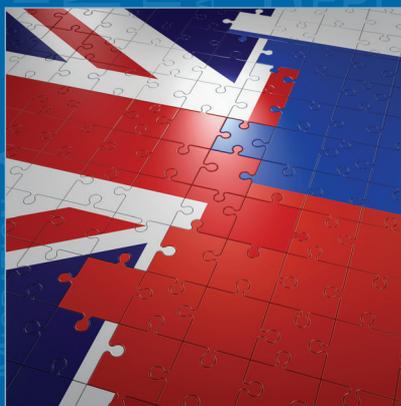




RIAC
**RUSSIAN
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS COUNCIL**



REPORT

UK–RUSSIA SECURITY RELATIONS: TALKING TO, NOT PAST EACH OTHER

45 / 2019

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Editor-in-Chief:

I.S. Ivanov, RAS Corresponding Member, Dr. of History

Authors:

A.V. Kortunov, Ph.D. in History; **E. Ferris**

Copy Editor:

T.S. Bogdasarova, Ph.D. in Political Science

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The report is based on findings from the third round of the Russia UK Track 1.5 (non-governmental) bi-lateral security dialogue, which RIAC. RUSI held in collaboration with Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. This round of dialogue included discussions on four key topics covering the breadth of UK–Russia relations: Nuclear Arms Control; Organized crimes and Terrorism; The Middle East; Cyber Security. Despite the UK and Russia’s difficult political relationship, there remains significant value in maintaining an open dialogue channel to allow the frank exchange of views and ideas.

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Introduction and Executive Summary

This report is based on findings from the third round of the UK–Russia Track 1.5 (non-governmental) bilateral security dialogue, which RUSI held in collaboration with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). The dialogue, held between September 2018 and February 2019 in both London and Moscow (with two sessions each in London and Moscow), brought together former government officials, academics and private sector industry experts from both countries to discuss ways in which the two countries' security relationship could be improved.

This dialogue was initiated in 2016 when bilateral relations between the UK and Russia appeared to be starting to improve, but the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in March 2018 significantly exacerbated the negative relationship between the two countries. Discussions took place against the backdrop of this event, which came up frequently in conversation with participants and as part of the general roundtable discussion. Many of the participants cited this episode, among others, as scene-setting for the current status of UK–Russia tensions. However, participants also noted that despite political difficulties, this project remains one of the few open channels of communication between both countries and highlighted the importance of continuing dialogue.

The first year of the project identified several security and geopolitical topics to establish the most productive areas of cooperation between the UK and Russia. The second year built on three of the most fruitful areas from the first round, and this third iteration used those previous discussions as a basis for four workshops on the most pressing security issues, including: the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty; organised crime and terrorism; the Middle East; and cyber security. Naturally, discussing sensitive security issues of this kind can be difficult. The Track 1.5 format included official participation from government ministries at certain moments during the proceedings, but did not require their constant presence, thus allowing specialists to candidly offer ideas in a less politicised environment. Many participants on both sides had significant previous experience working for their respective governments, which allowed the sessions to produce recommendations to governments that were grounded in the reality of policy practice.

The diplomatic deep freeze following the Skripal incident has rendered high-level communication between the UK and Russia difficult. But, as the repercussions from recent international sanctions have highlighted, Russia does not exist in a vacuum and remains plugged into the global banking and business systems. In addition, the country continues to be a significant player in a number of international contexts. This means that, regardless of the current difficult diplomatic relationship, both the UK and Russia need to start formulating ideas for what their relationship might look like so that they are prepared to engage on

mutually beneficial terms in future. This dialogue, like its previous iterations, has tried to bear in mind what could be tangibly achieved from getting greater interaction right, and how this could benefit both sides.

Ultimately, any improvement in bilateral cooperation between the UK and Russia must have political support from the highest levels of government, and rhetoric must be followed by action. At the same time, leaders on both sides pay attention to how they are characterised in the media and emotive rhetoric is not conducive to a constructive relationship. Both states must be able to criticise each other for their actions when they feel it is appropriate, while being aware of the downside of using inflammatory language. Experts and officials on both sides repeatedly raised the issue of politicians' unhelpful inflammatory rhetoric, as this can make it harder for the relationship to move forward.

This round of dialogue included discussions on four key topics covering the breadth of UK–Russia relations. It also provided an opportunity for experts on both sides to meet with their counterparts and consider productive recommendations for the future. Some of the topics were selected to ensure continuity from previous discussions. New topics for discussion were also added, which were identified based on an early scoping phase that had included discussions with officials and experts on both sides.

Nuclear Arms Controls

The collapse of the INF Treaty in 2018 brought the discussion of nuclear arms control and regional nuclear stability back to the fore in Europe in a manner previously thought to be left in the past. There were clear issues with the treaty. Russia had been unable to convince the US and its NATO allies that its newly-deployed missile was treaty-compliant. More widely, the ambiguous wording of the INF Treaty had left space for this and other problems and misunderstandings, and the Treaty had not been updated to account for advances in nuclear technology since it was first established in the 1980s. However, notwithstanding the extremely difficult diplomatic relationship between Russia and the West, roundtable participants agreed that there was a need to identify a mutually understandable concept of strategic security, and to move beyond viewing the relationship in purely competitive terms.

The topic of arms control more broadly between Russia and the West has become an increasingly salient issue, as the collapse of the INF Treaty has given way to renewed discussions on the future of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Several recommendations were discussed by the group, including establishing a new INF-style treaty that took into account technological advances such as hypersonic weapons, using the P5 as a launch-pad format for a discussion using technical experts, and proposing mutual ceilings on total nuclear stockpiles rather than range-specific limitations. The involvement of third parties such as China was also discussed at length, given that it is one of the largest possessors of INF-range missiles. Including China and other nuclear-capable countries in a new INF-style regime could help to broaden the discussion.

Organised Crime and Terrorism

Intelligence sharing was an early casualty in the UK–Russia bilateral relationship, but the UK and Russia nevertheless share several common security issues, such as the threat posed by Islamist extremist activity, foreign terrorist fighters drawn to Syria and Iraq, home-grown terrorism and organised criminal gangs engaged in drug and human trafficking. While direct conversations between UK and Russian law enforcement are difficult to re-establish in the current political environment, several alternative formats were suggested, including setting up joint research projects between Russian and UK universities to look at specific security problems such as designing out terrorism and crime on public transport. These could then be fed into policy discussions, as well as offer practical recommendations for governments on either side. While the UK and Russia have divergent approaches to introducing physical measures in cities to counter terrorist activities – particularly given Russia’s hard security approach to fortifying cities – lessons can nevertheless be learned from law enforcement’s approach to large events such as the FIFA World Cup in Russia (2018) and the UK Olympic Games (2012). To improve this understanding, participants suggested increasing sub-national cooperation, such as a London–Moscow partnership through the mayors’ offices to share information on physical resilience in capital cities. Engaging particular ministries that do not have a clear security remit – such as approaching respective ministries of transport to discuss terrorism – would be another way of depoliticising the discussion.

The Middle East

Russia aimed to assert its growing political and economic importance in the Middle East, ensuring that it has a place at the negotiating table once regional conflicts have subsided. Russia has sought bilateral partnerships with as many players in the region as possible, but the unpredictability of its approach has often wrong-footed the West, which is unclear whether the Middle East could be a point of convergence with Russia, or the site of contention in future. The UK already has deep relationships with parts of the Middle East but is seeking to increase its diplomatic relationships for economic as well as political reasons, which will become even more significant after Brexit. Post-conflict scenarios in places such as Libya and Syria were also discussed at length, with ambiguities around the nature of Russia’s relationships in Syria one of the main sticking points. There was agreement on the need to understand China’s intent and capability in the region, which may be a useful starting point for future discussions. Reworking existing formats such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was suggested by roundtable participants as possible alliances that NATO could work with over multiple issues, not just security. Yemen was also cited as a possible area of cooperation between the UK and Russia on humanitarian questions. Establishing a joint UK–Russia stance to contain Iranian expansive activity in the region was also proposed as a mutually beneficial area for discussion, which might help to address the broader Iran–Saudi Arabia clash that dominates Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Cyber Security

The starting point for the cyber security discussion was that UK official structures and businesses will continue to view Russian state and non-state actors as one of the main security threats in cyberspace. However, the debate could be depoliticised, to some extent, by focusing on learning lessons from criminal cyber attacks and analysing the methodologies that different groups used, in an effort to pre-empt future attacks. Both UK and Russian participants acknowledged their countries' blind spots on the scale of cyber attacks that have already been carried out, maintaining that poor information sharing was only exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. Existing legislation in both countries is insufficient to police cyberspace, and the judicial system is not sufficiently developed to prosecute offenders. In Russia in particular, cybercrime is not viewed as a serious crime and sentences are light. While governments do play a role in regulating cyberspace and instilling a culture of cyber-security awareness, it was agreed that businesses should also bear some responsibility for training staff and clients on user hygiene, as well as formulating better responses to data breaches. The threat from cybercrime is only set to increase as the Internet of Things and smart devices become more deeply embedded in people's daily activities, increasing the volumes of data on people, the growth of systems that control our daily lives as they become increasingly automated and online, and the subsequent risk of theft of biometric data.

Russian participants maintained that some cyber-criminals had used Russia as a testing ground for attacks, and having tested them, moved on to more sophisticated attacks abroad. Better information sharing between countries could have prevented or at least better anticipated future attacks. To offset concerns around sharing information with Russia, participants proposed establishing an independent information-exchange platform to promote a culture of feedback and data sharing on cyber-criminality. The Central Bank of the Russian Federation and the Bank of England could also cooperate on establishing joint cyber security policies and methods of good practice in the financial sector, which could then be more widely disseminated to other regional banks.

I. Nuclear Arms Control and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty

The first dialogue session on nuclear arms control took place in London in October 2018, where industry experts and academics gathered to discuss the future of nuclear arms control and the broader security threat from nuclear conflict. They were joined at specific moments by officials to provide contemporary context to the discussions and understanding of the official conversation and issues. While the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty is a US–Russia bilateral issue, the future of the INF and New START treaties have serious implications for both the UK and European allies. As a P5 country, member of NATO and nuclear power, the UK’s involvement in any future renegotiation of the INF Treaty is highly relevant. This event took place before the US withdrew from the Treaty, so the comments from the roundtable have been written with this in mind.

The first roundtable session focused on nuclear arms control, amid accusations that the US and Russia had levelled at each other for violating the INF Treaty. The discussion took place before the US’s announcement in November 2018 that it intended to withdraw from the Treaty, maintaining that Moscow had violated the agreement by developing and deploying a banned missile.¹ Russian President Vladimir Putin announced soon after that Russia would be suspending its obligations under the INF Treaty,² throwing into jeopardy the renegotiation of the New START Treaty, which expires in February 2021. While the roundtable participants could not have anticipated that the US’s definite withdrawal from the INF Treaty was imminent, this prospect nevertheless came up in many discussions, and several scenario-planning measures were discussed in case this eventuality came about.

One of the main reasons that the INF Treaty was in jeopardy was that the US and Russia believed that as it stood the Treaty was inadequate. Moreover, there were also repeated concerns over China’s deployment of INF-range systems, given that they were not included in the INF Treaty. Nuclear arms control had not been a strategic priority since the first term of US President Barack Obama’s administration, and before the US’s allegations over Russia’s violations, nuclear stability had been somewhat taken for granted. One point of agreement around the table was the importance of maintaining a conversation around nuclear arms control, and that it was incorrect to view the discussion around security purely in conflict terms.

¹ Kingston Reif, Trump to Withdraw U.S. from INF Treaty // Arms Control Association. November 2018.
URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-11/news/trump-withdraw-us-inf-treaty>, accessed 1 March 2019.

² In Tit-for-Tat Move, Putin Announces Russian Suspension of INF Treaty // Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 2 February 2019.
URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-blasts-us-decision-inf-treaty/29746714.html>, accessed 28 February 2019.

1.1. Understanding Strategic Security

Thanks to the level of trust that Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev and US President Ronald Reagan enjoyed, it was possible to craft the INF Treaty that is now being eroded by a high level of mistrust between the two powers. Moreover, Russia and the West currently lack a common understanding of security – Russian participants noted that Russia did not have a specific concept of ‘strategic stability’ and what it means, and that this idea has been defined by the West. Both Russia and the West must still reach a mutual conclusion on what conditions need to be met to constitute ‘nuclear peace’. A Russian nuclear expert interviewed for this dialogue outlined the official Russian position, which is that the US had failed to produce hard evidence of a Russian violation of the treaty, and maintained that if New START is not renegotiated, there will be no strategic stability in Europe.³ UK participants noted that they were particularly concerned by the prospect that Russia could become involved in a small-scale skirmish on the fringes of Europe that could then escalate in a manner similar to the Ukraine conflict, but with a nuclear dimension.

Roundtable participants noted that the current security prognosis is not so much a new Cold War, but more of a fragmented and fractured European security framework; there is currently no consensus on how to approach fundamental issues such as conventional weapons. While there is also no consensus in the Moscow administration about why the Treaty failed, there does appear to be an understanding in the Russian Ministry of Defence that Russia is militarily overstretched and that its nuclear build-up is expensive, so it could not compete in another arms race with the US. There are evidently voices within the Russian security administration that can be engaged over the idea of nuclear reduction or limitation.

1.2. Points of Agreement

Many participants agreed that the INF Treaty in its current format was not fit for purpose, and that given the technological advances since the Treaty was conceived in the 1980s, it should be revised. The INF had its limitations, in that it excluded sea- and air-launched missiles, and there are no ongoing verification processes. Air-defence systems were also not included in the Treaty, even though they contain almost the minimum range that the INF covers. The issue of surprise attacks remains relevant, as does the absence of a discussion of maritime security from the debate – Russia in 2015 launched cruise missiles at Syrian targets from its warships in the Caspian Sea,⁴ which prompted much alarm from Europe.

The ambiguity of nuclear and conventional weapons was discussed as a more general challenge, which is particularly salient with regard to intermediate-range missiles. It was also generally agreed that the INF Treaty alone does not address the grievances on both sides, and that additional treaties may be required to satisfy both sides’ security demands as well as the broader global strategic envi-

³ Author interview with Russian nuclear expert, Moscow, October 2018.

⁴ Quentin Sommerville, Russian Missiles Strike Syria from Caspian Sea // BBC News. 7 October 2015.

ronment which such treaties do not necessarily account for. The UK could play a role in expanding our understanding of what arms control means and moving away from mere crisis stability.

1.3. Points of Divergence

One issue that Russian participants frequently pointed out in this roundtable, and in the three other sessions that RUSI and RIAC hosted, is that the West's approach to Russia has been to issue ultimatums, which Russia rarely responds to in the intended manner. Putin cannot be seen to publicly compromise with the West, as this would undermine his political system. While Putin has not questioned the importance of the INF for Russia, there has been much opposition to it from the military, particularly retired members. However, Russia has frequently claimed that it is subject to more scrutiny than the US. The US and the West maintain that the onus is frequently on their side to come up with a solution to security issues, including drafting an agreement and proposing a dialogue, and that Russia has not demonstrated much willingness to come to the table. However, it was generally agreed that while the US had played this role in recent years, the Trump administration is unlikely to do so on this occasion.

Moreover, for Russia to agree to discuss the US's INF agenda would oblige Russia to recognise the legitimacy of the US's claims, which it refuses to do. Russian participants maintained that Russia is concerned by the fear of strike by mistake or inadvertent use, an issue that Russian nuclear strategists have often mentioned. They also maintained that accusations levelled at both sides are often due to the Treaty's vague wording, which has allowed for ambiguity over what constitutes a violation. As representatives from the Russian Ministry of Defence have noted,⁵ ambiguity in the Treaty's language has led to fundamental misunderstandings. Russia has countered the US's claim that Russia must acknowledge its 'highly likely' violation of the Treaty by maintaining that the US has deployed its Aegis Ashore systems to Romania, with MK-41 launchers that have the potential to launch Tomahawk medium-range cruise missiles capable of reaching the Russian city of Voronezh.⁶ Russian officials maintain that this is in violation of the Treaty. While both sides agreed that the MK-41 remained one of the fundamental points of disagreement, if they were to agree to a system of better transparency on this issue, that methodology could be transposed into other systems.

Another complicating factor is the growing need for better verification capabilities to establish the specific details of missiles, without which it is impossible to determine whether either side is in breach. Verification is currently difficult as the difference between a 500-km and 2,000-km cruise missile can be just the size of the fuel tank. Further points made in the discussion were that there is currently no consistent definition of the minimum threshold for 'deterrence'; the collapse of the INF Treaty and poor communication between both parties is likely to increase the scope for miscalculation in Europe and has had implica-

⁵ Interview with senior military official, Russian Ministry of Defence, Moscow. 8 November 2018.

⁶ *Ibid.*

tions for the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT), which could also be in jeopardy.

As the recommendations below suggest, the future of nuclear arms control, if there is one, will likely be multilateral, allowing other nuclear powers into the discussion. Both France and the UK have stated their respective positions clearly, which are that Russia and the US must reduce their arsenals to levels more comparable to their own, before they allow their own systems to be limited by multilateral agreements. France and the UK have already reduced their own numbers of nuclear warheads to 300 and 215 respectively. In comparison, Russia has around 7,200 and the US has 7,000 units of nuclear arms,⁷ including nuclear weapons and warheads stored in warehouses.

1.4. Recommendations

Participants from both Russia and the UK agreed that for a future INF Treaty to work, confidence-building measures must be offered on both sides, including an exchange of assurances that both have a common interest in keeping some form of security guarantees alive. One of the best-case scenarios would be identifying a specific timeframe within which both sides could reach a consensus on a new treaty. Participants from the roundtable suggested six potential strategies for reaching this consensus, which are outlined below.

1.4.1. Negotiations for Another Treaty

Any new INF-similar agreement forged between Russia, the US and other partners must account for technological advances since the 1980s, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), missile defence systems and hypersonic weapons, as they all need to be taken into account in credible definitions of what the INF calls ‘intermediate-range systems’. Even if no new INF-style treaty is negotiated, these systems should all be included in future discussions. However, any new treaty would have to be approved by the US Senate by a two-thirds majority, which is unlikely to happen. There have also been recent indications that Moscow is keen to renegotiate a new START Treaty, alongside (and perhaps as a condition for) extending the Treaty until 2026.⁸ Another suggestion by a Russian participant was that a treaty based on INF limitations rather than the elimination of stocks could be proposed.

1.4.2. Alternative Formats

The UK and France could propose a new list of definitions for a future treaty – the P5 might also be a useful format for this discussion, as would engaging a commission of technology experts to conduct inspections at nuclear sites.

⁷ Kristensen Hans M. New START 2017: Russia Decreasing, US Increasing Deployed Warheads // Federation of American Scientists. 3 April 2017.

URL: <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2017/04/newstart2017/>, accessed 4 March 2019.

⁸ Patrick Donahue, Helene Fouquet and Henry Meyer, Lavrov Offers US Talks on Extending Arms Control Accord: Munich Update // Bloomberg. 16 February 2019.

URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-16/pence-tells-nato-to-stop-buying-arms-from-east-munich-update>

Technical experts familiar with verification procedures could also be used to work on mutually acceptable definitions of a new treaty, to try to adapt to the current strategic landscape. However, technical dialogues have their limits. During the 1970s, the US and USSR were able to discuss limitations on stocks of anti-ballistic missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles through this kind of technical dialogue, but as the diplomatic relationship between the US and USSR deteriorated, low levels of trust obstructed their work. Attempting to push through technical dialogue in the wrong political environment is unlikely to work. Moreover, renegotiating arms control does not necessarily have to come in the form of a treaty – the INF could be replaced by ceilings of stockpiles, or mutual declarations on limitations.

1.4.3. The Involvement of China

There are currently no criteria for arms control numerical limits that involve more than two parties, yet China should not be ignored as a third party, given that it is one of the largest producers of missiles which, in US or Russian hands, would have been prohibited by the INF Treaty. To broaden the scope of the conversation, it may be worthwhile to involve countries with capabilities that could be regulated by a multilateral INF treaty. Countries such as China, Iran, Israel, India, and Pakistan could be included in a conversation to establish a military doctrine that discussed intermediate-range weapons at a global level. A Russia–US–China trilateral format would not be viable, as China would not join such an association without partners such as India and Pakistan, and most of China’s nuclear potential is mid-range. It is likely that such a conversation would have to include the strategic systems of all parties, including the US and Russia.

1.4.4. Identifying the UK’s Role

While Russia tends to view the INF Treaty as a Moscow–Washington discussion, this is not entirely the case – the UK has been vocal in its attempts to move arms controls up the agenda for European countries for whom strategic stability is extremely important. Russia tends also to view the UK as having the ear of Washington, which could play a role in clarifying to the US how important strategic security is to Europeans. Naturally, Brexit came up repeatedly in the discussion, but it is unlikely to fundamentally alter the UK’s role in the nuclear conversation. Irrespective of its involvement in the EU, the UK plays a role in the NPT and nuclear restraint is part of the UK’s national security interests – thus far, the UK’s cooperation with Russia through the P5 format remains positive and should be preserved.

1.4.5. Scope for Involvement of Other European Countries

Notwithstanding Brexit, the UK appears to be broadly aligned with France and Germany on nuclear security. Some participants suggested that European states could offer confidence-building measures such as committing to not deploy or host US INF arms on their home territories, which would unite the European consensus and offer some reassurance to Russia. One issue with this approach

is that there are still a range of views on nuclear controls in Europe. While the view from many NATO member states is that Russia is seeking to undermine the bloc, there could be scope for NATO to make a statement on the INF and arms controls without this challenging their unity.

Arms control must also consider issues such as: the combat readiness of nuclear arsenals and their degree of transparency; confidence-building measures; and the dialogue on military doctrines and information exchanges on modernisation plans. If ‘soft arms control’ – a way of approaching strategic security without blanket limitations or restrictions on stocks – were to be seriously considered, both the UK and France would have a potential role to play by formulating specific proposals. Progress in at least some of these areas would make it possible to both mitigate the negative consequences of the collapse of the INF Treaty and outline a new model of nuclear arms control that could gradually and carefully bring China, India and other nuclear powers into the fold.

1.4.6. Engaging Multilateral Entities

The P5 format has been the launch-pad for non-P5 action in the past, such as UK–China verification processes on the dismantling of warheads. Using this format to discuss the verification of allegations of treaty violations may be an option. Moreover, a multilateral inspection commission could be more acceptable by both sides, rather than a military-to-military exchange. Other multilateral entities such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) could also assist the US and Russia’s process in communication support or mediation, even without the INF in place.

II. Organised Crime and Terrorism

This session focused on organised crime and terrorism and attempted to move beyond definitions towards a consensus on practical security cooperation. The sessions also discussed salient security issues such as human trafficking, sharing ways of designing civilian infrastructure to counter crime and terrorism, and the return of foreign fighters from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. It also discussed lessons learned from international events such as the World Cup in 2018, the Sochi Olympics in 2014 and the London Olympic Games in 2012, to see whether the UK and Russia could compare their methods for securing towns and cities for future large-scale events.

A UK participant with experience in government noted that security and intelligence sharing between the UK and Russia had become one of the first casualties of the difficult bilateral relationship. The UK's official security structures, such as the National Crime Agency (NCA), have not engaged with Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) since the Litvinenko poisoning in 2006. The UK maintained that the FSB were responsible for the attack, and UK security services did not want to formally engage with a counterpart involved in their investigation. Moreover, the UK also tends to view the Russian security apparatus as an extension of President Putin and his associates. During the 1990s, the UK had relatively good relationships with the Russian intelligence agencies, including working with Russia's Federal Financial Monitoring Service (Rosfinmonitoring) to counter financial crime and with the Russian police services. Now, while there is technically a hotline open between the UK and Russia's ministries of defence, it is rarely used, and for the most part only to check that the signal is working.⁹ The NCA is able to initiate a bridge-building process, but cannot on its own resolve a political impasse, as this will need to be addressed by the central authorities.

Notwithstanding the difficult political environment, the dialogue indicated that both sides could still cooperate over several shared security interests and learn from each other's methodologies. One participant drew a comparison with the Israel–Palestine conflict, noting that Israel's security services continue to work with Gulf Arab states despite their political disagreements, and have found common ground with Arab neighbours over their mutual concern of the threat posed by Iran.¹⁰

2.1. Countering Organised Crime and Terrorism

While the UK and Russia have common interests in countering organised crime and terrorism, differences of understanding and definitions are likely to restrict cooperation. This area is also particularly difficult to depoliticise – the Russian

⁹ Interview with senior military official, Russian Ministry of Defence, Moscow, October 2018.

¹⁰ Paul Shinkman, *Secret Israeli–Arab Entente Blocking Peace?* // US News. 22 May 2017.

URL: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-05-22/secretive-israeli-arab-security-coordination-could-prove-an-obstacle-to-peace>

authorities' definition of extremism is very broad and has been used on occasion to target individuals expressing views in opposition to the government or for their religious activities, as in the case of several Jehovah's Witnesses.¹¹

Although discussing issues such as money laundering and financial crime can be politically sensitive in Russia, the dialogue did not shy away from this. It was agreed that the private sector could play a leading role in countering financial crime, especially the banking sector – London in particular has become a hub for the laundering of the proceeds of crime, often with the assistance of Russian organised criminal groups. Both sides agreed that banks must be on board with flagging suspicious transactions in a timely manner, but financial institutions rarely have the information they require, and corporations must be incentivised to do this. Large companies tend to have operations in multiple countries and sharing information on their customers across their global footprint is often a data-protection issue, with legal consequences in some jurisdictions where they operate.

A further practical issue is that organised criminal groups often operate as multiple and malleable networks whose partners change over time as demands and conditions change. It was agreed that security services on both sides tend to be more reactive than proactive in preventing gang crime. While this is a mutual issue, it was pointed out that Russia is attempting to increase its own resilience to security issues rather than cooperating with others on this issue. However, all sides were able to agree on the importance of addressing security issues such as child exploitation, on and offline, and human trafficking.

During a discussion on human trafficking, new forms of control by traffickers were discussed, whereby victims are made to believe that they have a stake in their future and some control over the situation, which makes them difficult for law enforcement to identify. These people tend to travel freely across borders, and while they may be aware that they are being exploited, they are occasionally able to earn a decent wage, which makes them less likely to flag their situation to law enforcement. Russia has increasingly become a transit route for human smuggling, but it is not clear to what extent organised criminal groups are involved, an intelligence gap that the UK could assist with.

UK–Russia cooperation on counterterrorism is poor, but the risk of home-grown terrorism and online radicalisation is an issue in both countries. Younger people in towns in the UK and Russia are becoming drawn to Islamist extremism and recruitment online, and local authorities have little knowledge of how to counter this, particularly in places such as Portsmouth¹² in the UK and the southern city of Stavropol¹³ in Russia. Traditional hubs around capital cities have now given

¹¹ Russia: Sweeping Arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses // Human Rights Watch. 28 June 2018.
URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/06/28/russia-sweeping-arrests-jehovahs-witnesses>, accessed 28 February 2019.

¹² Lizzie Dearden, Isis: London and Portsmouth Among Europe's Most Notorious Recruitment Hubs for Foreign Fighters, Report Reveals // The Independent. 17 November 2016.
URL: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-british-members-foreign-fighters-cities-london-portsmouth-worst-europe-belgium-paris-ctc-report-a7422371.html>

¹³ Alena Belyaeva, Stavropolskovo glavu sel'coveta osudili za verbovku terroristorov IGLI. [Head of Stavropol Agricultural Council Sentenced for Recruiting on Behalf of the Islamic State] // Komsomolskaya Pravda. 19 June 2018.
URL: <https://www.alt.kp.ru/daily/26843/3885236/>, accessed 1 March 2019.

rise to a picture of recruitment scattered across countries, impacting communities that previously felt insulated from these kinds of problems.

Russia has been a major source of individuals eager to go and fight alongside Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS). In 2017 President Putin claimed that around 4,000 Russian citizens were fighting alongside Daesh in Syria¹⁴ (this compares to around 1,000 from the UK). In 2014 during the Sochi Olympics, the Russian authorities broadly supported the exodus of several thousand individuals to join the conflict in Syria and Iraq, but they are now tightening up borders in porous southern regions to prevent their return. It was noted from a Russian participant that many individuals who have joined Daesh from the southern republic of Dagestan are highly educated people with good salaries, somewhat going against the claim that the attraction of terrorism is financial. Russia's approach has been to promote more moderate Islamic education, such as Sufism in Dagestan and Chechnya. However, in places like the North Caucasus, economic pressures, lower salaries and a corrupt local administration create an atmosphere ripe for political disaffection and have left people vulnerable to Daesh narratives. Recognising this, in June 2015 Daesh established a Vilayat (province) in Dagestan.

2.2. Physical Resilience

Participants noted that the success of large events such as the UK Olympics (2012), Russia's Sochi Winter Olympics (2014) and the FIFA World Cup (2018) could be attributed to several factors, not least a heavy security presence. There was some intelligence sharing between Russia and other foreign countries during the most recent World Cup, but this ended soon after the event. Efforts to establish longer-lasting cooperation could build on the success of events such as these.

Addressing the root causes of crimes and going beyond the physical challenges of security are issues that both countries are attempting to address. One of the main issues in countering crime and terrorism is the line between ensuring that the security services' interventions in civilians' lives are effective yet invisible, and do not intrude on people's private lives. Fundamental differences were mentioned in Russia and the UK's approach to the visibility of security interventions and designing out crime – in Russia, introducing visible measures such as metal detectors and armed guards at metro stations to deter terrorist activity was not viewed with the same anathema as it would be received in the UK. A similar method is unlikely to work well in London, where the sight of armed officers is more likely to cause consternation than calm.

Moscow is particularly concerned about marginalised communities that are becoming isolated in large cities and a fertile ground for recruitment for terrorist

¹⁴ Putin nazval chislo russiya voyuyushikh na storone boevikov v'Sirii [Putin Announces the Number of Russians Fighting on the Side of Militias in Syria] // Vedomosti. 23 February 2017.
URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/02/23/678892-putin-nazval-chislo-rossiyan>, accessed 1 March 2019.

groups. The discussion touched on how to break down these barriers and use urban planning and the physical designs of cities to reduce tensions between communities in this way. The use of state-sponsored surveillance, such as facial recognition software, to target known criminals and far-right football ‘hooligans’ at the World Cup,¹⁵ was mentioned as a particularly useful tool that did not restrict the movement of other civilians.

2.3. Recommendations

Several recommendations were suggested by participants in each session. One UK expert noted that Russia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the UK’s NCA formerly had liaison officers in place. While reintroducing these positions would be a good way to reopen contact with the Russian security services, without some political will from the UK government there is unlikely to be any movement on this. Ultimately, engaging with official agencies such as the NCA or the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) will still require authorisation from the highest levels of government.

2.3.1. Ways of Approaching Relations

2.3.1.1. Existing Multilateral Formats

Participants discussed several positive formats already in place through which the UK and Russia could approach each other in a relatively depoliticised format. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to address money laundering, and the Egmont Group, which brings together FIUs across the world, are two official structures that both sides could use to engage. A joint UK–Russia initiative to counter organised crime could be established as part of the G20. The UK and Russia could cooperate on human trafficking through organisations such as the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the OSCE or the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) – this agency in particular could present an opportunity to approach Russia, as the Secretary General since 2010 has been a Russian, Ambassador Yuri Fedotov.

2.3.1.2. Alternative Approach to Ministries

It was suggested that the UK could approach Russian agencies and ministries that do not necessarily have a security focus over issues that arise from terrorism. Discussing the physical resilience of railway infrastructure could be a conversation between the UK transport services and Russia’s ministry of transport. This might help to depoliticise the discussion, and allow information sharing on designing out terrorism and crime at a regional level. Establishing the correct person to contact at the Ministry of Internal Affairs would also assist with this – Oleg Syromolotov, now deputy director of the FSB, who oversaw security for the Sochi 2014 Olympics, was suggested as a potential contact for the UK to begin a dialogue over this. Russia already engages countries and some NGOs over spe-

¹⁵ Facial Recognition Tech Leads to World Cup Arrest // Moscow Times. 3 July 2018.
URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/07/03/facial-recognition-tech-leads-to-world-cup-arrest-a62096>, accessed 3 March 2019.

cific trafficking issues, such as with North Korea over the UN Security Council Resolution in which alleged cases of labour rights' violations occurred during the World Cup.¹⁶

There is also some precedent for a joint bilateral ministerial approach – Russia's Federal Drug Control Services (FSKN, before it was shut down in 2016) and the US's Drug Enforcement Administration had set up a joint group based on shared intelligence on counter-narcotics in Afghanistan. This had included training on countering narco-traffickers in Central Asia. It was suggested that Russia could work with the UK and Central Asian partners on this, as Russia already cooperates with other relevant countries, like Kyrgyzstan, on this issue.

2.3.1.3. Joint Research Partnerships in Security Studies

Several participants suggested that the above cooperation between ministries could be strengthened by establishing research partnerships and exchanges between UK and Russian universities that could work together on a joint security research project. For example, the Moscow State University of Railway Engineering could be an appropriate partner institution for places like the University of Southampton, which has a specific department allocated to Railway Systems Research. The inclusion of educational stakeholders could foster roundtable discussions that may then be fed into respective governments and future policy-making. Human-trafficking victims are often involved in industries such as mining, and so it was suggested that mining universities in the UK and Russia could play a role in raising awareness about the issue, along with mining companies. St Petersburg's Mining University and the UK's Camborne School of Mines in Exeter could partner for this. This cooperation would necessitate improving institutional links between Russian and UK universities – the current political climate has made deepening educational institution connections of this kind difficult, as Russia in March 2018 ordered institutions such as the British Council in Russia to cease operations¹⁷ in response to the UK's expulsion of Russian diplomats following the Skripal incident.

2.3.1.4. Sub-National Counterterrorism Cooperation Over Large Events

While scope for high-level engagement between governments is difficult at the moment, the UK and Russia could cooperate at a city level on events that require a security element. London regional authorities could engage with their Russian counterparts in places like Sochi to learn from one another's experiences of holding large events. For example, Russia's Winter Universiade – a large sporting event – was held in March 2019 in the southern region of Krasnoyarsk, and Putin personally attended. This could have been a good opportunity to exchange information with a UK delegation that included the Metropolitan Police on how security for the event was organised.

¹⁶ Emma Burrows and Matthew Chance, Russia's Hidden World of North Korean Labor // CNN. 16 January 2018. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/15/europe/russia-north-korea-labor-intl/index.html>, accessed 15 March 2019.

¹⁷ Statement from the British Council on Russia // British Council. 17 March 2018.

URL: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/press/statement-british-council-russia>, accessed 27 February 2019.

2.3.1.5. Informal Lower-Level Discussions on the Sidelines of Events

In previous years it was noted that Russian and UK security officials engaged with each other on the sidelines of major international events and expos to discuss security issues. This more informal atmosphere allowed a level of information sharing that was sufficiently depoliticised to be useful. Major events also tend to bring officers together – as in the World Cup in 2018 – for the common good to ensure security at venues.

2.3.2. Crime

2.3.2.1. Cooperation Over Drug Production Abroad

Participants from the UK and Russia agree that drug production by the narco-mafia in places like Afghanistan is a serious issue. There is still good intelligence sharing on drug production occurring abroad in Latin America and Africa. The UK has an intelligence gap on Afghan heroin, but Russia has good tactical intelligence on this – increasing information sharing over this issue could help to build trust between intelligence agencies.

2.3.2.2. Understanding Impact

The UK's view – and the European view – that was repeatedly mentioned is that the Russian authorities broadly do not prevent financial crimes that benefit the *siloviki*, businesspeople and politicians, often from the security or military services, who are close to Putin personally. At the same time, Putin has maintained since 2012 that he intends to increase Russia's ranking in the World Bank's *Doing Business* ratings to the top 20 by 2020,¹⁸ although this goal is likely to be pushed back to 2024 – the end of his current term. Should senior businesspeople understand the impact of issues such as modern slavery on Russian businesses in clear terms, this may make them more inclined to promote transparency and work alongside other businesses. Russian bank VTB Capital in February 2018 already publicly announced its zero-tolerance approach to modern slavery, which may encourage other companies to do the same.¹⁹

2.3.2.3. Using Examples of Russia's Partnerships with Other Countries

The appointment of Sergei Ivanov as the Special Representative for Environment Protection, Ecology and Transport in 2016 has increased the profile of environmental crime in Russia, including illegal logging in the Far East and wildlife hunting facilitated by organised criminal groups. Russia is increasingly aware of this as a global issue, and there is growing Finland–Russia cooperation in North-west Russia between police forces and intelligence agencies on these issues.

¹⁸ Russia Falls Short of Putin's Top 20 Doing Business Goal // BNE IntelliNews. 31 October 2018.
URL: <http://www.intellinews.com/russia-falls-short-of-putin-s-top-20-doing-business-goal-151146/>,
accessed 27 February 2019.

¹⁹ VTB Capital Plc // Modern Slavery Registry. 28 February 2018.
URL: <https://www.modernslaveryregistry.org/companies/17777-vtb-capital-plc/statements/26073>,
accessed 26 February 2019.

III. The Middle East

The third roundtable discussion in London focused on themes rather than countries, including Russia and the UK's common economic and security interests in the Middle East. It also attempted to move beyond the current conflicts in Syria and Libya to discuss post-conflict scenarios for nation-state building, and where both the UK and Russia could play a role. It also examined where third parties such as France and Italy could be involved in reconstruction and development in these areas. This was one of the sessions in which the most consensus on the UK and Russia's approach to a particular topic was reached.

Russian participants maintained that Russia has a range of political, economic and military aims in the Middle East, designed to reassert its regional dominance and ensure it has a place at the negotiating table once conflicts in places like Libya and Syria have subsided. Evidently, any diplomatic resolution to conflicts in the Middle East will have to consider the presence of Russia, which has a good understanding of regional political administrations, and has positioned itself as one of the key players there alongside the US and increasingly China.

Russian presenters also noted that Russia has several economic and political interests in the Middle East and is currently attempting to establish partnerships with as many countries as possible, including Turkey and Iran. Russia's broad military and political goals in Syria have been achieved, and it has two military bases there – a naval facility in Tartus and an airbase in Khmeimim – which are useful for serving Russia's Caspian Sea fleet in the Mediterranean Sea. Russia is also actively involved in playing a mediatory role in the Palestine–Israel conflict. Historically, Russia has been a relative newcomer to the Gulf, and its main activities in the region are confined to high-level summits and occasional meetings. Russia has also developed a document on security in the Gulf in a proposal format, which suggests confidence-building measures, the regulation of arms and information sharing, but this does not include any reference to Turkey or Iran and so is not the basis for a broader road map for peace in the region.

British participants noted that the UK aims to increase trade with Middle Eastern countries and deepen diplomatic relations with them, to strengthen itself in a post-Brexit world. Participants agreed that the UK is also keen to avoid subordination to US policy in the Middle East and become embroiled in the dynamic between Trump, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohammad bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. The UK is also wary of becoming more deeply involved in places like Syria, as there could be domestic repercussions. Several terrorist plots in the UK have had links to Daesh's broader ideology. For Russia, Daesh is an equally active threat, with militants claiming that their attempted terrorist attacks on mainland Russia have been in response to Russia's military involvement in Syria.²⁰ Russian participants also mentioned that non-state actors are threatening Russia's interests and are using the Middle East

as a springboard to do this. Ultimately, Russia does not have a consistent policy or overarching strategy towards the Middle East, making it difficult for the UK (and the West) to gauge whether the Middle East could be an area of cooperation or conflict with Russia.

There were several areas of agreement among participants. The UK and Russia do not want to fulfil the role of sole security provider in the Middle East – both administrations carefully select the aspects of the Middle East that they will engage with. In the longer term there was broad agreement that Russia and the UK have common views on the dangers and challenges in the region posed by conflicts and Islamist extremism. Both the UK and Russia are keen to diversify their investment portfolios and to promote their respective businesses in places like Qatar or Saudi Arabia – from a business and political perspective, neither the UK nor Russia has much to gain from a rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. However, it was also agreed that external actors cannot be responsible for entirely shaping the Middle East, as this will depend on the Middle Eastern countries' domestic policies.

The involvement of China came up on several occasions, given China's growing investment role in countries such as Israel at the Port of Haifa, where the Shanghai International Port Group will take charge of the container terminal in 2021.²¹ China is also looking to increase economic trade deals in East Africa in countries such as Kenya and there are pipeline plans to extend a railway network into South Sudan and Uganda,²² all of which could pose a security challenge to Russia, particularly in the southern region of Africa.

China is not yet a significant economic player in the Middle East. It has not contributed significant funds to Syria on the ground, but China does supply replacement parts to Soviet equipment in the Gulf. Should China expand its economic position in a way that includes a security dimension, for example marketing missiles or anti-access air denial systems in the Gulf, this would pose a serious challenge to Russia. This is alongside China's military presence in the Red Sea and its base in Djibouti. There was much debate in the roundtable discussion about whether China's growing economy and interest in oil and minerals would give them a more assertive stake in security efforts in the Middle East.

3.1. The Saudi Arabia–Iran Partnership

Russia is keen to preserve its relationship with Iran and is focusing on improving their bilateral relations, but is cautious of returning to its Soviet-era relationship with Iran where it was placed in the responsible 'older brother' role. At the same time, Russia has been careful about falling in line with Saudi Arabia's line

²⁰ Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Troy Souza, *The Islamic State Threat to the 2018 FIFA World Cup* // CTC Sentinel. May 2018. Vol. 11, No. 5, pp. 1–9.

²¹ Haifa Container Terminal Deal with China's SIPG Under Review // PortSEurope. 23 December 2018. URL: <https://www.portseurope.com/haifa-container-terminal-deal-with-chinas-sipg-under-review/>, accessed 25 February 2019.

²² Nick Van Mead, *China in Africa: Win-Win Development, or a New Colonialism?* // The Guardian. 31 July 2018. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/jul/31/china-in-africa-win-win-development-or-a-new-colonialism>

on the regulation of oil prices in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. It was suggested that Russia could take advantage of the Saudi Arabia–Iran conflict as a way of expanding Russian influence in the region. There is still competition over Syria, with both Russia and Saudi Arabia working to reduce Iran’s influence there. Saudi Arabia must engage with Russia over this, as failing to do so would leave open the possibility for Iran to increase its influence in the region. There is also considerable historic UK–Russia rivalry in Iran, but ultimately it was agreed that the UK is unlikely to pose a serious challenge to Russia here, given Putin’s better relationship with Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and its political administration.

Participants in the roundtable assessed that in Saudi Arabia, the role of the religious establishment is beginning to change, and the country is no longer entirely led by the clergy. A nationalist and more secular narrative is taking hold, which characterises Iran as an external enemy, but it remains to be seen how far Saudi Arabia’s leader Mohammad bin Salman will take this narrative. He has chosen to take a hard-line stance on Iran, actively pursued his enemies abroad, and has substantially escalated the conflict in Yemen. The government occasionally uses the issue of the Sunni–Shia conflict to promote a narrative of instability that must be countered by more restrictive measures. There is unlikely to be any clash between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Iraq, and some participants thought that the degree of Iranian influence and efforts in Yemen was somewhat exaggerated.

There was some disagreement about whether Russia could be positioned as an alternative to the US in the region, and whether it would be able to work with all countries, regardless of their political or religious ideology.

3.2. Geoeconomics

UK and Russian participants noted that Russia’s economic interests tend to dovetail with its political interests. Denis Manturov, Minister of Trade and Industry, and Alexander Novak, Minister of Energy, both hold the main files on energy cooperation between Russia and the Middle East. Sergei Chemezov and his company Rostec have also taken the lead on business development in the Middle East and have positioned themselves as a competitor to Russia’s Ministry of Defence. Participants maintained that Russia’s business in the Middle East is predominantly state-backed, and so any business taking place – particularly in oil and gas – is strongly supported by the Russian government, given the politicisation of the Russian energy sector. Russia has also inherited many Soviet-era arms trade ties in the Middle East, such as Iraq, Egypt and Algeria. During the Cold War these arms deals were operating at a financial loss to Russia, but Russia no longer wishes to trade on those terms. Iraq and Egypt are increasingly seeing Russian arms as an alternative when other options have been closed off. Another Russian participant suggested that Russia is encouraging other countries and their businesses to enter Syria, to ensure that its own companies (particularly government-loyal businesses) can have a share in a good opportunity.

Russia is also keen to expand its business relationship with Turkey, with which it has significant institutional and economic links. This is not the case in the Iran–Russia relationship, as there are no strong economic links that could keep the diplomatic relationship afloat on their own. Both the UK and Russia have a large export market in Turkey, although Russia’s exports were temporarily halted in 2015 following the shooting down of a Russian jet as it flew along the Russia–Syria border.²³

In comparison with Russia, the UK’s economic footprint is smaller, but it does have some important security contracts, particularly in Saudi Arabia. UK oil companies have a significant presence in Egypt, where they compete with Russia over the Southern Gas Corridor, but Russian and UK companies are also involved in joint ventures there – Russia’s LUKoil and the UK’s BP are still operating as part of a consortium in the Shah Deniz field, the first link in the Southern Gas Corridor. Russia would have preferred to remain active in the EU gas market, but EU and US sanctions have restricted its access, as well as access to long-term loan financing for Russian banks.

3.3. Libya: Post-Conflict Resolutions

There is no real opportunity to re-establish a functioning government administration or viable state in Libya within the country’s current borders. Turkey and Qatar have both invested significant amounts in Libya, as have other regional players like the United Arab Emirates (supported by Saudi Arabia) and Egypt. Major European or regional players are not focused on Libya, aside from France and Italy, who have economic aspirations on the border with Sudan and are concerned about their physical proximity to these countries and the consequences for Sudan should Libya collapse. Both have energy firms deeply engaged in the region too. Roundtable participants thought that the UK and Russia were not currently able to access the most influential people in Libya that are able to exact change, although both the UK and Russia do have some piecemeal links through experts that frequently travel to the region. Ultimately this is preventing both Russian and UK administrations from gaining a greater understanding of the situation on the ground.

All actors in the region are propping up militias and political groups that cannot reconcile their goals. A security force is required to stabilise Libya from abroad, but this was a sensitive issue that proved divisive in the discussion, as it would need to be invited by the government, but it was not clear which actor should be engaged with – whether it is the administration in Benghazi or Tripoli. There was agreement from both sides that Russia’s relationship with Libyan National Army leader Khalifa Haftar has been much exaggerated, and that high-level meetings have not resulted in a substantive change in Russia’s policy in the region. It was also agreed that deadlines or timeframes for elections should not be imposed, as this does not work in Libya and occasionally causes an escalation in violence – there was a consensus on recognising a ‘Libyan pace’ for negotiations.

²³ Turkey’s Downing of Russian Warplane – What we Know // BBC News. 1 December 2015.
URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>, accessed 15 March 2019.

There was much discussion about post-conflict scenarios. In Benghazi, external and domestic actors are vying for control over the reconstruction of the country. The Russian approach to Libya, as voiced by several Russian participants, is that while Russia does have economic ambitions in the region, it also does not want to reconstruct an area that it was not responsible for damaging in the first instance. It was also agreed that there are multiple triggers for an uptick in hostilities in Libya, usually because of a struggle over resources rather than ideology.

3.4. Syria: Scenarios for Escalation

In Syria, Russia has promoted the Astana format – a series of peace initiatives to broker a diplomatic solution to the conflict, hosted in the city of Astana in Kazakhstan²⁴ – including negotiations over hostages and humanitarian aid, in tandem with the Gulf states. Russia is also keen to protect its private companies that are interested in investing in Syria's oil fields. The discussion touched on the international response to a possible repeat use of chemical weapons, and the question as to whether Russia is able or has the political will to contain Syria's President Bashar al-Assad on this issue. There were mutual concerns expressed about a possible offensive by the Islamist group al-Nusra in Idlib, which could prompt a response by Damascus to capture the final enclave in Idlib that is not yet under their control. Russia would be unable to control this situation and there would be significant casualties. It would also be unclear what the consequences of the collapse of Al-Qa'ida-affiliated group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib might be for the broader conflict and larger resonances outside Syria from the end of the revolution.

It was agreed that there were risks of a new escalation in Syria, partly because of the US's withdrawal from Syria, and owing to the crumbling balance of powers on the ground. Participants discussed four main possibilities for changes on the ground:

- **First, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad may begin a major offensive in Idlib, supported by the Iran-backed militia and the Russian air force.** This potential scenario was frequently referred to throughout the roundtable. While there are efforts on both sides to coordinate their actions in Idlib, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to resist pressure from Damascus, which insists on launching a large-scale operation there. A trigger would be Turkey's inability to meet the commitments it made in September 2018 to send additional troops to Idlib after agreeing a deal with Russia to avoid a government offensive and setting up a buffer zone to protect civilians.²⁵ Al-Qa'ida-affiliated group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is also increasing its control over most of the de-escalation zone. This was an agreement

²⁴ Astana Format Most Effective for Syrian Dialogue: Russian Senator // Tehran Times. 11 March 2017. URL: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/411842/Astana-format-most-effective-for-Syrian-dialogue-Russian-senator>, accessed 15 March 2019.

²⁵ Patrick Wintour, Russia and Turkey to Set up Idlib Buffer Zone to Protect Civilians // The Guardian. 17 September 2018. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/17/russia-and-turkey-to-set-up-idlib-buffer-zone-to-protect-civilians>, accessed 15 March 2019.

signed in May 2017 between Russia, Turkey and Iran at the Astana format,²⁶ identifying four areas, including Idlib where hostilities between rebels and Assad's government forces can be officially reduced. A major operation would likely prompt an outflow of refugees fleeing to Turkey and even to Europe, as well as a potential breakdown of Russia–Turkey cooperation in Syria. This scenario could also exacerbate the diplomatic relationship between Russia and the West, which would be even more acute if chemical weapons were to be used, likely triggering a military action led by the US and its allies. Developing a counterterrorism operation involving the US, European countries, Russia and Turkey would help to address HTS in Syria as an alternative to a major offensive on Idlib.

- **Second, the Turks and Kurds could resume fighting in the North.** Given the US's withdrawal, Turkey's army could intensify its operations against the Kurds in the North. Ankara has claimed that it wishes to make progress into Kurdish-controlled areas and introduce an Ankara-sponsored 'buffer zone' (or 'safe zone') on the Turkey–Syria border.²⁷ The Kurds would try to reach an agreement with the Damascus government, with the risk that it might involve Assad's engagement on the Kurdish side, and a direct confrontation between Damascus and Ankara. In this case, there would also be a diplomatic issue between Russia and Turkey, along with new tensions between Russia and the West. Any additional gains for Damascus would likely be followed by a resurgence of terrorism in Syria and Turkey.
- **Third, Israel's targeting of Iranian assets in Syria could prompt serious retaliation from Iran.** The Iranians and the Shia militia would then return to the Golan Heights and would directly confront Israeli forces there. The Israelis would likely reciprocate by intensifying air raids in Syria, and Hizbullah activity at the Lebanon–Israel border could resume. The US would likely commit to backing Israel's escalating stance, as well as Israel's more assertive military presence in Syria, and potentially direct Israel's action in Iran. In that case, there is scope for a Hizbullah-led attack on Israel, and eventually direct US military action against Iran, putting Moscow in a very difficult position.
- **Fourth, the Russia–Iran partnership in Syria could collapse.** The once implicit competition between Moscow and Tehran for influence in Damascus would then become explicit. Pro-Russian and pro-Iranian military groups in Syria would most likely fight against each other. Tehran would increasingly accuse Moscow of being the first to 'sell out' Iran's interests in Syria to Turkey and criticise Russia for failing to punish Israel for its air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria. Turkey and Israel would likely pressurise Putin to have Russia support them. Iran would feel even more isolated and would become

²⁶ Russia: Syrian Safe Zones Plan Comes into Effect // Al Jazeera. 6 May 2017.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/russia-syrian-safe-zones-plan-takes-effect-midnight-170505185444598.html>, accessed 15 March 2019.

²⁷ Michael Eisenstadt and Soner Cagaptay, A Turkish Safe Zone in Syria: Prospects and Policy Implications // Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 1 March 2019.
URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-turkish-safe-zone-in-syria-prospects-and-policy-implications>, accessed 15 March 2019.

increasingly assertive and uncompromising towards Syria and the Middle East and North Africa region in general. Any breakdown of the Astana peace-building process would escalate the violence in Syria.

3.5. Post-Conflict Scenarios

Once the conflict has died down, there was a consensus that a figure like Saad al-Hariri, prime minister of Lebanon, would be an attractive prospect for Russia to negotiate with. However, HTS, affiliated to Al-Qa'ida in Syria, is becoming more strategic and less violent in the region, in an attempt to avoid alienating potential partners on the ground but ensure it remains militarily strong. It was suggested that HTS could be paving its way to enter official structures once the conflict has subsided. Russian participants suggested that Russia would be interested in engaging with the US over Syria, as it was pointed out that the UK is less vocal in this region and after the parliamentary vote in August 2013,²⁸ a less prominent actor in the conflict. While Russia appears to be the broker willing to work with Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the region, it is not clear whether the West understands this nuance, particularly the US, as its withdrawal of troops has served to empower Iran.

The UK is keen to see a diplomatic end to the conflict through a UN-sponsored process under resolution 2254,²⁹ but Assad will need to engage with the UN process. The UK side maintained that it would not provide reconstruction assistance or reopen its embassy until Assad agrees to this. They noted that the exact nature of the relationship between the Russian and Syrian Ministries of Defence remained unclear. The UK is eager to understand the day-to-day extent of this relationship, such as whether warnings had been issued over airstrikes, or the degree of control that Assad personally has over military operations.

3.6. Recommendations

The recommendations from this roundtable were primarily focused on finding appropriate formats through which to engage with Russia on the Middle East. Given both the UK and Russia's concerns about Chinese influence in the region, identifying their respective understandings of China's intent and capability there could be one useful point of entry for more open discussion about common concerns.

3.6.1. Reworking the GCC

There was much criticism of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the complicating factors of the Iran–Saudi Arabia relationship, but there are currently few other military alliances that work in the region. It was suggested that key players in the Middle East and Russia could establish a specific military alliance that

²⁸ Syria Crisis: Cameron Loses Commons Vote on Syria Action // BBC News. 30 August 2013.

URL: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-23892783>

²⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015). 18 December 2015. S/RES/2254(2015).

URL: https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/ct/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf, accessed 18 March 2019.

NATO could engage with over the region, against other more aggressive actors such as Al-Qa’ida or Daesh. A multilateral format would help to temper some of the balance of powers in the GCC. The GCC was established as a Gulf version of NATO but has failed to develop into this. It could, however, be the primary dialogue forum through which NATO could engage with the Middle East on different issues, not just over defence and security.

3.6.2. Statement of Reassurance from Russia Over Syrian Casualties

While Russia maintains that it targets terrorists on the ground in Syria, offering reassurances and explanations about the steps it has taken to minimise civilian casualties and how its targeting is conducted would improve relations with other countries involved in the region, including the UK.

3.6.3. Working Together on Humanitarian Issues in Yemen

While Yemen was not discussed as a topic on its own, it was agreed among most participants that the humanitarian crisis in that country is something the UK and Russia could work together on, and an area in which the UK has good expertise in dealing with local tribes. Yemen’s government has become hollowed out since the conflict and will require significant financial and political support for it to become a viable state after the conflict subsides. The humanitarian crisis going on in the country is a situation that both sides agreed needed some remedy or action at an international level.

3.6.4. UK–Russia Joint Approach on Iran

Several Russian participants noted that on occasion Iran has been a rational actor. For example, it did not hinder the Caspian Sea agreement, in which countries bordering it – Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – signed a deal in August 2018 on how to divide up its resources.³⁰ It was agreed that a combination of carrots and sticks were required to approach Iran, but that at present the US is not ready to offer this. There was also some agreement that Iran ought to be turned into a stakeholder that has some responsibility in the region, otherwise it will become a spoiler. While the UK does support international sanctions on Iran, the UK, France and Germany, alongside Russia and China, supported the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).³¹ The UK and Russia could work together on persuading the US to return to the table to discuss agreements such as the JCPOA and to engage with Iran through official formats.

³⁰ What Does the New Caspian Sea Agreement Mean for the Energy Market? // Stratfor. 17 August 2018.
URL: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/what-does-new-caspian-sea-agreement-mean-energy-market>,
accessed 26 February 2019.

³¹ Iran Nuclear Deal: UK Backs Deal Despite US and Israel Accusations // BBC News. 1 May 2018.
URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43957431>

IV. Cyber Security

This session in Moscow was designed to build upon the previous year's workshop that discussed differences in the UK and Russia's conceptual approaches to cyber and information security. Previous roundtables focused on establishing how both the UK and Russia define the concepts of cyber versus information security, and the challenges of identifying a rules-based system in cyberspace. This second workshop aimed to use case studies of cyber security threat groups such as Silence and Lazarus as practical examples to kick off the discussion, and identify lessons learned from mutually destructive cyber events.

As expected, one of the main issues in this bilateral discussion is that UK businesses and governments fundamentally view Russia and China as the two main cyber security threats.³² That said, there was agreement among participants that it was possible to depoliticise the cyber-security debate, as establishing how the attack was carried out is more important than specific attribution to a state or non-state actors. Given the rapidly evolving nature of cyber threats, it was ultimately agreed that sharing information and trying to improve resilience against future threats ought to be a priority for both sides.

There have been a number of high-level international discussions to this effect. In December 2018 the UN General Assembly adopted several resolutions on internet policy, aiming to establish international standards in cyberspace, including safeguarding data privacy.³³ France's President Emmanuel Macron in November 2018 launched the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace, which aimed to establish common norms in cyberspace and ways to counter emerging threats,³⁴ which became known as the Digital Geneva Convention. However, major players such as Russia, the US and China did not back this initiative, considerably reducing the convention's impact. It was also generally agreed that the current 2001 Budapest Convention on Cybercrime³⁵ – signed by more than 60 states – does not take into account considerable advances in technology since then, and that current legislation in cyberspace is insufficient.

Russian participants maintained that Russia engages with several other countries on cyber security, including through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with member states such as Kazakhstan. Within Russia, the FSB takes the lead

³² Cyber Security of the UK's Critical National Infrastructure // House of Lords, House of Commons Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. Third Report of Session 2017–19. November 2018.

URL: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtntatsec/1708/1708.pdf>

³³ Deborah Brown, UN General Assembly Adopts Record Number of Resolutions on Internet Governance and Policy: Mixed Outcomes for Human Rights Online // Association for Progressive Communications. 10 January 2019.

URL: <https://www.apc.org/en/news/un-general-assembly-adopts-record-number-resolutions-internet-governance-and-policy-mixed>, accessed 4 March 2019.

³⁴ Cybersecurity: Paris Call of 12 November 2018 for Trust and Security in Cyberspace // France Diplomatie.

URL: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/digital-diplomacy/france-and-cyber-security/article/cybersecurity-paris-call-of-12-november-2018-for-trust-and-security-in>, accessed 4 March 2019.

³⁵ Details of Treaty No. 185: Convention on Cybercrime 2001 // Council of Europe.

URL: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/185>, accessed 3 March 2019.

in addressing cybercrime and Rosfinmonitoring focuses on financial crime. The government also often works with the private sector, by engaging large banks such as Sberbank to investigate data breaches and attacks. However, Russia does not have an independent cyber police, and there is a growing understanding within the Russian administration that it cannot tackle cybercrime alone. There was also agreement that the Western sanctions introduced in 2014 have negatively impacted on Russian cyber-security companies; Russia promoted import substitution as a means of replacing the trade lost by the EU and US markets, which includes a growing reliance on domestic-made products, including technology.³⁶

Currently, few foreign cyber security vendors have a presence in Russia, and Russian companies' products are not able to gain a foothold on the market because of a lack of long-term financing from sanctioned banks. Other Russian companies such as Kaspersky are mistrusted by the West and have been accused of having close links to the FSB. Russian cyber security interfaces are also rarely compatible with Russian domestic technology, as they are created to be used with foreign technology. Moreover, any potential information exchanges between UK and Russian computer emergency response teams (CERT) are complicated by the political environment, and there are currently very few successful information exchanges on cyber security.

It was clear from the discussion that both countries have multiple blind spots in terms of the scale of cyber attacks that have already occurred, and that a lack of information sharing only exacerbates these fundamental vulnerabilities. Given that the UK and Russia's military critical national infrastructure (CNI) is so closely interlinked with cyber, any breach could have serious security implications in both countries.

4.1. Policing Cyberspace

Governments play multiple roles in cyberspace, including those of protector, exploiter, user and regulator. The extent to which cyberspace should be regulated was the subject of much debate, as tighter regulations risk stifling innovation and change. However, cyber security is central to the UK and Russian economies and ensuring the safety of CNI.

Most participants believed that the private sector held the most information on cyber threats, and that law enforcement capabilities lagged behind. Legislation is outdated in both countries, and sentences for cybercrimes are low and an insufficient deterrent for cyber-criminals. Both sides agreed that discussions between governments and banks to identify issues such as fraud and cybercrime are not yet mature – only broad themes have been defined, rather than longer-term trends that could help governments to be less reactive.

In Russia and the UK, judges rarely have sufficient understanding or awareness of the cyber threat to be able to prosecute cases. Many judges do not consider

³⁶ Ben Aris, Russia's Import Substitution Has Not Been a Great Success // Moscow Times. 13 October 2017. URL: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/13/russias-import-substitution-has-not-been-a59267>, accessed 15 March 2019.

cybercrimes to be particularly serious, and the scale of the threat from cyber security is generally underestimated. Moreover, there is also an issue around the jurisdiction and prosecution of cyber-criminals following an attack. Cyber-criminal groups are often transnational and target multiple countries at once, so it is unclear who the prosecuting entity should be.

Cybercrime is a service and a competitive space, but individuals are increasingly carrying out more sophisticated attacks with greater ease as the threshold for entry has been lowered. For example, hacking ATMs is an increasingly easy way for cyber-criminals to obtain clean cash. In response, the UK has upgraded its ATMs, encrypted its communications and segregated the networks. There is also a human factor – employees opening emails infected with malware at work remains a risk. One of the main risks to both the UK and Russia is the vulnerability of the supply chain, with organisations struggling to stay abreast of changing technology.

There was broad agreement on both sides over granular issues such as the need to regulate and protect the Internet of Things, including new technology such as smart homes. Fitness bracelets and smartphones can give attackers access to data such as the user's home address, passwords and even facial recognition data. The increasing use of biometrics in banking systems could also be vulnerable to attack by cyber-criminals, who have demonstrated a very high intent to access this information. Another common problem is the issue of connected devices, particularly in the financial sector. Mobile devices are used to simplify online banking transactions, but accessing more than one bank from a single point makes the consequences of hacking one device much more serious.

There is a risk of public erosion of confidence in institutions' ability to safeguard customers' data, and growing pressure on financial companies to improve their data security and react quickly to data leaks. Several participants noted that companies who had suffered a data breach were often unwilling to publicly state this and reacted slowly following a breach, which is likely contributing to a general under-reporting of incidents. Private sector participants agreed that a breach was inevitable, but that the importance lies in how companies respond, including communicating with clients and informing them as soon as possible about breaches and how they are being handled. Russian financial companies have encountered similar issues, with attacks on banks increasing over the last few years, where staff training and civil awareness have been inadequate.

4.2. Lessons Learned from Attacks

It was agreed that the attack from the Lazarus Group took years of planning to execute, but was only successful because organisations failed to take basic security precautions.³⁷ The group is thought to have been responsible for several

³⁷ FASTCash: 'How the Lazarus Group is Emptying Millions from ATMs'. 8 November 2018. URL: <https://www.symantec.com/blogs/threat-intelligence/fastcash-lazarus-atm-malware>, accessed 15 March 2019.

attacks on banks in countries such as Vietnam and Ecuador, as well as behind an attack on South Korean media and banking companies in 2013. It was also held responsible for stealing USD 1bn from the Bangladesh Central Bank in 2016. However, roundtable participants agreed that Lazarus’s methods were simple attacks that could have been prevented through more regular updating of computer security systems.

The digitalisation of business will pose new security issues in the coming years, and while the securitisation of industry is expensive, becoming a victim of cybercrime is equally expensive to fix. A Russian participant suggested that one of the most useful ways of educating organisations and companies about security online is to encourage them to use Secure Socket Layer (SSL) certificates, pieces of code that create a secure link between a web browser and a site that is then encrypted. This would allow them to transit information in a secure way, and help them to determine where attacks have come from. Organisations must continue to evaluate their successes and update their user hygiene to slow down attacks in future.

Cyber-criminals only need an attack to be successful on one occasion to make a profit and succeed, whereas even a single breach can be financially and reputationally destructive for an organisation. It was agreed that while official regulation is important, individual organisations must be aware of their businesses’ individual risks, particularly banks that hold key client data such as biometrics and handle money transfers. Many organisations lack awareness of the fact that the weakest link in their information systems is their staff – both in terms of insider threats, and staff security awareness and practice. People are also generally unaware of how cyber-criminals are using more unusual entry points to access their data, such as malware embedded in Adobe Flash Player.

Most Russian cyber firms tend to focus on network security and there is little longer-term research and development investment. Many cyber-criminal groups, such as Silence, began their operations in Russia and throughout 2016–2017 practised their skills there, which were then exported to target international institutions. Had the UK authorities known about the attacks in Russia before the attack hit the UK, they would have likely been better able to defend themselves. One Russian participant from the private sector maintained that they had attempted to share their information with UK financial institutions, but given the paranoia around Russian institutions, their information was not taken on board. This is likely because the UK tends to view Russian cyber security companies as an extension of the Russian government and is highly cautious of sharing data or information.

4.3. Recommendations

It was generally agreed that the onus is on both governments to promote a culture of cyber safety, particularly at work, and to instil this in the population at an early age, particularly at university.

4.3.1. Information Exchange Platforms

As mentioned above, many Russian companies throughout the workshop maintained that they had attempted to reach out to UK institutions to communicate information about Russian hackers, but that they had been rebuffed. If there is a serious intent to share information, then an information exchange platform could be set up for both countries to input their knowledge and receive output. Moving beyond just education, several participants noted the need to develop a culture of cyber security, including sharing lessons learned from previous attacks and promoting a culture of feedback, as passing feedback through official structures takes a long time. There is already some existing information sharing through CERTs, and there are also informal business networks that share information, although this is currently not scalable. Creating an independent institution through which information can be shared to identify the methodology of cybercriminals in a depoliticised way is likely to be the most viable solution.

4.3.2. Engagement Through Interpol

Despite difficult relations between the UK and Russia, Interpol has been an international entity that has continued to operate in a much less politicised or military manner. However, Russia has been accused of politicising Interpol in the past, particularly when it put forward a candidate for Interpol's presidency in November 2018 – their chosen candidate had been criticised for using the red notice system to target Russia's political opponents.³⁸ That said, Interpol could still be a good format for dialogue with Russia, an idea that was reinforced by another Russian participant, who maintained that Interpol and Europol have continued working together on drug-trafficking issues even during serious international incidents, and information exchanges are ongoing.

4.3.3. Engagement Through the UN

It was suggested that a UN format may be the most fruitful means of discussing cyber-security issues. However, there are currently opposing US and Russia resolutions on cyber security which will complicate this discussion, and any debates through this official format are likely to move very slowly, while cyber-criminals' sophistication evolves quickly. Both Russian and UK participants viewed positively the idea of re-establishing the UN expert group on cyber issues.

4.3.4. Bank-to-Bank Cooperation

Considering the speed at which the threat from cybercrime is evolving, increasing government and private sector funding will be required to counter it. Russia's Central Bank plays a key role in securing financial institutions' online banking, including the use of smart technology. While being aware of restrictions

³⁸ Richard L. Cassin, Concerns Raised as Russian official Poised to Lead Interpol // FCPA blog. November 2018. URL: <http://www.fcpablog.com/blog/2018/11/19/concerns-raised-as-russian-official-poised-to-lead-interpol.html>, accessed 15 March 2019.

around data sharing, the Central Bank could work together with the UK's Bank of England to establish joint cyber-security policies and share security methodologies used to prevent data breaches and thefts in the financial sector. This could take the discussion away from a government–government level, and results could be disseminated to other financial institutions across both countries to encourage them to take this on board.

Conclusion

Certainly, the four roundtables that RUSI and RIAC hosted on these sensitive but salient security issues brought out some contentious views, but also revealed plenty of scope for practical agreement. The UK and Russian participants' approaches to security questions may not always align but, as the numerous recommendations indicate, there are still many existing formats through which the UK and Russia can engage each other, as well as new ways of conducting information exchanges that may be useful for policymakers. Moreover, despite the UK and Russia's difficult political relationship, there remains significant value in maintaining an open dialogue channel of this kind, to allow the frank exchange of views and ideas.

About the Authors

Emily Ferris is a Research Fellow in the International Security Studies group at RUSI, where she specialises in Russian foreign and domestic security policies. Her research interests include Russian organised crime, the Russian Far East and political and security processes in Moldova and Belarus.

Andrey Kortunov is Director-General of the Russian International Affairs Council. He has been the Director-General of RIAC since 2011. Prior to that he held a number of positions at the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, including as its Deputy Director. His research interests include contemporary international relations and Russian foreign policy.



RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL (RIAC)
1, B. Yakimanka street, 119180, Moscow, Russia
Tel.: +7 (495) 225 6283
Fax: +7 (495) 225 6284
E-mail: welcome@russiancouncil.ru
www.russiancouncil.ru