes global: countering democratic norms', *Journal of Democracy* 26: 3, 2015, pp. 49–63.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Baglione, 'Post-settlement Chechnya: a case of authoritarian peace-building', paper presented to International Studies Association annual convention, 2008; John Russell, 'Ramzan Kadyrov's "illiberal" peace in Chechnya', in Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, eds, *Chechnya at war and beyond* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 133–51.

<sup>46</sup> Stanislav Tkachenko, 'Coercive diplomacy of Vladimir Putin (2014–2016)', in Roger Kanet, ed., *The Russian challenge to the European security environment* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 115–36, at p. 125.

<sup>47</sup> On Chechenization, see Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, 'A perfect counter-insurgency? Making sense of Moscow's policy of Chechenisation', *Europe-Asia Studies* 68: 8, 2016, pp. 1287–314.

<sup>48</sup> Ratelle and Souleimanov, 'A perfect counter-insurgency?', pp. 1297–8.



terrorism. And Europe ought to fall on its knees and express its great thankfulness that we, unfortunately, are fighting it alone.<sup>49</sup>

Bolstered by the success of its Chechen campaign, in the late 2000s Russia became increasingly confident in sponsoring its self-identity as a peacemaker and as a promotor of new norms of conflict management. When Russia sent forces into South Ossetia, Georgia, in 2008, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted ‘the credibility of Russia as an effective guarantor of peace and humanitarian security’ in the conflict.<sup>50</sup> According to Alexander Lukin, Moscow’s response ‘marked a departure from its practices of the 1990s, when it had to abide by the rules of the game that were incompatible with Russia’s vital national interests’.<sup>51</sup> Instead, Russia was now increasingly a rule-maker and a norm-shaper in its approach to issues of peace and conflict, promoting ‘values-based narratives which fundamentally challenge western liberalism’.<sup>52</sup> Although Russia’s normative stance gained little traction in the West, its wider normative challenge to liberal peacebuilding was gaining more international support. Russia backed states such as Sri Lanka, which rejected liberal peacebuilding models and instead turned to alternative modes of ‘illiberal’ or ‘authoritarian’ conflict management that challenged the hegemony of liberal peacebuilding.<sup>53</sup> Russia consistently supported these countries in the UN Security Council, blocking attempts by western powers to censure their actions. In doing so, it began to shape an alternative set of norms that was not only applicable in its immediate neighbourhood, but had resonance for a much wider range of international conflicts.

### ***Pax Rossica: Russia’s model of conflict management***

In the remainder of this article I trace how Russia built on its counter-norm entrepreneurship in conflicts such as that in Chechnya to develop an alternative framework for conflict management and stabilization. The emergence of this model is still in its early stages. It lacks sophisticated theorization or a developed doctrine. Yet there are sufficient common features across a range of cases in which Russia has been involved as a major actor to suggest the outlines of a new model. A long list of recent conflicts where Russia has been involved in some capacity might include eastern Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), CAR, Afghanistan, the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), Yemen, Mozambique and

<sup>49</sup> Cited in Emil Souleimanov and Ondrej Ditrych, ‘The internationalisation of the Russian–Chechen conflict: myths and reality’, *Europe–Asia Studies* 60: 7, 2008, pp. 1199–222 at p. 1199.

<sup>50</sup> Interview given by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to “Apsny”, an Abkhaz political magazine, February 2009, 1 Feb. 2009, [https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ab/-/asset\\_publisher/raC79Y6r2HN9/content/id/307930](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ab/-/asset_publisher/raC79Y6r2HN9/content/id/307930).

<sup>51</sup> Alexander Lukin, ‘Russia to reinforce the Asian vector’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. 2, April–June 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Averre and Davies, ‘Russia, humanitarian intervention’, p. 814.

<sup>53</sup> On the concept of ‘illiberal peace’, see David Lewis, John Heathershaw and Nick Megoran, ‘Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management’, *Cooperation and Conflict* 53: 4, 2018, pp. 486–506; Claire Q. Smith, Lars Waldorf, Rajesh Venugopal and Gerard McCarthy, ‘Illiberal peace-building in Asia: a comparative overview’, *Conflict, Security and Development* 20: 1, 2020, pp. 1–14; Michael Keen, ‘Assessing authoritarian conflict management in the Middle East and Central Asia’, *Conflict, Security and Development* 21: 3, 2021, pp. 245–72.

Mali. In two of these cases (Syria and Nagorno-Karabakh), Russia deployed formal military forces with the consent of the host government. In Georgia and Ukraine, by contrast, its intervention was directed against the central government. In other cases, its role varied from diplomatic mediation (Yemen, Afghanistan, MEPP) to the deployment of unofficial auxiliary forces (CAR, Libya, Mozambique). I first examine two very different case-studies—one outside Russia's traditional sphere of operations (Syria), the other in its neighbourhood (Nagorno-Karabakh)—to assess common features of Russia's engagement in conflict management. I then re-examine other cases in the long list to establish whether they contradict or support the overall thesis.

### *The Syrian laboratory*

The most important case for Russia's counter-norm entrepreneurship in conflict was its campaign in Syria—its first major military intervention outside its own neighbourhood since Soviet times. Russia had supported President Assad diplomatically as peaceful opposition protests developed into armed resistance after 2012, but in September 2015 it intervened in the war with a sustained air campaign against rebel forces that proved crucial to the survival of the regime.<sup>54</sup> Although framed primarily as a counterterrorist campaign, from the beginning President Putin argued that the aim was wider: to 'stabilize the legitimate authorities and to create conditions for the search for a political compromise'.<sup>55</sup> Military briefings explained how 'the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation continue to assist the peace process in the Syrian Arab Republic' and asserted that 'the political will, shown by Russia and its partners ... played a decisive role in ceasing bloodshed and ensuring the transition to a peaceful life in Syria'.<sup>56</sup>

As Pieper argues, the Russian intervention was partly driven by Moscow's desire to emerge as a 'co-shaper' of global norms, promoting regime stability and non-interference against ideas of democratization and regime change.<sup>57</sup> But the extent of Russian norm entrepreneurship was not limited to claims about the ethics of intervention; it extended to its evolving model of conflict management. Russia's approach sought to build a vertical model of peace enforcement, in which the initial counter-insurgency campaign and the subsequent period of peace consolidation used many of the same instruments, incorporating violence, mediation and regional diplomacy into an integrated conflict management strategy.

Russia combined the use of force with asymmetric mediation, developing proxies under its direct influence, such as the Tiger Force or the Liwa al-Quds militia, in which it embedded its own forces and trainers from private military

<sup>54</sup> On Russia's pre-intervention alignment with Damascus, see Roy Allison, 'Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis', *International Affairs* 89: 4, 2013, pp. 795–823.

<sup>55</sup> 'Putin nazval osnovnyuyu zadachu rossiiskikh voennykh v Sirii', *Interfax*, 11 Oct. 2015, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/472593>.

<sup>56</sup> Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 'Russian defence ministry briefs media outlets on situation in Syria', 31 Oct. 2018, [https://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12202184@egNews](https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12202184@egNews).

<sup>57</sup> Pieper, "'Rising power" status', p. 368.

companies.<sup>58</sup> The counter-insurgency was conducted in parallel with talks with rebel forces, conducted through the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring in the Syrian Arab Republic (CRCSS), which Russia set up in February 2016 after ceasefire negotiations with the US.<sup>59</sup> These talks with rebels were very different from the ideas of negotiation among equal parties promoted in western theories of conflict resolution. Negotiations were preceded by tactics of siege and aerial bombardment designed to persuade fighters to agree either to surrender to government forces or to leave the area and move to designated de-escalation zones. Eventually, most fighters ended up in Idlib as other de-escalation zones were overrun by government forces.<sup>60</sup>

This interweaving of violence and negotiations was not a temporary phenomenon; it became the central dynamic of Russia's coercive mediation strategy. Russia—and later Turkey—carefully negotiated the use of violence by their proxies to alter battlefield dynamics and to shape political negotiations among different groups. Samer Abboud points to the apparent paradox in which 'as Guarantor powers, Russia, Iran and Turkey seek to achieve a reduction in violence through its constant use'.<sup>61</sup> Selective violence demarcates zones of influence and de-escalation zones, and deters rebels—and their regional backers—from seeking to expand their allocated spaces on the battlefield. The Astana process allowed the tripartite powers (Turkey, Iran and Russia) to use force to discipline the different parties to the conflict in ways that reduced the level of armed confrontation. But in doing so, it made violence and political exclusion constituent elements of an emerging political settlement.<sup>62</sup>

Russia also used humanitarian aid to stabilize its control over territory. It developed its own aid network inside Syria, managed by the CRCSS. A critical analysis concludes that Russia's distribution of aid aimed primarily 'to buy loyalty and showcase its soft power',<sup>63</sup> but 'buying loyalty' and co-optation were central goals of the country's stabilization campaign. Alongside the CRCSS, at least 25 other Russian entities—mostly religious organizations or state-linked NGOs—were also active, creating 'a shadow aid system' that reinforced Russia's management

<sup>58</sup> See Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi, 'Foreign sponsorship of pro-government militias fighting Syria's insurgency: whither proxy wars?', *Mediterranean Politics*, publ. online 24 Nov. 2020, pp. 1–30, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2020.1839235.

<sup>59</sup> The CRCSS evolved into an important institution in Russia's conflict management efforts. In addition to managing local negotiations, its mandate also included managing refugee return from other countries and internal displacement; humanitarian assistance; infrastructure reconstruction efforts; and mine clearance. It also included departments on information policy and contacts with international organizations and foreign partners. See Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 'Na aviabaze Khmeimim nachal rabotu Koordinatsionnyi tsentr po primireniyu vrazhduyushchikh storon na territorii Sirii', 24 Feb. 2016, [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12079277@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12079277@egNews).

<sup>60</sup> Marika Sosnowski, 'Ceasefires as violent state-building: local truce and reconciliation agreements in the Syrian civil war', *Conflict, Security and Development* 20: 2, 2019, pp. 273–92; Samer Abboud, 'Making peace to sustain war: the Astana process and Syria's illiberal peace', *Peacebuilding* 9: 3, 2021, pp. 326–43 at pp. 339–41.

<sup>61</sup> Abboud, 'Making peace', p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Abboud, 'Making peace'.

<sup>63</sup> Marika Sosnowski and Jonathan Robinson, *Mapping Russia's soft power efforts in Syria through humanitarian aid*, Atlantic Council, 25 June 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mapping-russias-soft-power-efforts-in-syria-through-humanitarian-aid/>.

of the conflict.<sup>64</sup> While promoting its own aid network, Russia strongly resisted cross-border UN aid flows to rebel-held areas, insisting instead on cross-line deliveries from Damascus to reinforce Syrian sovereignty and central government control. In a series of showdowns in the UN Security Council in 2020–21, Russia forced the closure of several cross-border aid routes from Turkey, leaving just the Bab al-Hawa border crossing open to provide aid to millions of civilians.<sup>65</sup>

Alongside its campaign on the ground, Russia pursued intra-Syrian political negotiations and a diplomatic track. The Astana process (launched in the Kazakh capital in January 2017) brought together Turkey, Iran and Russia as guarantor states to preside over a series of meetings with members of the armed opposition and government delegates.<sup>66</sup> A series of UN-backed peace talks in Geneva followed classic liberal peacebuilding models based on inclusive power-sharing, a negotiated ceasefire and humanitarian corridors.<sup>67</sup> The Astana process, however, represented ‘an altogether new approach to peacebuilding’, in which regional diplomacy and national-level peace talks were intertwined.<sup>68</sup>

Russia’s negotiations were based on different principles from the Geneva talks: they excluded certain opposition groups from the talks completely; they used military force to persuade other groups to participate and comply; and they linked intra-Syrian talks to regional diplomacy. Rather than a bottom-up negotiation that included all interested parties, Russia’s negotiating format aimed to limit the agency of insurgents, and instead reduce them to being proxies of regional players—notably Turkey. In doing so, Russia did not simply work with the existing geometry of power, but actively worked to construct an opposition—through the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue—with which the Syrian government might be able to conclude a political settlement.<sup>69</sup> A constitutional committee was established under the auspices of the UN Geneva process in January 2018, but it made little headway, partly because the Syrian government had little interest in compromise with the opposition once it came to believe that a complete military victory was possible.<sup>70</sup> Although the Astana process did not produce a final political settlement, it undercut alternative talks and effectively derailed attempts to unite rebels in a coherent opposition to the Syrian government.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Robinson, *Russian aid in Syria: an underestimated instrument of soft power*, Atlantic Council, 14 Dec. 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russian-aid-in-syria-an-underestimated-instrument-of-soft-power/>.

<sup>65</sup> On the complex dynamics of the Sarmada/Bab al-Hawa border zone, see Armenak Tokmajyan and Kheder Khaddour, *How the small town of Sarmada became Syria’s gateway to the world* (Washington DC: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2 June 2021).

<sup>66</sup> On the Astana process, see Sergey V. Kostelyanets, ‘Russia’s peace initiatives in the MENA region: evaluation and prospects’, *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13: 4, 2019, pp. 534–55; Sinem Cengiz, ‘Assessing the Astana peace process for Syria: actors, approaches, and differences’, *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7: 2, 2020, pp. 200–14; Abboud, ‘Making peace’.

<sup>67</sup> Abboud, ‘Making peace’.

<sup>68</sup> Abboud, ‘Making peace’, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Abboud, ‘Making peace’.

<sup>70</sup> See Lara Seligman and Colum Lynch, ‘As Assad gains ground, new Syria talks offer little hope of peace’, *Foreign Policy*, 12 Nov. 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/12/as-assad-gains-ground-new-syria-talks-offer-little-hope-of-peace>.

Andrey Kortunov points to Russia's regional diplomacy—based on 'interests, not values', as he sees it—as key to its successful intervention in Syria, in contrast to the failure of US intervention in Afghanistan.<sup>71</sup> Russia's diplomacy around Syria reflected what Fyodor Lukyanov calls the 'new multilateralism', a shift away from western-dominated diplomatic coalitions towards flexible constellations of non-western regional powers, often with contradictory interests, in the immediate vicinity of a conflict.<sup>72</sup> The coalition in the Astana process included Iran and Turkey—two powers on opposite sides of the war—and used the capacity of each regional power to control armed forces on the battlefield to achieve and police a ceasefire. After 2016 Russian–Turkish relations became the fulcrum of the conflict, with the two countries negotiating their competing interests in northern Syria through bilateral talks.<sup>73</sup> The Sochi Agreement of September 2018—and subsequent bilateral deals—did not resolve the status of Idlib, but persisting tensions were managed through frequent high-level talks between Putin and Erdogan. The Russian–Turkish accommodation stabilized the conflict and sidelined western powers, who increasingly were forced to deal with Russia as the key interlocutor on Syria.

### *Nagorno-Karabakh*

At first glance, Russia's deployment of a peacekeeping force to Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2020 might seem very different from messy counter-insurgencies in the Middle East. But the peacekeeping deployment relied on many of the same principles of Russia's stabilization model: insertion of military force to prevent a resumption of fighting and to control the peace process; high-level, top-down negotiations with key parties, on Russia's terms; control of the information and humanitarian space; and active regional diplomacy that excluded the West.

Moscow deployed its specialized peacekeeping force, the 15th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (SMRB), as part of a ceasefire agreement it negotiated to halt six weeks of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenian forces in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>74</sup> The peace deal of 9 November set a cap on Russian forces at 1,960 personnel to police the remaining territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor, but the full complement was probably closer to 4,000, including humanitarian workers and reconstruction crews.<sup>75</sup> Russian forces could also be

<sup>71</sup> Andrey Kortunov, *A tale of two interventions: why Russia succeeded in Syria when US failed in Afghanistan*, Russian International Affairs Council, 30 Aug. 2021, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/a-tale-of-two-interventions-why-russia-succeeded-in-syria-when-u-s-failed-in-afghanistan/>.

<sup>72</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Afganistan i novaya mnogostoronnost', *Rossiia v global'noi politike*, 15 Sept. 2021, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/novaya-mnogostoronnost/>.

<sup>73</sup> Seçkin Köstem, 'Russian–Turkish cooperation in Syria: geopolitical alignment with limits', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2020, pp. 1–23.

<sup>74</sup> The SMRB was set up in 2005 as a specialized peacekeeping unit. In a typical example of the blurring of Russian peacekeeping and war-fighting, the SMRB was mobilized along the Ukrainian border in 2014. Some SMRB soldiers were reportedly killed fighting alongside Donbas separatists inside Ukraine. See Ryan S. Tice, *Tools of Russian influence: how Putin uses military–technical cooperation, proxies, and peacekeepers to achieve his objectives*, Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2020, pp. 83–5.

<sup>75</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Post-war prospects for Nagorno-Karabakh*, Europe report no. 264 (Brussels, 9 June 2021), p. 13.

quickly reinforced from the Russian 102nd Military Base in Gyumri, Armenia, if necessary.

The Russian peacekeeping operation followed the main precepts of its emerging approach to conflict management. It asserted a monopoly of control over humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts. Russia replicated aspects of its Syrian model, setting up an Interagency Humanitarian Reaction Centre (IHRC) to manage humanitarian aid, refugee returns and reconstruction.<sup>76</sup> Russian peacekeepers maintained complete control over the only entry-point into the territory and were able to dictate the movements of aid workers and NGOs. Among international organizations, only the Red Cross was active on the ground in mid-2021, with UN agencies embroiled in complex status disputes. Russia also maintained a virtual monopoly on information about its peacekeeping force and reconstruction efforts, reflecting its emphasis on complete control of communications and information in its military deployments. Russian forces regularly refused entry to foreign journalists wishing to visit Nagorno-Karabakh and established their own media operation inside the territory.<sup>77</sup>

As in other conflicts, Russia pursued high-level, state-centric mediation, using the threat of force to exert leverage over the parties. During the war, Russia used military force to signal its red lines to Turkey and Azerbaijan. In October, as the fighting intensified, Russia held military exercises in the Caspian Sea off Azerbaijan, and Russian air strikes twice hit pro-Turkish rebel camps in Syria.<sup>78</sup> After six weeks of fighting, President Putin persuaded Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and President Ilham Aliyev to agree to a ceasefire on 9 November. Russia's dominance of the mediation process marginalized the role of western states. The Minsk Group of the OSCE, headed by three co-chairs (Russia, France and the United States), had worked unsuccessfully to resolve the conflict for 25 years. When Russia intervened, the other Minsk Group co-chairs were hardly consulted during the negotiations and had little choice but to accept the Russian-brokered ceasefire. The co-chairs offered to facilitate bilateral negotiations without preconditions in July 2021,<sup>79</sup> but in reality only Russia had the capacity and political will to remain engaged in managing the conflict.

As Laurence Broers argues, the agreement reflected 'the sweeping aside of the multilateral diplomacy represented by the Minsk Group by multipolar power dynamics'.<sup>80</sup> These multipolar dynamics were critical to the outcome, since Turkey had openly backed Azerbaijan's military offensive. Russia and Turkey

<sup>76</sup> 'Putin signs order to create humanitarian response center for Nagorno-Karabakh', TASS, 13 Nov. 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1223523>.

<sup>77</sup> 'Russian peacekeepers deny foreign reporters access to Nagorno-Karabakh', Reporters without Borders, 9 April 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/news/russian-peacekeepers-deny-foreign-reporters-access-nagorno-karabakh>; ICG, *Post-war prospects*, p. 9.

<sup>78</sup> Galip Dalay, *Turkish–Russian relations in light of recent conflicts: Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Aug. 2021), p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> 'Statement by the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group', 29 July 2021, <https://www.osce.org/minsk-group/493945>.

<sup>80</sup> Laurence Broers, 'The OSCE's Minsk Group: a unipolar artifact in a multipolar world. How did diplomacy become so irrelevant to resolving the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict?', *Eurasianet*, 11 May 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-the-osces-minsk-group-a-unipolar-artifact-in-a-multipolar-world>.

held bilateral talks about the resolution of the conflict, but Turkey was not a signatory to the ceasefire agreement and Russia quickly quashed ideas of a joint peacekeeping force. In late January 2021 Russia and Turkey opened a joint centre to monitor the ceasefire remotely from a base in Azerbaijan, but that was the extent of formal Turkish involvement in the peacekeeping operation.<sup>81</sup> In popular commentary, the two countries were often viewed as being on opposite sides of the conflict, with Turkey providing extensive military and political support to Azerbaijan while Russia backed its ally Armenia. Yet normatively, the two states were aligned: both rejected the liberal peacebuilding model promoted by the OSCE and in its place advocated alternative, 'illiberal' approaches to managing the conflict and diplomatic formats that sidelined the West.<sup>82</sup>

### *An emerging model?*

These two case-studies represent very different forms of Russian intervention but demonstrate common elements to Russia's approach to mediation and conflict management. Many of its features can also be identified in other Russian interventions. In Libya and the CAR, Russia experimented with a new version of military power projection into a conflict zone: the deployment of personnel from a private military company, the Wagner Group.<sup>83</sup> In Libya, at least 2,000 Wagner contractors backed Khalifa Haftar's rebel army, ensuring Russia had a stake in the conflict and leverage in the subsequent peace process.<sup>84</sup> As in Syria, so in Libya Russia attempted to use regional diplomacy to cement a peace deal, although with less success. In the CAR, Russian security contractors associated with Wagner protected the regime of President Touadéra against rebel insurgency, using many aspects of the Chechen counter-insurgency model, including asymmetric negotiations.

Russia's engagement in conflict was not confined to scenarios where it deployed military force. It also used its extensive diplomatic networks and position in multilateral forums to promote its role as a diplomatic mediator. In the Yemeni civil war, Russia maintained links with all parties, juggling its close ties with Iran with its growing cooperation with Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Russia maintained good relations not only with Israel but with Hamas and Hezbollah, although its attempts to mediate in the MEPP have seldom had much impact. In 2019 Russia proposed a Gulf Collective Security arrangement, offering a regional

<sup>81</sup> Paul Goble, 'Joint Russian–Turkish Karabakh monitoring center opens amidst fresh controversy', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 18: 20, 4 Feb. 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/joint-russian-turkish-karabakh-monitoring-center-opens-amidst-fresh-controversy/>. For details of the centre, see ICG, *Post-war prospects*, p. 9.

<sup>82</sup> In October 2021 Russia backed a Turkish proposal to form a 3+3 grouping to include Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey and Russia.

<sup>83</sup> On Wagner, see Kimberly Marten, 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35: 3, 2019, pp. 181–204.

<sup>84</sup> By mid-2020 there were some 2,000 Russian personnel working for Wagner in eastern Libya, with another 2,000 or more Syrian mercenaries. Their equipment included MIG-29A and Sukhoi 24A fighter aircraft and Pantsir-1 air defence systems. See UN, *Panel of Experts Report, Libya, S/2021/229* (New York, 8 March 2021), p. 32.

peace deal to complement its own national-level initiatives.<sup>85</sup> None of these initiatives produced direct results, but they strengthened Russia's self-identity as a mediator in the region and demonstrated its willingness to talk to any party which had influence over a particular conflict, regardless of their ideological position.

In Afghanistan, although it did not deploy military force, Russia addressed the conflict in accordance with the broad principles of its conflict management elsewhere. It bought itself leverage in the conflict by providing covert financial and military support to the Taliban, and by engaging with a network of other power-brokers and armed groups on the ground. It pursued the same two-level negotiating framework as in Syria: it sought a consensus among regional powers in the so-called 'Moscow format' diplomatic platform, and it promoted talks between Afghan politicians and the Taliban. In contrast to western initiatives, which sought representation of women and civil society in negotiating formats, Russia invited only male Afghan power-brokers to meet with the Taliban at talks in Moscow in February and May 2019. For Russia, understanding and shaping power politics, not democratic principles of representation, were the key to successful negotiations.<sup>86</sup> Its engagement did not translate into significant influence on the Taliban after they seized power in August 2021, but it ensured that Russia retained a role as diplomatic mediator in the aftermath.

Although it is difficult to summarize these very diverse cases, four underlying principles are evident in Russia's approach across this range of situations. The first is that the use or threat of force is integral to successful conflict management. Without some leverage on parties in the conflict through military force, it is difficult to force them to stop fighting. Russia's most successful mediation efforts have combined talks with coercion. Second, military force on its own is not sufficient: negotiations should be conducted with multiple actors regardless of ideology, but from a position of strength. Mediators should be interested, powerful actors who can impose solutions, not neutral third parties. Third, the key actors in resolving conflicts are states, not international organizations and civil society. Russia's peacemaking seeks 'multipolar' deals with regional states, not multilateral, internationalized initiatives with multiple stakeholders. Fourth, the West is part of the problem, not the solution; its involvement should be managed and minimized. This is not simply a geopolitical claim, but a normative one: in Russia's view, western pluralist, liberal peacebuilding efforts have proved to be destabilizing and ineffective in halting conflict. Russia instead advances a set of counter-revolutionary norms that directly contradict liberal political values and promotes order as a moral priority over justice, reflecting longstanding traditions in Russian political thought.<sup>87</sup> Table 1 summarizes how these principles have been applied in recent conflicts.

<sup>85</sup> Marianna Belenkaya, *Ot Livii do ubiistva Suleymani. Chto oznachaet dlya Rossii novaya nestabil'nost' na Blizhnem Vostoke* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2020), <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80698>.

<sup>86</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, 'Russia and the search for a negotiated solution in Afghanistan', *Europe-Asia Studies* 73: 5, 2021, pp. 928–52.

<sup>87</sup> Neil S. Macfarlane, 'Russian perspectives on order and justice', in R. Foot, J. Gaddis and A. Hurrell, eds, *Order and justice in international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 184–206 at p. 206.



**Table 1: Russian conflict management since 2015**

<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Use of force</i>	<i>Hierarchical negotiations</i>	<i>'Multipolar' diplomacy</i>	<i>Competition with the West</i>
Syria (2015–)	Russian aerospace forces; special forces; military police; PMCs; local proxies	Asymmetric talks with rebels; Astana process and constitutional council	Astana process with Iran, Turkey; Sochi Accord; talks with Israel, Gulf states, Lebanon	Ad hoc deals with US but aim to remove US military presence from Syria
Libya (2018–)	2,000+ Wagner force, covertly backed by Russian MOD	Moscow ceasefire talks (Jan. 2020)	Russian–Turkish bilateral talks; informal deals with UAE, Egypt	Participation in Berlin Conference I (Jan. 2020) and II (June 2021), but Wagner presence criticized by US, EU
Central African Republic (2019–)	1,000+ Wagner personnel, Russian MOD support	Direct talks with rebels, 2018; participation in UN process, 2019	Limited regional diplomacy	Diplomatic, information conflict with France
Nagorno-Karabakh (2020–)	2,000-strong official Russian peacekeeping force	Russia-brokered ceasefire 9 Nov. 2020 with Armenia, Azerbaijan; ongoing mediator role for Russia	Bilateral agreements with Turkey on monitoring ceasefire; proposed 3+3 regional format	OSCE co-chairs sidelined by Russian mediation role
Afghanistan (2019–)	Reports of financial, military support to Taliban	Intra-Afghan talks (2019–20), including meetings between Taliban and other political forces	'Moscow format' (2017–18, 2021); 'Extended troika' (China, US, Pakistan, 2019–21)	Critical of US/NATO campaign; welcomed US/NATO military withdrawal
Mali (2021)	Reports of Wagner deployment to fight against rebel forces	Limited mediation role	Limited regional diplomacy	Critical of French role in Mali; promotion of anti-French media

*Note:* PMCs = private military companies.

## Peacemaking as a foreign policy idea

As Russia has become more deeply involved in a wider array of conflicts, its officials have begun to articulate the country's alternative mix of counter-norms and peacemaking practices as a significant foreign policy idea. Among the changes to the constitution introduced in 2020, a little-noticed amendment to article 79.1 mandates Russia 'to adopt measures to support and strengthen international peace and security, the peaceful coexistence of states and peoples, and to prevent interference in the internal affairs of states'.<sup>88</sup> The formulation combines Russia's growing self-identity as a security provider with its normative stance on how peace and stability can be achieved.

At the Valdai conference in 2019 President Putin argued that 'the Syrian settlement' could become 'a model for resolving regional crises'. Putin argued that Russia could contribute original, innovative approaches to both new and longstanding chronic conflicts: 'I am convinced that these approaches can be used to resolve other existing problems in the world, including in Asia, such as, for example, the situation on the Korean Peninsula.'<sup>89</sup> In an address to the Moscow Security Conference in 2021, Putin argued that Russia was actively assisting in settling regional conflicts, citing its 'liberation' of Syria from 'international terrorists' and its 'political and diplomatic work within the Astana format'. He added that Russia's 'decisive contribution helped to stop the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', where 'Russian peacekeepers reliably guarantee peace and security in the region'.<sup>90</sup>

Russian commentators suggested that Moscow was increasingly looking to export the 'Syrian model of pacification [*umirotvoreniya*] of political, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional conflicts to any area that needed it'.<sup>91</sup> Russian experts began describing international security as a market, in which Moscow could act as a major provider of security services—from counterterrorism to conflict mediation.<sup>92</sup> Even Russian sales of air defence systems and cyber security might be added to the list.<sup>93</sup>

Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov argued that Russia should position itself as 'an effective and successful peacemaker' and should 'increase the significance of peacemaking [*mirotvorchestvo*] and the management [*uregulirovaniya*] of armed conflicts in foreign policy discourse'.<sup>94</sup> A team of academics argued that Russia should 'promote its image as an effective peacemaker [*mirotvorets*]', building on its existing experience in which 'it is playing a critical role in managing [*ureguli-*

<sup>88</sup> 'Vestricha s rabochei gruppoy po podgotovke predlozhenii o vnesenii popravok v Konstitutsiyu', 26 Feb. 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62862>.

<sup>89</sup> Putin, speech, 'Zasedanie diskussionogo kluba "Valdai"'.  
<sup>90</sup> 'Video address to the participants and guests of the 9th Moscow Conference on International Security', 23 June 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65904>.

<sup>91</sup> Dmitry Lekukh, 'Mirovoi rynek eksporta bezopasnosti i siriiskii "opytnyi obrazets"', RBK, 3 March 2020, <https://ria.ru/20191005/1559456777.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Ivan Loshkarev, 'Eksport bezopasnosti: kak Rossii vernut'sya v Afriku i ne sdelat' oshibok', RBK, <https://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/28/10/2019/5db2af989a79a79e5bc37eeb>.

<sup>93</sup> Putin, speech, 'Zasedanie diskussionogo kluba "Valdai"'.  
<sup>94</sup> Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, 'Russia in the post-coronavirus world: new ideas for foreign policy',

*Russia in Global Affairs*, 17 May 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/post-coronavirus-world/>.

rovaniya] numerous conflicts'.<sup>95</sup> This Russian alternative paradigm is presented as part of a wider geopolitical and ideological competition with the West. Kostelyanets points to Russia's 'promotion of models of international conflict mediation ... as alternatives to the ones proposed by Western countries'. The driver, he argues, is 'full participation in the new geopolitical competition', in which Russia 'explores the avenues for developing sustainable yet affordable mechanisms for protecting and advancing its interests in the world'.<sup>96</sup>

An even broader line of thought in the country's conservative thinking frames Russia as a peacemaker in terms of its role in world order as a strategic opponent—or balancer—of the West. Engström argues that the foreign policy doctrine of 2013 describes a Russia that sees itself 'as a unique restraining factor in the world of increasing chaos'.<sup>97</sup> The doctrine highlights 'the unique role our country has been playing over centuries as a counterbalance in international affairs and the development of global civilization'. Russia is 'fully aware of its special responsibility for maintaining security in the world both on the global and regional levels'.<sup>98</sup> In this way of thinking, Russia is returning to a traditional historical self-perception as the restraining or balancing power, represented in Orthodox theology by the figure of the *katehon*, the biblical figure which holds back the Antichrist.<sup>99</sup> This echoes the thinking of Russian conservatives, who talk of a 'shield ideology', in which the country acts as the defence against evil, destabilizing forces—usually emanating from the West. Conservative commentator Yegor Kholmogorov calls this a 'Pax Rossica' in which Russia plays 'the role in the global system of a force constraining the establishment of a world order that is equivalent to world lawlessness'.<sup>100</sup> By contrast, US foreign policy is widely characterized by Russian commentators as a strategy of 'managed chaos' (*upravlyaemyi khaos*), marked by 'colour revolutions', military interventions and covert support for anti-government rebellions.<sup>101</sup> Consequently, Russia, in holding back these experiments in liberalism and democracy, is also promoting peace.

## Conclusion: a revisionist peace?

Western efforts to socialize Russia into a wider set of liberal peacebuilding norms have failed. Instead of following a virtuous spiral towards norm compliance, Russia has pursued a spiral of norm contestation, which has led to the development of counter-norms and an alternative paradigm of conflict management. This is far from being a fully fledged blueprint for a new global peacebuilding order:

<sup>95</sup> *Zashchita mira*, pp. 61–2.

<sup>96</sup> Sergey V. Kostelyanets, 'Russia's peace initiatives in the MENA region: evaluation and prospects', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13: 4, 2019, pp. 534–55 at p. 536.

<sup>97</sup> Maria Engström, 'Contemporary Russian messianism and new Russian foreign policy', *Contemporary Security Policy* 35: 3, 2014, pp. 356–7 at p. 362.

<sup>98</sup> Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Doctrine* (Moscow, 2013).

<sup>99</sup> David G. Lewis, *Russia's new authoritarianism: Putin and the politics of order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 200–213.

<sup>100</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *Russia's new authoritarianism*, p. 201.

<sup>101</sup> A. V. Manoilo, 'Rol' strategii upravlyaemogo khaosa v formirovanii novogo miroportyadka', *Pravo i politika*, no. 5, 2014, pp. 638–51.

Russia's policies are always context-specific and responsive to competing sets of institutional, security and political logics. But Moscow's prioritization of order over justice, of the state over civil society, and of authority over representation reflects a normative position that is clearly distinct from the responses to conflict promoted by liberal democracies since the 1990s.

Russia's norm contestation was driven by both a logic of status and a logic of security. Active norm diffusion by western actors came to be viewed as a profound challenge to Russia's desired status as a great power, capable of shaping norms and rules, not only in its neighbourhood but in the global order. At the same time, western attitudes to the war in Chechnya, interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and the track record of liberal peacebuilding elsewhere suggested that western approaches to peace and conflict posed a security threat to Russian national interests. Russia's promotion of an alternative set of norms sought to address both these dynamics. It reasserted Russia as a rule-shaper and norm-maker in international affairs; and it offered a legitimating discourse for measures taken by the country to defend its perceived security interests.

Although Russian conflict management poses a challenge to existing international norms and practice, the extent of this challenge is not yet clear. On the one hand, Russia remains committed to the central role of the UN Security Council in peacekeeping and conflict management, and continues to support UN peacekeeping operations—despite some misgivings over mandates. This might suggest support for Richard Sakwa's concept of neo-revisionism, in which Russia rejects US hegemony in the international system, while affirming its support for many international institutions, including the UN system.<sup>102</sup> Yet Russia's emerging model of stabilization does not reaffirm, for example, traditional UN norms of impartial peacekeeping or neutral mediation. Moreover, Russia's support for UN involvement in conflicts is often selective and instrumental, usually preceded by attempts to achieve informal regional deals—as in Libya or Afghanistan. Arguably, Russia's behaviour is better understood in terms of the 'reactionary' revisionism described by Andrej Krickovic, seeking a return to 'the rules, norms, and institutions of great power politics'.<sup>103</sup>

In this sense, Russia's model of conflict management reflects the norms and practices we would expect from a great power pursuing a 'realist peace'—a top-down, hegemonic approach to conflict that privileges statist order and regional hegemony but is pragmatic about tactics and partners.<sup>104</sup> In an international system that accepted such roles and identities for great powers, Russia's approach could result in an agreement on new rules of the game. However, Russia's current thinking about peace and conflict has emerged through a process of contestation of liberal norms and in competition with the West. Hence, Russia's approach to

<sup>102</sup> Richard Sakwa, 'Russian neo-revisionism', *Russian Politics* 4: 1, 2019, pp. 1–21.

<sup>103</sup> Andrej Krickovic, 'Revisionism revisited: developing a typology for classifying Russia and other revisionist powers', *International Politics*, publ. online 27 June 2021, pp. 1–24, DOI: 10.1057/s41311-021-00322-3.

<sup>104</sup> On the idea of 'realist peace', see Norrin M. Ripsman, 'Realism, rationalism, and peace', in Henry F. Carey, ed., *Peacebuilding paradigms: the impact of theoretical diversity on implementing sustainable peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

### *Contesting liberal peace*

conflict management is not only a realist project, but also has an ideological strand that articulates a normatively anti-liberal and anti-western discourse. This duality suggests different possibilities for further evolution of Russian norm contestation. It is possible to imagine a Russian realist model of conflict management gaining wider acceptance within an evolving international system. But Russia's contestation spiral also suggests potential movement towards a more radical normative stance, informed primarily by hostility towards the West and a growing ideological challenge to liberalism. Such a trend would deepen the normative divide between the West and Russia, and ensure that finding common ground on fundamental questions of peace and conflict remains elusive.