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Conference Report

UK–Russia Security Relations
Talking To Understand

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Introduction

THIS REPORT SUMMARISES the findings from the latest round of the UK–Russia Track 1.5 (participants are non-governmental, but with some government participation at set times) bilateral security dialogue. The dialogue has been conducted jointly by RUSI and the Moscow-based Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) for the past four years. This round involved four workshops that took place between September 2019 and February 2020. Two workshops were held in the UK and two in Russia. Each meeting was designed to bring together academics, the private sector, and former government officials from Russia and the UK to discuss issues of shared interest and to explore ways in which the two countries might improve aspects of their security relationship.

The UK–Russia dialogue was launched in 2016. This was during a particularly low point in UK–Russia diplomatic relations and was followed by the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury in 2018, which significantly damaged the bilateral relationship. Against this politically difficult background, the dialogue aims to maintain a channel of communication between the Russian and British expert and policy practitioner communities so that an exchange of views on sensitive security issues can continue.

While the Skripal case and contentious events such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the conflict in eastern Ukraine were raised during the workshops, the aim of the meetings is to broaden the UK–Russia security dialogue to consider other issues, including identifying areas for potential bilateral cooperation. The Track 1.5 element of the workshop, where representation from the UK or Russian government side is present for a portion of the day, ensures that the official perspective is included. Officials do not, however, participate in the workshop sessions, to ensure that discussions among participants are candid.

Previous iterations of the dialogue have covered a range of geopolitical issues such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, organised crime, terrorism, and the Middle East.[1] This year, the workshops focused on the challenging issues of the economic opportunities in Africa; maritime security in the Arctic; private military companies; and the rules of the information space. This iteration of the project also broadened its activities beyond London and Moscow with an event on maritime security held in the Arctic city of Arkhangelsk, with the assistance of the Northern Arctic Federal University (SAFU). Convening the dialogue outside Moscow allowed the discussion to benefit from the knowledge of regional experts and to engage communities that are often overlooked.

As with previous project cycles, the workshops were designed to generate recommendations for the Russian and British governments, as well as to identify potential areas in which the private sector, academia and regional actors can contribute to the bilateral relationship.

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1. Emily Ferris and Andrey Kortunov, 'UK–Russia Security Relations: Talking To, Not Past Each Other', RUSI Conference Report, April 2019.

I. The Rise of Africa

THE RUSSIA–AFRICA SUMMIT was held in Sochi in October 2019,[1] which increased international interest in Russia's economic and political goals on the continent. That summit touted the growing economic relationship between Russia and Africa and opportunities for increasing trade, but as became clear during the workshop discussion, neither Russia nor the UK seem to have an overall strategy towards Africa. Russia's Africa policy has been opportunistic and piecemeal, and it is not clear which ministry dictates Russia's policy on the continent. It was notable that this workshop did not involve the antagonisms that had characterised previous discussions over regional affairs. At the same time, while both sides recognised the potential to connect over the region, the path forward was not always clear.

UK and Russian Approaches

The UK is in the process of developing its Strategic Africa initiative, which aims to expand the UK's regional network across a range of issues, including security, demography and climate change. Growing UK political representation, such as representative offices opening in Chad and expansion of embassies in Mali, suggests a more meaningful engagement with Africa than the disbursal of aid grants. But the UK government has lost much of its institutional analytical capacity on Africa and many strategic partnerships there have eroded, leaving opportunities for other countries – such as Russia.

Theresa May's visit to Africa in August 2018 was the first visit by a UK prime minister since 2013, and seemed to signify that there was something more behind the rhetoric of engagement. The visit was a reminder to May of how many relationships the UK had to build on; her selection of South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria to visit were all countries in which the UK has long-standing goals. But the UK is still in competition with France and Turkey's governments, who have made many more visits to Africa since 2010. Africa had always been more of an EU priority – which the UK had followed, but several UK participants maintained that post-Brexit, the UK's position on Africa may change. Russian speakers noted that there were few frictions between the UK and Russia's approach to Africa, and that while both countries had their own national interests, they were unlikely to be in direct competition. Russia's actions in Africa are not guided by a wider doctrine and are focused on its own immediate interests. Russia is attempting to deepen its diplomatic relationship with African states, and Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, frequently visits the region.

Russia is keen to broaden its economic cooperation across different fields, to ensure that it is not economically or diplomatically isolated. Many African states were represented at the

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1. Roscongress, 'Russia–Africa Economic Forum', <https://roscongress.org/en/events/ ekonomicheskiy-forum-rossiya-afrika-/>, accessed 2 March 2019.

Russia–Africa summit in October, and the presence of senior members of the Russian government highlighted the symbolic importance of this event. At the same time, few large-scale economic deals emerged. Russian participants noted that Russia – alongside India and Turkey – was taking a more holistic approach to Africa and attempting to engage both with the government and private sector.

During the Cold War, the West and the Soviet Union's different ideological principles and geopolitical understandings meant that they were further apart on Africa. But a Russian participant contended that issues such as piracy in the Indian Ocean had largely been eradicated because of good cooperation between navies, which included Russian, Chinese and European partners. This indicated that there are areas in which Russia and Western partners can work together to address mutual security issues.

Soft Power

The UK and Russia have different understandings of 'soft power' and how this works abroad. Russian participants noted that the Russian understanding of this concept is closer to 'public diplomacy' – a system of tools designed to achieve foreign policy goals. Rossotrudnichestvo, Russia's main public diplomacy agency in Africa, works to promote Russian culture and higher education. Some Russian businesses, such as RusAl – an aluminium company – have corporate social responsibility schemes, including fighting Ebola by encouraging locals to be vaccinated.

The UK also has a range of methods through which it engages with Africa. Sharing a common language with many African nations is a significant advantage. The British Council is active there and has already established strong cultural ties between the UK and Africa. In recent years, it has become harder for African students to be granted visas to study in the UK, and many have sought educational opportunities elsewhere, including in Russia.

Security and Terrorism

While participants noted that UK–Russia relations would remain politically challenging, they agreed that it was important to insulate Africa from the impact of this geopolitical competition. Participants on both sides maintained, however, that there was little appetite for the UK and Russia to cooperate on security and terrorism in Africa, mainly because of the difficulties involved in sharing information. This is because of issues around data protection laws in the EU and UK, as well as fundamental mistrust on both sides over how information may be used – an issue that this project encountered in previous cycles, particularly during the workshop on terrorism.

The Russian participants noted that counterterrorism was central to Russia's cooperation with African countries, including intelligence sharing, military training and countering maritime piracy. They also noted that Russia does not aim to counter a specific terrorist organisation in Africa – unlike its stated approach in Syria where the Islamic State is Russia's main target.

Russian participants maintained that their approach to African countries has been to focus on assisting them with counterterrorism, as a way of promoting political stability. They noted

that this might also be an easier approach for the UK to use to engage with Africa, rather than by promoting democratisation as a means of improving political stability. Despite human rights failings in some authoritarian countries, Russian participants note that this form of governance offers stability, in contrast to the Western focus on democratisation, which is often a source of instability.

Participants agreed that there was room both for the UK and Russia to assist African governments in counterterrorism without overlap. However, Russian participants noted that in Russia the concept of 'counterterrorism' means something slightly different, as this legal term can include political extremist groups as well, even if they are non-violent. Misunderstandings of terminology are a common issue in Russia's relationship with the West, and so being clear about what certain concepts mean to each side is very important.

Business and the Economy

Africa is attempting to diversify its economy, but it remains reliant on natural resources such as oil and gas, which are critical to its national security and therefore highly politicised. Foreign involvement in these industries can be controversial and needs to be carefully managed, but many African countries also require technical capabilities from abroad, particularly in sectors such as mining. Africa is still a minor player in the global energy market, in comparison with countries in the Middle East, the US or even Russia.

In some African countries, such as Tanzania, political transitions had a negative impact on businesses – the new administration is now scrutinising licences awarded by previous governments, either to make a political point or genuinely to root out corruption. Foreign companies that forge close relationships with African governments can face reputational risks if a new administration comes to power.

While the rate of economic conferences between Russia and Africa is increasing, often the event preparation is more important than the meeting itself. Although Russian companies are interested in international expansion to diversify their business portfolios, Russian participants claimed that some African governments have restricted Russian companies from operating.

Russia's approach to Africa is not uniform, and it has less trade with sub-Saharan Africa than with China or the EU. There is also growing competition from Turkey, India and the Gulf states. Participants also discussed the growing role of Turkey and its diplomatic charm offensive in Africa, such as opening new embassies and conducting numerous state visits.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations on possible ways to improve the UK and Russia's coordination in Africa that were discussed by participants at the workshop. Most of the recommendations are focused on the private sector, rather than at a government level.

Government Level

- **Scope for security cooperation**. Russia currently has no multilateral institutional instruments through which it can engage other countries on Africa. The G7 format – which Russia used to be a member of – could be a solution to this. There is scope for increased coordination between the UK, Russia and African countries through the UN.
- **Approaches to state-building**. Participants discussed the role of African armed groups and state-building, including Russia's role in the peace deal in the Central African Republic. A UK participant maintained that deal-making of this kind was flawed, as it built peace by rewarding armed group leaders with political positions, effectively rewarding violence. However, a Russian counterpart disagreed, describing these deals as a way of ensuring that each community represented by armed groups was able to have some representation. Russian participants did not view these deals as excluding the wider population in the way that Western observers had but saw it as the simplest way of bringing that part of the population into the state. This suggested that Russian actors see bringing imperfect interest groups into the state as one of the fastest resolutions to state-building and stabilisation.

Private Sector

- **Private sector information sharing**. One participant pointed out that the challenges of working in certain jurisdictions could force cooperation between the UK and Russia – foreign companies in Mozambique have already started sharing business intelligence to improve the operating environment. In Zimbabwe, by the end of the Mugabe government, Chinese and Western companies faced similar difficulties and were able to share information usefully. UK and Russian companies feeling pressure on the ground could come together for information sharing and developing common responses, which might subsequently feed into the government–government relationship.
- **Engaging through existing structures**. Many participants agreed that making use of existing platforms such as the African Union and regional economic partnerships could set conditions for business competition across the region, rather than setting specific conditions for a certain country. Both the UK and Russia have learned lessons from their past experiences in Africa, and existing formats such as the G20 would be a good platform to share them and establish rules of international economic engagement with the region.
- **Joint ventures**. Joint ventures between UK and Russian companies in Africa in some circumstances could be effective. Participants noted that there may be scope for UK and Russian companies to cooperate before they begin an investment, rather than once they are already on the ground. It was suggested by Russian participants that Russia's lack of colonial history in Africa offered a clear reputational advantage over British counterparts. This colonial legacy may be less stark should a UK business set up a joint venture with Russian counterparts. A Russian participant noted that Africa was a difficult prospect for small businesses, and that they tend to follow larger ones or identify a specific niche to operate in. Other opportunities include electrification as large parts of Africa lack

electricity and require investment. UK and Russian businesses could provide this, while providing training and education to help solve infrastructure issues.

- **Demographic opportunities and future trends.** The broader discussion of demographics came up several times. A young and growing population in Africa could offer an economic opportunity for both the UK and Russia to tap into a nascent market. Other participants suggested that urban development and land management challenges could present an opportunity for the UK and Russia to work together. Care was taken to ensure that any kind of bilateral dialogue over Africa must include African representatives, as there have been issues in the past when dialogue formats have excluded them.

II. Maritime Security in the Arctic

THIS WORKSHOP TOOK place in the northern city of Arkhangelsk, which was selected as the location for the meeting because of its strong history of Russian–British maritime trade. A meeting in the city also offered the possibility of tapping into the regional expert community. SAFU kindly hosted the delegation at its premises and shared significant local insights into Arctic issues. The topic of the Arctic had come up in several previous workshops as an area in which the UK and Russia might find areas of common ground. Arctic maritime security was thus selected as one of the four workshop topics. This workshop was characterised by a constructive atmosphere and generated multiple recommendations.

Understanding Differences

Maritime safety issues, including in the Arctic, are subject to an intensive legal framework. Aside from the general provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the seas are governed by several other international instruments, such as the Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL 73/78), and the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue. Specific ways of addressing maritime safety issues in the Arctic are further enshrined in regional agreements or universal codes, such as the Polar Code, which is part of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and made obligatory through amendments to SOLAS and MARPOL. The Law of the Sea defines the specific rights and responsibilities of coastal and non-coastal flag states in maritime areas with different legal jurisdictions, such as territorial seas, exclusive economic zones or the High Seas. Those regulations apply in the Arctic as in any other parts of the world.

In the UK, maritime safety is a civil matter led by the police, but the British military does not have law enforcement capabilities at sea, even if troops are deployed. The UK has a coastguard, but it does not have any law enforcement authority and acts as a coordinator with other agencies. For example, the UK's warships are involved in counter-narcotics in the Caribbean, working alongside US coastguard officers, who do have a law enforcement mandate there.

In Russia, the responsibilities for maritime safety and environmental security in the Arctic are spread among different agencies. While Ministries of Emergency Situations and Transport operate emergency response centres in the region, both the coast guard (part of the border guard under the Federal Security Service), and the Northern Fleet have responsibilities to provide maritime safety and environmental security along Russia's northern coasts.

At the time of the conference, an unarmed French naval support vessel had recently traversed the Russian Northern Sea Route (NSR). Some Russian participants claimed that there had been

no adverse reaction from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to this incident and little diplomatic fallout, but agreed that in response the Russian Ministry of Defence had proposed a law that would require prior notification of any passage across the NSR by military ships. Participants from both the UK and Russia noted the potential for misunderstanding along the NSR, alongside some Russian concerns that the use of the passage by military vessels could become more frequent.

Legal Jurisdictions

There was some discussion on the UK side about whether UNCLOS was still fit for purpose, although renegotiating it at this point is likely to be a challenge. A Russian participant noted that UNCLOS remains the most important legal framework governing maritime issues in the Arctic. The few gaps in the regulation left over in the Arctic are addressed by additional instruments based on the UNCLOS framework, such as the Polar Code or the 2018 agreement preventing unregulated fishing in the Central Arctic Ocean.

According to workshop participants, Article 234 of UNCLOS does not indicate clearly which rules that regulate vessel traffic can and cannot be introduced. This article currently gives coastal states the right to unilaterally introduce and reinforce rules of navigation in ice-covered waters, for the purpose of preventing marine pollution from ships. There is also no clear understanding about whether the Russian claim that the NSR represents a 'national transport route' has any legal consequences.

Russia is in the process of establishing the outer limits of its continental shelf in the Arctic Ocean based upon the provisions of Article 76 of UNCLOS, which allow Russia to define those limits based on the natural continuation of its continental margin, rather than as measured by nautical miles from the baselines. Russia has submitted its claim, which overlaps with those made by Denmark and Canada, to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. In 2014, the three countries agreed on how to proceed with delineating their shelf if their claims are confirmed by the Commission.

In accordance with the Polar Code, in effect since 2017, commercial vessels and large cruise ships must be fit to operate in Arctic waters depending on ice conditions. The Polar Code has specific drawbacks, as it does not cover a whole group of vessels of a certain deadweight. The further elaboration of the provisions of the Polar Code are discussed in the IMO.

The impact of climate change on the region was debated at length. Participants noted that several questions remain, such as the impact of warming in the Arctic, which required new scientific expertise. Some of the potential benefits of climate change were discussed, such as the easier navigation along the NSR without icebreakers, which would increase the traffic along this route and make navigation more challenging. The Arctic Council has already established a forum on climate change – the Arctic Regional Climate Centre Network. The melting of permafrost is a serious issue for Russia, as this development threatens onshore drilling, coastal areas and homes in many northern Russian cities. The potential for climate change to unleash new infectious diseases was also discussed as a serious mutual concern.

There are several legally binding agreements that have been drafted under the auspices of the Arctic Council to assist people and ships in distress. The growth of political tensions between Russia and the West has meant a lack of information sharing crucial to maritime safety and the prevention of accidents in the Arctic – for example, information on where a vessel is going, or ice conditions at a particular time. This has revealed serious knowledge gaps which could be potentially dangerous for vessels operating in these waters.

China and the Arctic

There was some criticism of other players in the region, notably China, which has called itself a 'near Arctic state'. While there was disagreement among some Russian participants about the extent of Chinese policy in the region, some Russian members of the delegation claimed that China would need very clear wording about how it uses the NSR and its natural resources. UK and Russian participants agreed that it was important, however, to take into account China's vision of the Arctic from a military and a strategic perspective.

Although China currently lacks the military means and experience to navigate the Arctic region, it was clear that Russia and the UK view China's activities in this area as a potential security risk, even though a Russian participant noted China's lack of military interests or deployable capabilities in the Arctic. China's burgeoning icebreaker fleet was also discussed – tests of their new icebreaker were conducted in 2019. Workshop participants questioned why China would need such capabilities, which prompted some concern from those present.

Working Together in the Arctic

The Arctic Ocean is unique in its vulnerability, and its sea borders are not easily guarded. Participants on both sides agreed that the Arctic Council was one of the areas in which Russia, the UK and other countries cooperated effectively on environmental issues. One Russian participant pointed to the 2018 moratorium on fishing in the Arctic basin as a landmark for cooperation between the EU and Russia, and an indication that common ground can be sought on specific issues. However, post-Brexit, the UK's role in this process is likely to be diminished. However, some topics are beyond the Arctic Council's remit, including military issues, and national interests still might collide here, particularly over military exercises. Both Russian and British participants voiced concerns about each other's military exercises on land and at sea.

It was noted that the NSR poses logistical challenges, as navigating in Arctic waters requires specialised equipment, training and preparation. Given the extreme Arctic conditions, Russia may have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in developing safety protocols along this route. The Arctic shipping industry is also vulnerable to economic cycles and geopolitical changes. Container transhipment involves a significant amount of transport and shipments which need to be delivered on time, which Arctic conditions can delay.

Russia has nuclear icebreakers that can provide safe shipping along the NSR. Arkhangelsk already has strong shipbuilding capacities, including multiple research and development centres and

the United Shipbuilding Corporation, which brings together more than 40 businesses. There was some disagreement among Russian participants over the likely scale of cargo that the NSR could take – Russian President Vladimir Putin has forecast around 80 million tonnes of cargo by 2030, but it was agreed that the existing Russian fleet was not ready to achieve this level of trade.

Recommendations

- **Signing up to an Arctic Code of Conduct.** Russia will chair the Arctic Council in 2021–23. This could be a good opportunity to discuss the possibility of adopting the code, and for modernising the Council. This could include establishing thresholds for military activity in this region. Participants were, however, aware that negotiating an agreement between naval forces is a challenge. A lower-level set of guidelines would be much easier. A UK participant suggested that ships that do not abide by the existing Polar Code or a new Arctic code could be denied insurance, which might act as a deterrent – although this would not apply to warships.

- **Delineating specific warfare-free zones**. One Russian participant claimed that there had been deteriorating confidence in military affairs in the region. It was proposed that specific anti-submarine warfare zones that restrict any military activity could be demarcated, which would de-escalate military tensions in this region. Russia's 2015 Maritime Strategy already supports the establishment of such zones in the Arctic and could serve as a good starting point.

- **Specific scientific information sharing platforms**. Information sharing can be commercially and politically sensitive. European and UK personal data protection regulations generally prioritise individuals over state security, making it difficult to share information with Russia. Moreover, the shortage of relevant data in the Arctic region, such as meteorological and hydrographic information relevant for safety, is putting vessels in potential danger. A Russian participant proposed specific information sharing between Arctic countries, such as highlighting issues around coastal areas quickly, and using GPS systems. There is very little integration of scientific research data on the Arctic and its environmental conditions, but sharing data with Russian and Japanese meteorologists – who already work together – might provide more precise information on the Arctic. Universities could also cooperate on this, which might help to depoliticise the issue. SAFU, for example, has systems on surveillance of the seas that could be shared with another British university or institution rather than between governments.

- **Joint consultations on port infrastructure**. Some of the NSR's key ports, such as Dikson, Arkhangelsk and Tiksi, can receive ships, but others lack repair or bunkering stations and require modernisation to respond to emergencies at sea. While these ports do have some search-and-rescue capabilities, their lack of vessels and equipment will hinder this. Russia already cooperates with countries such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark to conduct risk assessments over increased activity in the Arctic, to which the UK could also contribute. Russian participants noted that Russia has few deep-water ports and expanding this infrastructure would increase the competitiveness of the NSR. Without this expansion, the NSR may not be as economically viable as the government claims.

- **Using naval anniversaries as an opportunity for cooperation**. A UK participant noted that anniversaries of previously positive UK–Russian maritime cooperation could be used as a springboard for future coordination. An example of this would be the Arctic Convoys – sea convoys from the UK and some Arctic countries that delivered supplies to parts of the Soviet Union, including Arkhangelsk, during the Second World War, demonstrating the UK's commitment to assisting the Soviet Union.

- **Dismantling nuclear submarines as a model for future cooperation**. One Russian participant noted the dismantling of Russian nuclear submarines since the late 1990s as an example of what can be achieved with good political will. This was a sign of positive cooperation between the UK and Russia – the UK contributed to a multilateral programme designed to dispose of spent nuclear fuel – and could form the basis for further work together. In 2005, Russia offered to use the infrastructure established during that cooperation to dismantle decommissioned British and American submarines as Russia had the equipment and expertise, and there would be little risk of exposing sensitive information. In the future, France and the UK will both be obliged to dismantle retired nuclear vessels and could cooperate with Russia on this task. Civil organisations and the nuclear fleet could work together to assess the environmental damage of the submarines. However, there are currently few formal meetings between the UK and Russia, which makes it difficult to regularly discuss these issues and plan towards the next meeting.

- **Smaller dialogues between key figures**. Participants suggested that a small group of senior figures on both sides could begin a maritime-focused dialogue between the UK and Russia. As military-to-military engagement, even on non-sensitive issues such as search and rescue, has become highly politicised, regular meetings that are easy to attend and located on neutral ground, such as a third country, would be a good starting point, with the aim of generating bilateral legally binding maritime agreements. Issues such as agreeing on ways to minimise pollution of the Arctic region could be discussed, for example, agreeing not to use heavy fuel oil in the region.

- **Establishing an understandable chain of command in an emergency**. The UK and Russia lack a proper understanding of the resources needed to deal with future large-scale maritime accidents in the Arctic. Since the downturn in diplomatic relations with Russia in 2014, Russia is no longer part of the Arctic Security Forces Roundtable which meets to discuss these issues, and which the UK is part of. A collision between a tanker and an iceberg would, for example, create a situation that would require international assistance. There is also a need for better medical services and communications between civil emergency organisations operating in the Arctic, and for those organisations to better understand their separate roles in land, air and sea. Deeper analysis of the risks linked to poor communication and information sharing on oil spills is required. There also needs to be some standardisation of how the risks in the Arctic are calculated, although formal and informal institutional barriers, as well as the difficult political climate, remain a challenge to this.

Training exercises, joint communications, scenario-planning and lessons learned were all proposed by British and Russian participants as confidence-building measures that the UK

and Russia could conduct together, either bilaterally or involving a third party such as Norway. Russia already works with Norway on its annual Barents Sea search-and-rescue exercises, in which the UK could be included, or the UK and Russia could conduct joint training exercises in the North Sea. Both sides acknowledged that an understanding of each other's resources and management systems for emergencies could help mitigate the risks of future incidents at sea.

III. Private Military Companies

THE WORKSHOP ON private military companies (PMCs) and private security companies (PSCs) was one of the most challenging to put together, given the sensitivity of the issues discussed. Nevertheless, the workshop included a range of participants from the UK and Russia who had worked or were currently working in PSCs, as well as academics and journalists on both sides whose research focused on PMCs.

Definitions

PMCs are often cast in a malign light in the media, reflecting their popular association with mercenaries. Workshop participants pointed out, however, that modern PMCs operate in very different ways and are involved in a wide variety of security functions, including important non-kinetic support and logistical roles. One of the greatest differences between PMCs and mercenaries is that PMCs are often part of a corporate legal entity, rather than at the behest of a private individual. The concept of the PMC was unpacked by both sides, and it was agreed that PMCs are not necessarily private – as they involve both private and public interests – and sometimes are not military or a company. Instead, speakers suggested that it may be better to refer to PMCs as a 'service'.

The number of PSCs in Russia has increased in the past few years, and there are now thought to be around 700,000 people involved with them and their activities. Russian criminal law prohibits the creation of PMCs (but not PSCs) and the export of military services abroad. Russia's PSCs are engaged in protecting property and installing security systems, acting similarly to a police service. PSCs are regulated by Russian law and are domestically focused, but PMCs usually operate abroad, which affects their legal status.

There are no specific laws on PMCs in Russia, even though there is a clear need for legislation. There have been three attempts to push a draft law on their regulation through the Duma, but one of the main sticking points is determining their transparent objectives. The Russian government is reluctant to pass this law because the status quo allows them plausible deniability, or the ability to deny knowledge or responsibility for their actions. However, when members of Wagner – the most famous Russian PMC – are killed in battle, their families do not have any legal recourse, cannot claim compensation or contact the police, as the victims have no legal status. To operate and avoid being penalised by Russian law, all Russian PMCs register abroad. However, this does not solve the challenge of regulating PMC activity effectively, but instead offers a legitimising classification.

Russia's PSCs are involved in a range of security services, including guarding oil and gas fields, escorting convoys in dangerous areas and guarding nuclear sites. Russian law defines what PSCs can do – they have the right, for example, to use tasers but not dogs. In contrast, PMCs are

able to use the full spectrum of weapons that the Russian Ministry of Defence uses, including drones and military aircraft. Conscription in Russia means that most recruits have some military experience, and PMCs tend to hire people with certain technical skills, similar to 'white-collar mercenaries'. For example, a PMC known as RSB Group guards convoys and ships to protect against piracy, provides security training and is engaged in demining in Libya on behalf of the government there.

Another issue is the diverging rhetoric on the status of PMCs from the government. Lavrov maintains that he is keen to protect the personnel involved in PMC activity, but Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has stated that there was no official position on PMCs. There is clear rivalry over the process, which is preventing the government from agreeing on a legal definition. Putin has also in the past proposed a law that would allow personnel working for PMCs to be trained for this work, but without any state involvement or technical oversight of their activities, although this law was not introduced in the end. Given bureaucratic issues in Russia, Russian participants noted any move towards legalising PMCs would mean that companies would require years to be fully compliant.

Wagner

Wagner operates as a commercial organisation and requires multiple clients it can offer its services to and the Russian government is its main client. It receives government tenders to purchase uniforms – no other PMC in Russia has this level of access, and perhaps as a result many individuals from other Russian PMCs have left to join Wagner. However, Wagner is still trying to compete with other PMCs for attention from the authorities and is eager for access to financial resources.

One UK participant noted the danger of over-focusing on Wagner's activities, which might allow other Russian PMCs to blame any of their own wrongdoings abroad on Wagner. One Russian participant noted that Wagner is essentially an umbrella company for many smaller factions, and the entire private security market has undergone a restructuring, in which oversight has moved from the Ministry of Defence to the National Guard. This has prompted a new level of engagement by the public and media with the operations and services of PMCs.

UK Perspective

UK law does not allow its PMCs or PSCs to engage in combat abroad. UK PSCs perform services such as unarmed defence, guarding of VIP convoys and risk consulting. They are constantly under audit and if they are found in breach of a contract, they are duly penalised. In the UK, PSCs are used on a case-by-case basis and decisions on their use overseas usually have ministerial clearance for security reasons. However, during tenders for Ministry of Defence (MoD) contracts, subcontractors must state whether they will apply the principles of these frameworks.

Clients of British PMCs and their services tended to encounter situations where they required temporary rapid expansion of capabilities, but where it was not financially prudent to invest

in a long-term army. Security protection of people and sites in the UK tends to be carried out by state agencies such as armed nuclear constabularies, but when the UK operates in other countries, this service may be outsourced. The UK government spends around £50m annually on what would be called PMCs, which are involved in security and stabilisation activities in Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan.

British PMCs were often used when the UK found itself operating in countries where it lacked the support of the local regime and could not rely on military force. The UK does not use PMCs to topple these regimes, but to protect other missions that are there. The UK's official view has been for the PMC industry to self-regulate rather than be subject to government regulations, so that there is a drive from within the market to maintain standards. However, there was some disagreement on this point among UK participants, who argued that self-regulation was devaluing the nature of the regulations that already exist.

UK PMCs are active in non-kinetic areas such as cyber security, where they are subcontracted to assist with information warfare or strategic communications. The UK government may indirectly fund PMC activity, even if it is not directly commissioned by them, and higher-end PMCs are used by corporations owned or based in the UK. Although the UK government still regulates the industry and defines the space and terms in which companies of this kind operate, it is also permissive, allowing companies relative freedom over their operations.

There is a broader question around direct engagement and indirect facilitation – the debate within government about the role of PMCs and whether it should be taking soldiers into these roles. Previous UK governments have dabbled with regulation, but few have definitively decided what the extent of the projection of UK security abroad should be. The only UK PMC that has conducted offensive operations in Africa is Executive Outcomes, now defunct. Most others are private security companies that have a commercial perspective and support entities that are not necessarily the state, supplying protective rather than offensive services.

Russian participants queried why so few British private security companies were part of international codes of conduct. While the UK position was that those companies that work for the MoD have signed up to the code, some companies not working for the MoD have not. These companies are viewed as being a cost-efficient way of operating in different environments. The activities of a little-known British PMC known as KMS Limited (Keenie Meenie Services) were discussed. KMS Limited performed a variety of functions abroad in the 1970s, but some of its members were subsequently implicated in war crimes. This prompted discussions in Whitehall about how 'mercenaries' should be defined, and how this could impact British government interests.

There is a difference in the personnel that tend to be employed by British and Russian PMCs. In Russia, many of those working for PMCs have joined for idealistic – and occasionally nationalist – reasons, some are industry professionals and others are looking for a better income. In the UK, members of PMCs tend to be military professionals or former military police officers. One

British participant noted that the West has become so reliant on PMCs that it has become impossible to bring these capabilities back in house.

Maritime Domain

UK PMCs also operate in the maritime security domain, outside the territorial waters of any state. They supply security to ships in the Indian Ocean. There is some regulatory framework on land, but the sea is much harder to regulate, as the barrier to enter the maritime domain is lower. Flat chains of command, decisions made by juniors and little oversight all make this a much more dangerous operating space. There are some regulatory standards imposed by international maritime organisations. There is also an escalatory set of rules in place that allows armed security guards to react to a threat in a step-by-step way that ends in the use of lethal force. But the UK Navy is diminishing and cannot enforce its legislation on flagged ships or inspect security teams there. The only scrutiny over their operations comes from the clients who have hired these PMCs.

Recommendations

- **Rework existing regulations**. International and national law is currently insufficient to regulate the services that PMCs offer. Countries have different views on what a 'mercenary' is, which makes it harder to find common ground. The strictest regulations are in South Africa, which make it illegal for any company to engage in military-style activities abroad. Russian and British participants agreed that the Geneva Convention on mercenary regulations is an antiquated legal checklist from the 1970s and impossible to fulfil from a legal standpoint, so needs to be reworked. A Russian participant proposed signing up to the Swiss initiative, where 60 states have joined forces to self-regulate. UK and US PMCs already self-regulate, and while self-regulation can be successful for licensing procedures, it is not clear whether this framework can deliver justice in the event of misconduct. It was agreed that licensing of companies, personnel and contracts should be the responsibility of the home state. One UK participant noted that greater accountability should be assigned to PMCs themselves, so that they are recognised as actors under international law, ensuring that they bear corporate criminal responsibility.
- **Further joint regulations**. There are existing regulations that govern PMC activity, such as the UN Convention of 1989, but only 41 countries have signed it, and neither the UK nor Russia are signatories. A Russian participant noted that in 2012, the UN expert group on private military and security companies issued a report and recommendations, many of which are still valid and could be used as a basis for further discussion. There is also a requirement for UK-based companies to operate in accordance with UK law, such as anti-bribery laws in high-risk environments. This anti-bribery framework, and the UN expert group's convention, combined with Russian regulations under the umbrella of the International Code of Conduct, could help both sides towards an agreement on PMC regulation.
- **Sign up to an international code of conduct**. Some participants agreed on the need to adopt the independent Montreux document – an intergovernmental but non-legally

binding document for PMCs and PSCs, designed to respect international humanitarian law. Participants noted that this would promote voluntary membership, although monitoring and enforcement is difficult, particularly when subcontracting services to local nationals.[2] A UK participant pointed out that there could be networks of regulations in place with multiple stakeholders to promote accountability. In maritime security, standards would prevent human rights abuses at sea and ensure the proportionate use of force. However, national interests are always likely to trump the international consensus.

- **De-escalation rather than regulation in the event of wrongdoing**. Civilians require a body to complain to in the event of wrongdoing by PMCs. A Russian participant noted that things tend to go wrong when companies subcontract staff who are not properly instructed and do not speak local languages. There is a lack of understanding between PMCs and their victims over who should be responsible in the event of wrongdoing – the home state or the client who signed the contract. Another Russian participant suggested that given the variety of functions of modern PMCs, these organisations would best be identified as a third category – neither civilian nor military. It was agreed that international criminal law should apply to PMCs to hold them accountable.

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2.   International Committee of the Red Cross, 'The Montreux Document on Private Military and Security Companies', 2 May 2011, <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0996-montreux-document-private-military-and-security-companies>, accessed 3 March 2020.

IV. Rules of the Information Space

THIS SESSION WAS the most challenging, given disagreements between the UK and Russia about each other's depictions in the media. Efforts were made to reduce the use of buzzwords such as 'fake news' in the agenda, to ensure that these did not obstruct the constructive aim of the discussion. The workshop included debates about how to verify news sources in a fast-moving digital age, and the impact that false narratives have on government policy.

False Narratives

The promotion of false narratives by state and non-state groups provides a challenge to the rules and conventions of the existing information space. In a digital age where everyone is able to disseminate information quickly around the world, verifying sources and the truth behind a sensational story is becoming extremely difficult. Establishing truth in a modern society is central to international relations; if basic facts cannot be agreed, then there is little basis for trust between the UK and Russia. However, striking the right balance around the importance of freedom of information and censorship is very important. In Russia, the government has much more control over the media, but there needs to be a common denominator for political systems that imply different approaches to media and the state.

Despite much hype about the dangers of false narratives, there have always been communities, on and offline, that have gathered and found forums to discuss the news and political processes. One UK participant cautioned about the overstating of the importance of 'fake news'; the amount of news shared does not always correlate to influence, and so the numbers of tweets or news stories do not necessarily reveal anything about the importance of a source or story. Moreover, access to technology can be a positive force, as it means that power is shared and no longer monopolised by the state, increasing the number of voices in the public domain.

One important point made by a UK participant was that the term 'fake news' has been increasingly applied to opinions that people do not like. This is a particularly salient issue in the UK–Russia relationship as it can be the basis for misunderstandings. A different opinion does not necessarily mean that the view is incorrect.

The importance of intent was also discussed. In certain contexts, information is not published by journalists owing to editorial decisions, although this is not intended to misinform or mislead. Conflicts driven by non-state actors have made reporting more difficult, as media outlets are used to dealing with governments that have institutional responsibilities, and it is not clear which narrative is closest to the truth or who to blame if the news turns out to be false.

It was agreed that conspiracy theories in the media tend to operate in an echo chamber of what people already believe. Russian participants discussed the issues of overcoming the Soviet-era legacy of a single opinion, where anything contrary to that stated view is false. While false information is poisoning institutions and international relations, recognising different perspectives can be a useful starting point to address UK–Russia polarisation on specific issues.

Regulatory Processes

The UK has an inconsistent approach to media regulations, and broadcasting has an interventionist approach. The BBC and Channel 4 are publicly owned. They are regulated by Ofcom – the Office of Communications, a UK government-approved agency – and are required to report the news objectively, but the BBC also has other objectives, such as reflecting the diversity of the country. The written press has minimal regulation, and newspapers are not required to fulfil public duties – they tend to self-regulate, but public inquiries have claimed that this is ineffective.

Russian participants claimed that most people do not trust the media, and that the media has historically been the gatekeeper of information that keep fringe ideas off the pages. People tend to choose media that represents their views, which creates an echo chamber of repeated views. Limits on online freedom of speech in places such as the US tend to focus on protecting children or national minorities. In Russia, this discussion is about the battle against online extremism. Alternative opinions in Russia are not given much funding or prominent platforms.

New Uses of Media

Journalists always use the data that is most available to them – interviews, court reports, first-hand accounts – and technology has changed this. Open source investigative journalism outlets, such as Bellingcat, receive much of their information from Telegram, a social networking site. Amnesty International has a digital verification procedure in which lawyers help them to uncover human rights abuses, and the Dataminr initiative – an information discovery company – brings data together to help verify stories. Tweets are quick sources of information, which means that everything has an online trace, making it much easier to track the genesis of an idea.

Participants discussed how easy it was to share these narratives unknowingly, as repetition is effective, even if a correction is later issued. Russia has a law on 'fake news' – usually under the umbrella of extremism laws – that fines online users for sharing false content, although this was not proposed as a viable way forward in the UK.

The role of celebrities was also discussed, who promote certain narratives on social media to users who trust them. In Russia, the fire at the Winter Cherry shopping mall in Kemerovo was used as an example where celebrities had shared information on social media about the numbers of victims killed, which had increased panic.

Recommendations

Although this workshop was the most contentious, it nevertheless generated the most recommendations. British and Russian participants at first appeared to be far apart on many issues, but there were important points on which they were aligned, particularly the idea that the responsibility for false narratives was one that needed to be shouldered by the entire community, rather than the sole burden of the government or media agencies.

- **Addressing 'deep fake' news**. The future of false narratives is likely to be faked audio and visual footage. A Russian participant proposed that IT specialists and journalists could combine forces to try to verify sources and work out how to anticipate them in future. Attaching links to news sources so that people are more easily able to check sources would assist with this.
- **Internal media regulations for better reporting**. Russian news outlets such as Vedomosti have internal regulations that prevent them from reporting based on just one source, as do many UK outlets, but other news agencies who are pressed for time when reporting on a breaking news story do not. A UK participant maintained that fewer journalists than before are calling up sources to verify them, and that best practices should be disseminated more widely in the journalism community.
- **Bilateral media agreements between UK and Russian agencies**. There could be specific agreements established between agencies such as the BBC and TASS in Russia on media regulations, which would somewhat help to depoliticise the debate around false narratives. There is currently no way of assigning responsibility for knowingly spreading false narratives in the media. Journalists, the government and opposition groups should come together to try to address this and to set up a code of conduct that would hold people liable for knowingly spreading false narratives, similar to legal frameworks in cyberspace. Participants agreed, however, that countering false narratives is a job for everyone, including educators and consumers of news, policymakers and news generators. The European Committee for Standardisation set up the Journalism Trust Initiative two years ago, which included norms and principles of how to behave in the media space. It was suggested that the UK and Russia could sign up to a similar format to build confidence between each other's journalism communities.
- **Involving celebrities**. Celebrities have a role to play in sharing false narratives, and a Russian participant proposed that online influencers should shoulder the burden of responsibility for this as well. Media agencies and the government should also work with celebrities with significant online followings to improve their media literacy and awareness of the dangers of sharing unverified stories online.
- **Confidence-building measures**. Notwithstanding a very difficult political climate at the moment, one UK participant proposed a cooperative initiative to counter current information warfare dynamics whereby UK and Russian fact-checking sites could focus on correcting false narratives within their own countries about the other country. This would attempt to counter accusations around British media biases against Russia, and allegations of anti-Western rhetoric in the Russian media.

- **Peer-review process**. A Russian participant noted that in the academic community, false research and test scores were a perennial issue. While it is a smaller community, many peers in the field know each other and are able to verify scholars' identities. It was suggested that this process be broadened out to include the media space, although this idea would naturally slow the fast pace of journalism.
- **Media literacy programmes for content consumers**. There has been little emphasis on improving users' critical thinking and understanding of articles that they view and share online. There are ad hoc media literacy programmes in UK schools run by the BBC. Russia has some media literacy classes, but in comparison with the UK, it has a lower level of media education and critical thinking around this subject. Improving this critical thinking, both in the UK and Russia, would help users become more aware of the content they are viewing. The way in which stories are presented is extremely important, whether it is narrated as a fact or presented as an unverified question. All of this would help media audiences to consider perspectives more carefully rather than agreeing to an already-decided narrative.
- **Refocusing on cultural aspects of the UK and Russia as confidence-building measures**. Although there was significant disagreement on how one another's countries were portrayed in the media, a UK participant noted that a possible explanation for this was a lack of understanding. In the UK, there is little general interest in Russia and debate tends to focus on times when Russia impinges on British interests, which has led to a more politicised discussion. During the Cold War, British journalists were deployed to the Soviet Union to cover cultural issues and broaden the debate, so the media was not responding to single events. It was suggested that confidence-building measures could allow journalists to cover less politically charged aspects of one another's countries.
- **Reclaiming public trust**. One Russian participant also noted that growing public distrust of the media will mean that the press will be obliged to reassess its position and return to a traditional role of informing the public, rather than shaping opinions or concealing facts that editors deem irrelevant. Reclaiming public trust is likely to be the most important step in attempts by both the UK and Russia to counter false narratives; if readers and viewers believe that the traditional media is generally acting in good faith, they are less likely to seek out alternative – and occasionally fringe – beliefs.

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