



## Chapter 13

# Russian Diplomacy and Conflict Management

*By David G. Lewis*

### ***Introduction***

One of Russia's most significant instruments in its strategic toolbox has been its capacity to use diplomacy to pursue its geopolitical opportunities in regional conflicts. From Nagorno-Karabakh to Libya, from Syria to Afghanistan, Russia's diplomats are at the top table at peace negotiations. Russia is increasingly the key pivot power in any conflict resolution process in the Middle East. Russia's approach to conflict management is a form of coercive diplomacy: a strategic mixing of hard power and diplomatic know-how. It has often been highly effective in managing conflicts in ways that respect and promote Russia's national interests.

Russia's emerging role as a diplomatic broker and mediator in international conflicts supports several of Russia's strategic goals. First, it addresses Russia's search for international status, providing ways for Russian diplomats to be in the room when major international security issues are discussed. Second, it corresponds to Russia's self-conception of how a Great Power (and UN Security Council member) should act; in Moscow's realist worldview, Great Powers have additional rights, but also take on additional responsibilities for peace and security, particularly in their sphere of influence.

Of more immediate significance is the way in which Russia's conflict diplomacy is designed to directly benefit Russia's foreign policy goals. It has so far proved an effective and low-cost mechanism to consolidate or extend Russian geopolitical influence as in Syria or in Eastern Libya, where it acts as a multiplier for the deployment of military force and helps to legitimize a Russian military presence. Furthermore, it provides Russia with leverage in its relations with other regional powers; for example, Russia's diplomatic and military engagement in regional conflicts offers a mechanism for Russia to maintain an edge in bilateral relations with Turkey.

Finally, acting as a mediator and peacemaker in conflicts offers a relatively low-risk way to compete with the West; Russia's actions have reduced Western influence in Syria, the Southern Caucasus, Libya, and central Africa. At the same time, because Russia has positioned itself as an indispensable actor in many of these conflicts, the U.S. and its European allies are forced to maintain effective channels of communication with Russia to help manage regional conflicts.

### ***Russia and Post-Soviet Peacekeeping***

Russia's current approach to peacebuilding and armed conflict reflects a long evolution of Russian thinking on peace and conflict in the post-Cold War world. By 1993, Russia had some 36,000 troops deployed on peacekeeping duties in post-Soviet conflicts in Tajikistan,

Transnistria, and Abkhazia.<sup>1</sup> But Russian peacekeeping had no clear doctrine and policies often evolved as the result of *ad hoc* attempts by local commanders to respond to events on the ground. Russia's peacekeeping deployments certainly aimed to stem the violence in these post-Soviet wars, but they also reflected Russian geopolitical goals rather than playing a classical impartial peacekeeping role.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s, Russia's actions seldom generated serious tensions with the West: the EU and the U.S. were happy to delegate the management of messy post-Soviet conflicts to the Russians, even if it was often clear that Russia was acting both as participant and peacemaker in a string of conflict zones. However, tensions with the West began to appear more frequently during Moscow's botched counterinsurgency in Chechnya in 1994-96. The conflict in Serbia over Kosovo caused a more significant rupture with NATO in 1999.

During the 2000s, Russia's approach to conflict management began to diverge more significantly from dominant Western approaches. First, Russia rejected the vision of humanitarian intervention inspired by the Balkan wars—the Blair doctrine—that legitimized the use of force without UN approval in cases of mass human rights abuses. After the high point of liberal international order marked by the UN World Summit in 2005, Russia began to contest ideas such as the responsibility to protect (R2P) norm much more strongly.<sup>3</sup> In January 2007, in an historic vote that symbolized the end of the post-Cold War illusion of a consensual liberal order, Russia and China vetoed a UN resolution condemning human rights abuses in Zimbabwe, marking the first use of multiple vetoes since 1989 and the first time that Russia and China had united to veto a resolution since 1972. Russia was no longer prepared to accept that internal affairs were a legitimate subject to discuss under the rubric of international peace and security. Russia's view of peace enforcement emphasized the importance of the sovereign state, not as an abstract norm, but as a form of political resistance to what Russia viewed as an unacceptable expansion of U.S. influence and power.

Second, Russia increasingly came to reject “liberal” approaches to conflict resolution that viewed pluralism as an essential component of a sustainable peace. Typically, international conflict resolution efforts sought to end conflicts by finding a solution acceptable to all warring parties through peace talks. Peace processes in the 1990s in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, and South Africa all followed such a model, which assumed that peace could emerge from carefully mediated talks among different political factions, in which armed actors would compromise to achieve peace. This approach, sometimes known as “liberal peacebuilding,” relied on peace talks often overseen by small western states such as Norway, who were assumed to be neutral actors.

Such initiatives were often accompanied by an influx of international organizations and civil society into conflict zones aiming to address both the immediate consequences of conflict and the underlying root causes. Nevertheless, liberal peacebuilding had a mixed record, often failing to resolve conflicts and arguably exacerbating others. As part of a wider backlash against liberalism, an alternative model of “illiberal” or “authoritarian” conflict management has made a comeback. Military force is central to imposing order in this model, but it cannot be deployed

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<sup>1</sup> Bettina Renz, “Russian responses to the changing character of war,” *International Affairs* 95: 4 (2019): 817–834 [p. 820]; <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz100>.

<sup>2</sup> Dov Lynch, “Peacekeeping and Coercive Diplomacy: Russian Suasion,” *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 19-36.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Averre and Lance Davies, “Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria,” *International Affairs* 91.4 (2015): 813-834.

alone. Achieving an end to the conflict also requires coercive forms of diplomatic negotiation to co-opt parties, to divide the opposition, and to provide some legitimacy to counterinsurgency operations.<sup>4</sup>

This pushback against liberal ideas about peace and conflict at the international level largely reflected Russia's own experience of war in Chechnya. The first Chechen war in 1994-96 had been a disastrous failure for Moscow. It was a brutal counterinsurgency that forever tainted the Yeltsin presidency with its mass violations of human rights by Russian troops. From Moscow's point of view, it was also an abject failure, ending with a humiliating capitulation to Chechen rebels at the Khasavyurt Accords in 1996. The rise of Vladimir Putin was accompanied by calls for no more "Khasavyurts," and the Second Chechen War was run with a different set of rules. Gone were the critical Western journalists and shocking television pictures; the OSCE and Western "mediators" were no longer welcome. This was a war fought inside sovereign boundaries where Russia brooked no external criticism.<sup>5</sup>

The Chechen war had significant influence on Russian thinking about peace and conflict. From now on, Russia would follow a new set of rules: striving for control over the information environment; using local proxies rather than Russian forces; excluding international actors and mediators; and channeling funds to loyal allies as a means of political and social control. These lessons of the Chechen conflict inevitably influenced Russian thinking about how to manage armed conflicts as the scope of Russian interests widened into the Middle East, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa. As Russia became involved in a wider range of conflicts, it refined its normative framework for peace and conflict and adjusted its diplomatic and military toolbox to match. While it was primarily Russia's deployment of its military forces (or Russian-tasked auxiliary forces) in conflicts such as Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, and Libya that attracted the most attention, less attention was paid to Russia's emerging doctrine of peace enforcement, which mixed diplomatic, political, informational, and military tools into an increasingly effective package.

### ***Russian Peacemaking as a Global Idea***

By the late 2010s, Russian officials were no longer just criticizing the shortcomings of Western military interventions, although the difficulties faced by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq certainly galvanized Russian diplomacy. Russia also began to promote Russian mediation and conflict management as a positive alternative to Western interventions. An influential Russian think tank report argued that Russia needed to develop new ideas for its foreign policy, the first of which should be for Russia to promote its role as "an effective and successful peacemaker." The authors argued, "Russia should give more importance to peacemaking and the settlement of military conflicts in its foreign policy rhetoric."<sup>6</sup> This role as a peacemaker was formalized in the constitutional amendments adopted in 2020. Among the changes that allowed Vladimir Putin to extend his term as president almost indefinitely, a little-noticed amendment to Article 79 mandates Russia to "support and strengthen international peace and security," while "not permitting interference in the internal affairs of states."

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<sup>4</sup> David Lewis, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran, "Illiberal Peace? Authoritarian Modes of Conflict Management," *Cooperation and Conflict* 53.4 (2018): 486–506, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718765902>.

<sup>5</sup> John Russell, "Ramzan Kadyrov's illiberal peace in Chechnya," in Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey, and Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *Chechnya at war and beyond* (London: Routledge, 2014): 133-151.

<sup>6</sup> Sergei A. Karaganov and Dmitry V. Suslov, "Russia in the Post-Coronavirus World: New Ideas for Foreign Policy," *Russia in Global Affairs*, May 17, 2020, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/post-coronavirus-world/>.

Alongside this discursive shift, since 2015 Russia has actively intervened militarily and diplomatically in a series of conflicts outside the post-Soviet space. In Syria, Russia not only provided air support for Syria's brutal counterinsurgency campaign, but also negotiated truces with local rebels and initiated a national process that attempted to persuade rebels to agree to a political settlement.<sup>7</sup> In pursuit of a political agreement, Russia initiated the Astana process in 2017, a series of meetings of Russia, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>8</sup>

In Libya, Russia used the private military company Wagner to provide military backing for General Khalifa Haftar in 2019-20, and leveraged its position on the ground to emerge as a key player in peace talks. In Afghanistan, officials promoted peace talks in the so-called Moscow Format, which combined regional powers in talks among Afghan powerbrokers, after it had begun engaging more closely with the Taliban and other armed factions. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Russian officials and security contractors negotiated truces with rebel warlords in 2018 and attempted to negotiate a peace agreement at the national level, often working in competition with an alternative United Nations (UN) initiative. Finally, in November 2020, a Russian peacekeeping force was deployed as part of a deal negotiated by Moscow to stop the fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Even where Russia has no military forces, it has also offered its services as a diplomatic mediator. In the Middle East, alongside Libya and Syria, Russia has also offered its services to mediate in the civil war in Yemen<sup>9</sup> and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 2019, Russia advanced a Gulf Collective Security proposal, offering a regional peace proposal to complement Russia's national level initiatives.<sup>10</sup> None of these initiatives have produced any significant results, but they demonstrate Russia's willingness to play a wider political and diplomatic role in the region. Russia has also been active in South Asia offering to mediate to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan in 2019.<sup>11</sup> Russia inserted itself into the diplomacy of the Afghan conflict, hosting a Troika-Plus mechanism (United States, Russia, China + Pakistan) as a diplomatic platform to discuss the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

Although each of these situations differed—and Russia's initiatives did not always gain traction—some contours of a new Russian peacemaking model began to emerge. Russia lacked the economic and military power to replace the U.S. as a regional power or to challenge the rising influence of China, but it began to carve out an influential role as a security broker, a pivot power around which regional powers began to coalesce. Russia deployed hard force where necessary, but in selective and cautious ways, and always augmented it with active, multi-

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<sup>7</sup> Marika Sosnowski, "Ceasefires as Violent State-Building: Local Truce and Reconciliation Agreements in the Syrian Civil War," *Conflict, Security and Development* 20, no. 2, (2019): 1–20, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14678802.2019.1679561>.

<sup>8</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): 534-555; Samer Abboud, "Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria's illiberal peace," *Peacebuilding* (2021): 1-18, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21647259.2021.1895609>.

<sup>9</sup> S. Ramani, "Can Russia play a role in ending the Yemeni civil war?" *Middle East Institute*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-russia-play-role-ending-yemeni-civil-war>.

<sup>10</sup> Marianna Belenkaya, "Ot Livii do ubiystva Suleymani. Chto oznachayet dlya Rossii novaya nestabil'nost' na Blizhnem Vostoke," Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80698>.

<sup>11</sup> "Russia offers to help mediate between India and Pakistan," *Reuters*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-russia/russia-offers-to-help-mediate-between-india-and-pakistan-idUSKCN1QH1EI>.

<sup>12</sup> David G. Lewis, "Return to Kabul? Russian Policy in Afghanistan," *Security Insights*, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, June 2020, Number 060, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/return-kabul-russian-policy-afghanistan-0>.

channel diplomacy, business deals, niche economic offers, security assistance and arms sales, and personalized networks of relationships that enabled quick responses and flexible decision-making. Much of Russia's approach was trial and error; often things did not work out as planned, but the costs were low and risks manageable. It was certainly not a fully-fledged philosophy of post-liberal peacebuilding. Nevertheless, some key principles emerged that characterize a specifically Russian model of conflict management, or—as I have termed it elsewhere—of coercive mediation.

### ***Ten Principles of Russian Conflict Management***

Russia's approach to conflict management can best be described as a form of coercive diplomacy: a combination of peace talks with power politics. It is important to recognize that this is not a coherent blueprint or model. Unlike many Western liberal approaches, it is highly context-specific; policies are based on a study of the correlation of forces in a conflict and on the local and regional power dynamics in each case. But there are some consistent elements that underpin Russia's approach. Here I outline a set of underlying principles that can be identified as characteristic of the Russian approach to conflict management.

#### ***1. The goal is to stop the fighting, not to transform societies.***

Russia is not concerned about achieving social transformation or democratization, but instead about introducing a minimum of political order, in line with Russia's geopolitical interests. Indeed, an important underlying philosophical position is Russia's rejection of universal values in favor of particularistic cultures and civilizational divides. In Afghanistan, for example, Western policy-makers often reference the importance of women's rights and the "democratic gains" of the past two decades as important elements of any political settlement. Russia's hyper-realist approach largely leaves such normative elements on one side, instead assuming Afghanistan is a highly conservative society that is not ready for Western liberal values. This indifference to a "values agenda" means Russia is happy to support a wide range of partners with different ideologies, from the Taliban to General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan rebels, just as long as they are capable of imposing order and protecting Russia's interests.

#### ***2. The only guarantee of stability is a strong state.***

Liberal approaches to conflict resolution often view the state as part of the problem and encourage civil society and non-state actors to play a leading role. Russia took a different path, arguing that a strong state is a precondition for peace. Democratization and elections, on the other hand, are often destabilizing; much better is an authoritarian strongman who can keep order than a pluralist polity that allows terrorist and militant groups to flourish.

This tenet reflects Russia's own approach to domestic political order, where the central need for a strong state has been a *leitmotif* of Putinist thinking since the late 1990s. Even in 1999 Putin was proclaiming, "Russia needs strong state power [*vlast*'] and must have it," and talked of the strong state as "the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and driving force of any change."<sup>13</sup> In the international context, the same principle applies, not only as an ideological stance that mirrors Russia's domestic priorities, but as a reaction against what Russian officials

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<sup>13</sup> David G. Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 7-8.

often see as the destabilizing effect of Western support for anti-government movements and rebellions. In the context of the Middle East, for example, Sergei Karaganov, an influential Russian academic, argues “any weakening of statehood, especially in such a vulnerable region, is a proven evil.”<sup>14</sup>

Hence, the first step to stability is through strengthening a friendly state government; Russia’s backing for Assad, Maduro, Lukashenka, and the Myanmar junta all fit this pattern. But there are important exceptions in practice. Russia has backed a rebel group in Libya that seeks to overthrow the UN-recognized government, while in Afghanistan Russian officials often appear to have better relations with the Taliban than with the elected president, Ashraf Ghani. Russian officials have dismissed the Ukrainian government as a neo-Nazi junta and provided military support to separatist groups. This apparently contradictory position is justified by Russia’s dismissal of Western-backed governments as little more than “puppet” administrations, which it views as an obstacle to the establishment of a stronger, more effective sovereign state.

### **3. *Powerful, engaged states are better mediators than weak, neutral states.***

Classic conflict resolution approaches often recommend a neutral arbiter or mediator to oversee peace talks. Typically, this has been a small state, such as Norway, a UN special envoy, or a non-governmental body such as the Crisis Management Initiative, a Finnish international non-profit organization. Russia tends to avoid these approaches, arguing that resolving conflicts is not best done through “horizontal” peace talks mediated by a neutral party (e.g. Norway), but by strong actors imposing their will on warring parties to achieve a cessation of violence (e.g. Russia or Turkey). In the case of Afghanistan, Russia opposed a widening of the peace process to include numerous states from outside the region. Instead it promoted a narrow Troika-Plus format of major powers (the United States, Russia, China plus Pakistan), which even excluded its traditional ally India. In Libya, Russia tried to achieve bilateral deals with Turkey while aligning with the UAE and Egypt. In Syria, Russia initiated the Astana process, under which Russia, Turkey, and Iran met regularly as guarantors of a political process. In each case, the entrance ticket to the diplomatic club is the power to influence armed groups on the ground.

### **4. *Peace talks are for powerbrokers.***

This focus on power politics as central to the international diplomacy of peacemaking is mirrored in Russia’s approach to peace talks. Liberal peacebuilding approaches have often tried an inclusive, participatory approach, bringing different social groups into the negotiating room. Western approaches to talks in Afghanistan, for example, have tried to include representatives of civil society and media and have also tried to improve the representation of women. In a series of Russian-sponsored intra-Afghan talks in 2019, dubbed the Moscow Format talks, Russia invited an exclusive group of powerbrokers and warlords along with the Taliban to discuss a political settlement.<sup>15</sup> Russia’s approach views peace talks through a realpolitik lens; those with guns and political power have the ability to start and stop the violence, so it makes sense to limit the process to powerful armed factions and political leaders. This can be effective for short-term deal making, but an exclusively political settlement risks being unsustainable if it involves new patterns of repression that spark new rounds of violence.

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<sup>14</sup> Sergei Karaganov, “Год побед. Что дальше?” [A Year of Victories. What's Next?], *Россия в глобальной политике*, January 16, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> See Ekaterina Stepanova, “Russia and the Search for a Negotiated Solution in Afghanistan,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, (2020): 1-25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09668136.2020.1826908>.

### **5. *Military activities and peace talks are closely inter-related.***

The line between war and peace is completely blurred; peace talks are a continuation of war by other means. Russian thinking stresses that there can be no outright military victory without accompanying negotiations, diplomacy, and information campaigns. Russia's understanding of the importance of politics and diplomacy in war fighting is an integral part of Russian military doctrine, which argues for a central role for non-kinetic elements in any campaign. Article 36 of Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy promises, "interrelated political, military, military-technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and other measures are being developed and implemented in order to ensure strategic deterrence and the prevention of armed conflicts."<sup>16</sup> An editorial in the Russian military journal, *Voennaya Mysl'* [Military Thought], points to a growing belief that "to fight on the battlefield is the work of those who fail at politics and strategy." Much better to achieve strategic goals through such non-military means as smart diplomacy, covert actions, political machinations, and information warfare.<sup>17</sup> As with coercive diplomacy more generally, it is the ability to align developments in the negotiation room with activities on the battlefield that produces results; Russia has been particularly effective at linking its use of hard power with diplomatic initiatives.

### **6. *Effective peace-making requires information control.***

The first Chechen war taught Moscow that information campaigns and media activity are an essential part of conflict management. Consequently, in conflict diplomacy the Russian military and Russian diplomats view themselves as also fighting in an information war. Russia used extensive propaganda during the Ukraine conflict in 2014, including social media campaigns run from troll factories such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA). This also became a pattern during the Syrian conflict, where Russian disinformation campaigns aimed to mute international criticism of the Syrian counterinsurgency, including the use of chemical weapons. In the Central African Republic (CAR), where Russia has also mixed military assistance and peace talks with rebels, Russian contractors set up media operations, both old-fashioned radio programming and new social media campaigns, to support the Russian presence in the country. In Nagorno-Karabakh, one of the first initiatives of the Russian peacekeeping operation was to set up a media unit. Since the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to the contested zone in November 2020, Russia has been able to monopolize information coming out of the peacekeeping zone.

### **7. *The end justifies the means.***

Unscrupulous methods are acceptable to achieve stability. Russia is willing to use a wide palette of methods to produce a form of political stability that respects Russia's interests, including promises of business deals, coercion, and the use of violence, manipulation of humanitarian or development aid, or other violations of international humanitarian law. This principle is most evident in Russia's backing of any means to suppress popular uprisings or insurgencies, including turning a blind eye to mass human rights abuses or even, in the case of Syria, the use of chemical weapons. The willingness to overlook injustice and human rights violations in the

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<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, December 31, 2015, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> "Strategiya i kontrstrategiya gibridnoi voiny" [Strategy and Counterstrategy of Hybrid War], *Voennaya Mysl'* [Military Thought], October 10, 2018, <http://vm.milportal.ru/strategiya-i-kontrstrategiya-gibridnoj-voiny/>.

name of stabilization can also be traced to Russia's experience in Chechnya but it is also reflected in Russia's wider unwillingness to criticize other states' conduct in suppressing rebellions or civil unrest. Such an approach may produce short-term stabilization, but it undermines any possibility of a just peace emerging. At best, Russian intervention produces an illiberal or authoritarian "peace," i.e., a cessation of armed violence, but too often at the cost of human security and social justice.

### **8. Humanitarian and development aid is a political tool.**

Russia has used humanitarian and development aid as a strategic tool to enhance its conflict management mechanisms. This has been most extensively trialed during Russia's intervention in Syria, where it has attempted to reduce cross-border UN aid flows to rebel-held areas while reinforcing its own and the Syrian government control of humanitarian assistance. In a series of showdowns at the UN Security Council in 2020, 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. Russia has been developing its own aid network inside Syria, managed by the Russian military's Centre for Reconciliation of Conflicting Sides in Syria (CRCSS), but recent analysis suggests that Russia's distribution of aid has aimed primarily "to buy loyalty and showcase its soft power."<sup>18</sup> Alongside the CRCSS, at least twenty-five other Russian entities, mostly religious organizations or state-linked NGOs, are also active, creating "a shadow aid system" that is part of Russia's wider mechanism of conflict management.<sup>19</sup> In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has replicated aspects of this model, setting up an Interagency Humanitarian Reaction Centre to manage humanitarian aid, refugees' returns, and reconstruction tasks.<sup>20</sup>

### **9. All conflicts have a regional dimension.**

In Russian diplomacy, a starting point for any conflict resolution process is a regional consensus on a way forward. Regional powers are often involved in internal conflicts through proxies, therefore effective conflict management needs a multi-level approach, in which consensus among regional powers precedes a political agreement on the ground. For more sustainable political breakthroughs, Russia also seeks legitimation through the UN. This stance is an important corrective to many western approaches to conflict, which have tended to ignore complex regional and international politics and instead have focused primarily on internal dynamics. But the Russian emphasis on regional geopolitics often risks oversimplifying the internal dynamics of conflicts: at times Russia's attempts to achieve deals with other regional powers, notably Turkey, in the Libyan conflict foundered because they did not take sufficient account of the complex internal dynamics of the conflict. Assuming that proxies can be easily managed by regional powers risks overlooking the real political struggle on the ground that does not always map easily onto regional geopolitics.

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<sup>18</sup> Marika Sosnowski and Jonathan Robinson, "Mapping Russia's soft power efforts in Syria through humanitarian aid," Atlantic Council, June 25, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mapping-russias-soft-power-efforts-in-syria-through-humanitarian-aid/>.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Robinson, "Russian aid in Syria: An underestimated instrument of soft power," Atlantic Council, December 14, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/russian-aid-in-syria-an-underestimated-instrument-of-soft-power/>.

<sup>20</sup> "Putin signs order to create humanitarian response center for Nagorno-Karabakh," TASS, Moscow, November 13, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1223523>.



### **10. *The West is part of the problem, not part of the solution.***

Moscow argues that the intervention of Western powers is one of the primary causes of conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is not only that interventions by the U.S. in Iraq or Afghanistan are viewed as failures, but that conflicts are the direct result—and even the deliberate aim—of U.S. foreign policy. In his famous Munich speech in 2007, Putin criticized “an almost uncontained hyper use of force . . . in international relations,” which was “plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts.” This American-led unipolar order was creating a disorderly world, one in which “nobody feels safe.”<sup>21</sup> United States foreign policy is widely characterized by Russian commentators as a strategy of “managed chaos” (*upravlyaemyi kaos*), marked by “color revolutions,” military interventions, and covert support for anti-government rebellions.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, for Russia, regional powers, not western states, are the most effective powers to resolving conflicts. However, since the U.S. is also present in many conflicts, most cases also provide Russia with an opportunity to challenge and potentially supplant the U.S. and its allies.

### ***Conclusion: Challenges and New Problems***

Russia has ambitions to be a major security actor globally. Alongside its ability to project military power outside its immediate region, Russia also has extensive experience and capacity in conflict-related diplomacy. Russia has good intelligence and analysis capabilities and an effective diplomatic service that enables it to take on complex negotiations. The Russian model is effective at linking military, diplomatic, and economic instruments into a relatively successful policy mix.

Some aspects of Russia's approach may be a useful challenge to gaps in contemporary international peacebuilding. At times, however, a focus on Great Power rivalries oversimplifies conflicts and overlooks complex local dynamics that can derail international initiatives. In addition, a highly exclusionary political process that ignores the interests of minorities and other social groups risks creating new conflict fault lines. But the biggest problem in Russian approaches to conflict is the outcome: an illiberal peace or an authoritarian strongman may be better than all-out civil war, but a failure to address issues of injustice and human rights risks creating fertile ground for further conflicts and instability in the future.

Russia's diplomacy around conflicts and its mediation initiatives pose a challenge to Western countries, many of which have become complacent about the importance of active diplomacy in support of conflict resolution. Russia's model of top-down illiberal peace poses an ideological challenge to ideas of liberal conflict resolution and peacebuilding that the UN and Western states need to address. Russia's initiatives gain traction in places where existing international approaches have been tried and failed. Russian initiatives should galvanize other parties to become more active in finding new approaches to peace negotiations and to act more effectively to end civil wars and deadly conflict.

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<sup>21</sup> V. Putin, “Vystuplenie i diskussiya na Myunkhenskoj konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti,” Munich, February 10, 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>22</sup> V. Manoilo, “Роль стратегии управляемого хаоса в формировании нового миропорядка” [The role of the strategy of managed chaos in the formation of a new world order], *Право и политика*, 5, (2014): 638-51.

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