IS IT HARD TO HIDE A BEAR IN THE DESERT?
THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN LIBYA
AND THE KREMLIN’S QUEST FOR GREAT POWER RENEWAL

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Abstract

What is the character of modern Russian expeditionary warfare? I explore this question through a detailed analysis of the Russian intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 until mid-2020. Based on my analysis, I argue that the intervention can be best understood as an armed attempt to manage an international conflict in a similar way that Moscow manages its domestic politics.

The key characteristics of the Russian intervention in Libya were the weaponization of diplomacy, widespread overt and covert disinformation operations, and the limited deployment of military force. Moscow’s weaponization of diplomacy aimed to manipulate Libya’s domestic political system and related international peace processes toward outcomes that favored Russian interests. Russian overt information operations portrayed Moscow to global audiences as a benevolent great power that was attempting to stabilize Libya, while simultaneously denying reports that Moscow was also involved in destabilizing activities. Kremlin affiliates simultaneously conducted covert disinformation operations to support Moscow’s preferred actors in Libya, to denigrate the UN-backed government, and to criticize any actor or process that threatened Moscow’s interests. Finally, the Kremlin used covert military support to manipulate the Libyan National Army’s weaknesses and to gain Russian access to important oil infrastructure and airfields in Libyan National Army-held territory.

This characterization of the Russian intervention in Libya corresponds with four Russian ideas about modern politics and contemporary warfare. These ideas are sovereign democracy, гибридная война, the strategy of limited actions,
and non-linear warfare. Sovereign democracy provides a lens through which to understand Moscow’s weaponization of diplomacy. Giбридная война provides vital perspective on information’s role in shifting a target state’s geostrategic orientation toward Russia. Finally, the strategy of limited actions combined with non-linear warfare help to understand the Kremlin’s use of limited covert military force for expeditionary operations.

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Dedication

To Bernard Brodie.

For his inspirational words.

“The purpose of soldiers is obviously not to produce books.”

– Bernard Brodie, 1949
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Chapter 1 – Modern Russian Warfare & Libya

Vladimir Andanov and his squad of Wagner Group mercenaries were on patrol in the fall of 2019 in the Libyan village of Espiaa, about 30 miles south of the capital of Tripoli. It was hot. Vlad was used to fighting in eastern Ukraine, not North Africa. His squad started to shoot into the air when they saw a man on the road. They didn’t know him. But they didn’t want him there either. The man’s name was Mohammed, and he quickly ran to his father’s home when the shooting began. Vlad and his squad followed close behind, forced their way into the house, and searched Mohammed and his relatives. The mercenaries then blindfolded everyone, tied their hands, loaded them onto a truck, and took them to a nearby Wagner military base at Qasr bin Ghashir. At about six o’clock the next morning, the mercenaries took Mohammed and his relatives back to their village, lined them up near a small outhouse, and began to execute them. Mohammed dropped to the ground and pretended to be dead when the shooting began. He and his brother survived. Everyone else died. The presence of Russian mercenaries in Libya was new for Mohammed and his family. But none of what happened that day was new for Vlad or the Wager Group. Vlad had engaged in similar war crimes during his first contract with Wagner while working in eastern Ukraine in 2014.¹

From Libya to Ukraine, stories like this have become more common as Moscow pursues an increasingly assertive global strategy to reclaim its great power status. This strategy has deployed Russian military power to wars in Eastern Europe and the Levant, such as the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, the Kremlin's long war in Chechnya that ended in 2009, Moscow's 2014 invasion of Crimea, the Russo-Ukrainian War from 2014 to the present, and Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war from 2015 to 2017. Analysis of these wars has produced varying concepts that have tried to describe the character of modern Russian warfare. However, the Kremlin’s great power ambitions are not confined to Eastern Europe or the Levant, and the extent to which the concepts derived from these regions apply to Russian expeditionary warfare in dissimilar peripheral regions—where neither Moscow nor Washington have vital national interests—is uncertain.

Furthermore, most Russian military doctrine and thought relates to the Russian military’s strategy to defend its homeland against a large-scale, conventional military invasion.\(^2\) Russian military leaders and thinkers have written comparatively very little about how the military would conduct expeditionary operations outside of the country’s borders. The small amount of authoritative information about the topic mostly comes from an early-2019 speech by Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. During his speech, Gerasimov referred to military operations outside Russian territory as a “strategy of limited

actions” (страгия ограниченных действий). His short, six-paragraph description of a potential framework for a Russian strategy of limited actions is based on the Russian military’s experience in Syria. Gerasimov’s description is a useful starting point to understand Russian expeditionary operations. But its brevity leaves many questions unanswered.

Uncertainty about the character of modern Russian expeditionary warfare is problematic. The most recent great power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War featured extensive strategic competition between expeditionary forces in peripheral regions throughout Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, including devastating wars in Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Congo, Korea, and Vietnam. Although the United States and NATO prioritized their military preparations during the Cold War for a large-scale conventional war in Europe, US and NATO forces instead became entangled in expeditionary operations in peripheral regions throughout the globe. Whether these were conventional wars like Korea, or so-called small wars, like the large-scale counterinsurgency campaign in Vietnam, the United States and its allies often found themselves unprepared for the wars they fought, rather than the wars they had expected. This unpreparedness often prevented the United States and its allies from understanding the character of the wars they were fighting and hindered the attainment of arguably achievable national security objectives.

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This historical perspective is important for assessing the extent to which Russian wars in the contemporary era and into the near future are likely to involve expeditionary operations related to peripheral Russian and US national security interests. With rapidly expanding populations, fast-growing economies, and abundant national resources, regions that are on the periphery of both Russian and US security interests are increasingly drawing Moscow and Washington into competition for access to and influence in these regions, setting the stage for conflict and armed confrontation. Yet it remains uncertain how Russia would approach warfare if it were to directly confront a Western power, such as the United States, while conducting an expeditionary operation in a peripheral region.

This uncertainty prompts the question: what is the character of modern Russian expeditionary warfare, particularly in peripheral regions? I explore this question through a detailed analysis of the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 until mid-2020 with emphasis on the period of intensified fighting in and around Tripoli from early-2019 until mid-2020. As discussed in greater detail below, I argue that the primary characteristics of the Russian intervention in Libya were the pervasive weaponization of diplomacy, widespread overt and covert disinformation operations, and the limited deployment of military

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force. This characterization of Russian expeditionary warfare builds on four key Russian ideas: sovereign democracy, *gibridnaya voyna*, the strategy of limited actions, and non-linear warfare. These ideas are discussed in detail below.

**Literature Review: Debating The Character Of Modern Russian Warfare**

Moscow’s desire to make Russia great again has generated increasing interest amongst Western policymakers, scholars, analysts, and warfare practitioners about the character of modern Russian warfare. This interest has revived attention in older ideas—such as political warfare—while also generating interest in new concepts, including sovereign democracy, hybrid warfare, *gibridnaya voyna*, the so-called Gerasimov doctrine, new-generation warfare, non-linear warfare, gray zone conflict, and the strategy of limited actions. These concepts are discussed below in the order in which each entered the strategic studies lexicon. The intent of this arrangement is to help show how Russian and Western understandings of modern warfare have broadened over time, particularly over the past 20 years.

These concepts have collectively heightened awareness that the Russian understanding of modern warfare extends beyond a simplistic understanding that war is based solely or mainly on the use of military force. However, contemporary literature analyzing the character of modern Russian warfare is riddled with contradictory definitions, often uses the different terms interchangeably or in

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5 The literature review focuses on approaches to warfare that combine multiple elements of national power, rather than a single element such as concepts like active measures that are wholly information operations.
ways different than their originators intended, often lacks rigorous empirical research, and offers limited insight into the applicability of extant concepts to expeditionary operations in peripheral regions, i.e., areas where neither Russia nor the United States have vital national interests.

*Political Warfare, 1948*

Discussions about political warfare have regained popularity in recent years.\(^6\) Influential American diplomat George F. Kennan described political warfare in 1948 as a state’s use of all elements of national power to achieve its objectives short of war.\(^7\) Kennan wrote that political warfare could include both overt operations—such as political alliances, economic recovery planning for foreign state partners, and white propaganda—and covert operations—such as supporting foreign resistance or liberation movements, black propaganda, and psychological warfare. Kennan provided then contemporary examples such as the 1947 Truman Doctrine, i.e., the publicly declared policy that the United States would support foreign countries threatened by communism, and the 1948


Economic Recovery Program, aka, the Marshall Plan, whereby the United States helped to restore the economic infrastructure of post-World War II Europe.

In contemporary discussions, the elements of national power typically include a state’s diplomatic, informational, military, and economic power. Some scholars, analysts, and practitioners also consider a state’s political, financial, intelligence, and legal power as distinct elements of national power. From this latter perspective, political power relates to domestic affairs, whereas diplomatic power relates to international affairs; financial power refers narrowly to a state’s use of money and assets, whereas economic power refers broadly to all aspects of a state’s economy; and intelligence is separated from informational power to distinguish between analyzed information that is used to inform internal decision-making and weaponized information that is used to influence external audiences.

Contemporary scholars have observed that Russia has engaged in political warfare against the United States for many years. Some also claim that political warfare may become the dominant form of great power competition in the future. However, Russia’s full-scale conventional invasion of Ukraine that began in early-2022 has challenged this assertion and indicates that although political warfare remains a potent element of modern Russian statecraft, the Kremlin remains willing to pursue traditional warfare, even at a very high cost.

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8 Robinson et al., Modern Political Warfare.
10 Galeotti, Russian Political War.
Sovereign Democracy, 2006

Sovereign democracy is a term that Russian political technologist Vladislav Surkov coined in an early-2006 speech to United Russia Party while he was serving as the deputy head of the Russian presidential administration. Although the term is rarely used in association with Russian warfare, the term does have relevant explanatory value for Russian expeditionary operations. In domestic policy, sovereign democracy can be understood as a form of managed democracy, i.e., a governing system wherein the Kremlin maintains a political system that has the façade of a democracy—including features such opposition political parties, debate, and elections—but is managed by an autocratic regime. Rather than relying on Soviet-style oppression, Surkov’s system of sovereign democracy relies on controlling all forms of political discourse, infiltrating all political movements, exploiting them, and playing them against each other to keep any real opposition off-balance and confused.

In foreign policy, sovereign democracy has a similar aim and approach, but operates on the international level rather than at the domestic level. At the international level, Moscow seeks to retain its position amongst the leading powers that control the global order. This is essential to safeguard Russia’s

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sovereignty from all threats, notably including color revolutions. In Surkov’s words, “If Russia leaves global politics, ceases to influence world decisions, then most likely these decisions will be made to its detriment.” However, Surkov also recognized that Russia’s weaknesses at the international level prevent it from always acting as a superpower, thus engendering a strategy of weakness to destabilize “everything and everyone who does not treat Russia as a great power.” This strategy of destabilization motivates the Kremlin to intervene in disparate parts of the world for various reasons, including to prevent the monopoly of one or two countries in any industry that is vital to Russian national security interests. Rather than viewing the contemporary era of increasing globalization as “everyone rising together,” Surkov views growing interconnection as an opportunity to destabilize old alliances that threaten Russian interests, such as NATO or the European Union, by exploiting member states when their respective interests diverge. Surkov also views interconnection as an opportunity to all sides of any conflict with the aim of obtaining advantage for a favored party against the others.

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13 Surkov was among the first Russia thinkers to identify the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space as one of the main threats to Russia’s sovereignty. Elnur Ismayilov, Russia’s Military Interventions in Georgia and Ukraine: Interests, Motives, and Decision-Making (La Vergne: Academica Press, 2021), 87, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/jhu/detail.action?docID=6537966.
15 Gruyter, “The Wizard of the Kremlin.”
16 Surkov, “Sovereignty Is a Political Synonym for Competitiveness.”
**Hybrid Warfare, Early 2000s**

Many new concepts to describe the character of modern Russian warfare have been developed and have evolved over the last two decades. Hybrid warfare probably is the most well-known, rising to official US government deliberation in early-2017 during a congressional committee hearing on “The Evolution of Hybrid Warfare and Key Challenges.”\(^\text{19}\) Frank Hoffman popularized the term hybrid warfare within Western military discussions in the early-2000s to describe what he claimed was an emerging type of 21st-century warfare that mixed conventional and irregular forces at the operational and tactical level within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects.\(^\text{20}\) Hoffman did not initially apply the label to Russian warfare. However, the concept of hybrid warfare caught on in US and NATO defense circles and evolved through numerous conceptual expansions following the Kremlin’s seizure of Crimea in 2014.\(^\text{21}\) For example, NATO’s 2021 definition of hybrid warfare was far more expansive than Hoffman’s initial concept. From NATO’s perspective, hybrid warfare comprises military and non-military means, including both overt and covert operations, regular and irregular forces, disinformation, cyber-attacks, and economic pressure to blur the lines between war and peace, sow doubt in the minds of

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target populations, and destabilize societies. This sort of definition creep from Hoffman’s initial concept to NATO’s much more expansive definition has led to criticism that the concept of hybrid warfare lacks utility without a unique standard definition, and that it has become politicized within both Russia and the West.

Other critics have argued that hybrid warfare is simply a new term to describe a centuries-old practice.

Gibridnaya Voyna, 2009

Russian discussion about hybrid warfare (gibridnaya voyna) began between 2009 and 2013 in response to Western interest in the topic. However, several scholars argue that Russian military theorists tend to conceptualize hybrid warfare differently than their Western counterparts. Whereas Western military discussions tend to define hybrid warfare based on its means—a synergistic combination of conventional military forces, irregular forces, and potentially non-military means—Russian theorists tend to define gibridnaya voyna based on its primary objective—to change a target state’s geostrategic orientation—and its main approach—subversion. Within gibridnaya voyna, there

are a variety of ways to subvert a target state’s government. Ordered from the least to the most invasive, these include influencing a major change in a target state’s domestic or foreign policy; eroding the state’s socio-cultural cohesion, domestic stability, and/or international legitimacy; establishing external control over the target state; and/or replacing the target state’s leadership with a regime loyal to the aggressor state.²⁵

Russian theorists consider gibridnaya voyna to be a whole-of-government approach to warfare that uses a combination of informational, diplomatic, economic, and military means—up to and including conventional military force. However, information is the focal point in gibridnaya voyna because information operations are the primary way through which one state inculcates its interests and values into another, thus allowing a fundamental reshaping of the other state’s geostrategic orientation.²⁶ This means that all elements of national power in gibridnaya voyna are subordinate to the central information objective and campaign.²⁷ The primacy of information in gibridnaya voyna therefore reverses the usual historical pattern in which non-military means have been subordinate to violent military means. Instead, in gibridnaya voyna, armed violence supports the broad information campaign and relies on information operations to achieve success, only becoming effective after achieving information superiority.²⁸

²⁶ Clark, Russian Hybrid Warfare, 15–22.
²⁷ Clark, 11–15; Fridman, Russian “Hybrid Warfare,” 7, 92.
²⁸ Clark, Russian Hybrid Warfare, 22.
Other aspects of *gibridnaya voyna* that Russian military theorists emphasize are the United States as the inventor and foremost practitioner of *gibridnaya voyna*; multi-sided conflicts, like Syria, where actors are fighting with and against each other for different objectives in different parts of the battlespace; modern warfare’s diversifying participants, e.g., state actors, non-state actors, militant groups, and private military companies; the blurring of the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare because of increasing weapon ranges and the growing use of unconventional forces that fight behind the frontlines; and a change from an operational approach that relies on sequential and concentrated actions to an approach that emphasizes simultaneous, distributed, and continuous operations throughout all dimensions of a conflict, as well as in remote theaters of operation.29

*The Gerasimov Doctrine, 2013*

Closely related to the concepts of hybrid warfare and *gibridnaya voyna* is the so-called “Gerasimov doctrine.” The concept of the Gerasimov doctrine originated with Mark Galeotti’s analysis of a 2013 article by Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov in which he described how the West—not Russia—was waging a new form of warfare against Russia based on the outbreak of color revolutions in post-Soviet regions and the Arab Spring in 2011. Gerasimov claimed that these conflicts demonstrated how warfare in the modern era had begun to blur the line between war and peace due to the increased

29 Clark, 20–24.
effectiveness of nonmilitary means—including political, economic, and humanitarian resources—combined with the protest potential of local populations. Gerasimov also argued that subordinate military means relied on concealed assets—such as special operations forces and information warfare—to support the dominant non-military aspects of a conflict, and that actors only resorted to the open use of military force to achieve success in a conflict’s final stage, typically under the guise of peacekeeping forces.³⁰

Galeotti clearly wrote in his original analysis that these ideas on warfare did not originate with Gerasimov and were not an authoritative Russian doctrine. However, not all readers paid attention to his disclaimer, and the Gerasimov doctrine entered the strategic studies lexicon. Galeotti even renounced the doctrine in subsequent articles, clearly stating that it did not exist, i.e., that it is not an official Russian military doctrine, and that the idea did not originate exclusively with Gerasimov, but the myth—and debate about it—has lived on.³¹

But perhaps with good reason. Although the Gerasimov doctrine is not real in the sense that there is no formal Russian military doctrine called the Gerasimov doctrine, the ideas in Gerasimov’s speech do reflect strands of

prominent thinking found in recent Russian documents, such as Russia’s 2010 Military Doctrine, 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, 2014 Military Doctrine, and 2015 National Security Strategy. These documents collectively emphasize concepts of modern warfare that are similar to those found in Gerasimov’s 2013 speech. These concepts include the integrated use of military and non-military means, the increasing and potentially decisive role of information warfare, the use of color revolutions, a reliance on the protest potential of an adversary’s population, states intervening militarily in another state’s domestic affairs under the pretext of protecting civilian populations, and the growing role of special operations.32

New-Generation Warfare, 2013

New-generation warfare entered the strategic studies debate around 2013. Similar to the origin of the Gerasimov doctrine, the concept of new-generation warfare began with Russian military theorists before evolving into something different within Western defense circles.33 Russian military officers Sergei Chekinov and Sergei Bogdanov asserted in an oft-cited 2013 article that humanity in the 21st century had entered a new generation of high-tech warfare. Chekinov and Bogdanov based their analysis on Western military operations in the Persian Gulf (1991), Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and Iraq (2003), as well as on their study of other prominent Russian military theorists.34 Chekinov and

Bogdanov claimed that this new-generation of warfare features a combination of non-military and military means with information operations playing the decisive role.\textsuperscript{35} States use non-military operations—such as information operations, subversion, and civil disobedience—to conduct distributed attacks against another state’s government, military, and social institutions to mislead political and military leadership, to degrade the military’s command and communications networks, to demoralize the population, to disrupt social cohesion, and to lay the groundwork for follow-on kinetic military operations. These follow-on operations emphasize long-range, precision missile and artillery strikes followed by the deployment of ground forces, which remain essential to achieve the goals of new-generation warfare.\textsuperscript{36} However, some descriptions of Russian new-generation warfare within Western discourse have narrowed over time to the extent that they describe new-generation warfare as nearly synonymous with information warfare.\textsuperscript{37} Other definitions have broadened so widely that the concept has subsumed multiple other forms of warfare, including asymmetric warfare, low-intensity conflict, and network-centric warfare.\textsuperscript{38}

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Non-Linear Warfare, 2014

A contemporary version of non-linear warfare entered the strategic studies lexicon around 2014, also within Russian circles, but originating in science fiction literature rather than in Russian military theory. In a short story titled “Without Sky” that was published online a few days before the 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea, the story’s author describes the world’s first non-linear war. The war features four constantly shifting coalitions battling with immense, silent, unmanned air and rocket forces, but no ground forces.39 Key aspects of the non-linear war include war as part of a larger political process in which victory in battle is not necessarily the most important part, ever-changing coalitions, the primacy of airpower, the prevalence of unmanned assets, and information operations to confuse and exploit the simple-minded masses who can only think in two-dimensions, flat and simple—without sky—understanding everything literally and without ambiguity, helpless, and unsuited for life.

Despite the story’s fictional nature and obscure origins, it later drew attention because it was published so closely to the war in Crimea under a pseudonym for Vladislav Surkov, the same Russian ideologue mentioned above who served in Putin’s inner circle from 1999 until early-2020.40 However, as a fictional story, its meaning and relationship with Russian military thought is open to broad interpretation. This has allowed the concept of non-linear warfare to expand considerably from Surkov’s 2014 description. Characteristics of non-

linear warfare that analysts of Russian warfare have added to or interpreted from Surkov’s initial description are varied, including an emphasis on new forms of politically-focused operations; the manipulation of global financial interconnectedness; the subversion of international institutions and geopolitical alliances; the weaponization of information, culture, and money; covert and/or small-scale military operations; the use of a wide array of non-military means; actors concealing their true geopolitical intentions; and covert attempts to influence other state’s decision-making processes.41

Although some link the contemporary origin of non-linear warfare to the same article that spawned Galotti’s ideas about the Gerasimov doctrine, Gerasimov did not actually use the term non-linear warfare in his article.42 Therefore, to distinguish between the ideas associated with the Gerasimov doctrine and those more closely associated with Surkov’s description of non-linear warfare, I treat the two concepts separately. However, this distinction is not observed in the wider literature on Russian warfare. The terms are instead often used interchangeably, as well as with other terms, often without reference to their origins or initial meaning.

Gray Zone Conflict, 2015

The idea of gray zone conflict rose to prominence in Western military theory around 2015 following the Kremlin’s 2014 seizure of Crimea and borrows heavily from decades-old ideas on low-intensity conflict. An oft-cited 2015 RAND publication by Michael J. Mazarr describes the gray zone as an ambiguous space between peaceful interstate political competition and open war in which states gradually pursue cohesive, integrated campaigns with mostly nonmilitary means to achieve warlike objectives without triggering a powerful international military response.43

This description of gray zone conflict is very similar to US Department of Defense definitions from the late-1980s that describe low-intensity conflict as a “political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above routine, peaceful competition among states…[that] frequently involves protracted struggles…waged by a combination of means employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments.”44

Gray zone conflict is also very similar to political warfare in the sense that both can include any element of national power and aim to conduct operations

short of large-scale war.\textsuperscript{45} The primary difference is that gray zone conflict can use low levels of military force. However, political warfare does not.

\textit{Strategy of Limited Actions, 2019}

The concept of the “strategy of limited actions” also originated from Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov. He first used the term “strategy of limited actions” in a 2019 speech at the annual meeting of the Russian Academy of Military Sciences while discussing the Russian military’s intervention in Syria.\textsuperscript{46} Gerasimov said that Russia’s successful operations in Syria provided the basis to further develop a Russian strategy of limited actions. The term has since then occasionally been used to describe how the Russian military intends to conduct out-of-area, expeditionary operations in locations beyond Russia’s borders. Although the concept has not been adopted into official Russian military doctrine as of early-2023, Gerasimov’s discussion about the strategy of limited actions is the closest thing to authoritative Russian military doctrine from a senior Russian military leader about how the Russian military intends to conduct expeditionary operations.\textsuperscript{47}

Gerasimov stated that the aim of Russia’s strategy of limited actions is to protect and to promote Russia’s national interests beyond its borders using a self-sufficient task force based on the military branch best suited for the

\textsuperscript{46} Gerasimov, “Vectors of Military Strategy Development.”
\textsuperscript{47} Kofman et al., “Russian Military Strategy: Core Tenets and Operational Concepts,” 32–33.
mission.\textsuperscript{48} The strategy of limited actions relies on gaining and maintaining information superiority, using capable command and control systems, covertly deploying the necessary military and non-military forces, providing comprehensive support to the deployed force, and coordinating all military and non-military operations with partner forces at the deployed location.\textsuperscript{49} Dmitry Rogozin’s dictionary of national security and military terms adds to Gerasimov’s description, stating that the strategy of limited actions uses only the amount of military force that is required to achieve Russian objectives while avoiding large-scale confrontation with the enemy.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the fact that the term strategy of limited actions originated with Gerasimov and is the most authoritative description from a senior Russian military leader about how the military thinks about expeditionary operations, the strategy of limited actions is also the concept about modern Russian warfare that has generated the least interest in the Western strategic studies community over the past two decades, according to the frequency of the various terms discussed in this literature review as found in two prominent research databases—the JSTOR Security Studies Collection and the EBSCOhost Military & Government Collection. See table 1.1 above. Political warfare and hybrid warfare were the most frequently mentioned terms by far. The strategy of limited actions was

\textsuperscript{48} Gerasimov, “Vectors of Military Strategy Development.”
\textsuperscript{49} Gerasimov.
almost never mentioned. Similarly, the Russian Ministry of Defense military theory journal *Military Thought* has published only three articles ever containing the term *стратегия ограниченных действий* (strategy of limited actions).  

Critiques

Most of the concepts described above—except *gibridnaya voyna*, the strategy of limited action, and sovereign democracy—have entered widespread usage throughout both US and NATO government, security, and academic circles. However, common critiques of these terms claim that they are politicized buzzwords that offer nothing conceptually new, focus too much on one aspect of modern Russian warfare at the expense of others, offer a bewildering array of contradictory definitions, or describe the same thing with different terminology. Instead of using these concepts, some critics counter that there is no single

<table>
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<th>Type</th>
<th>JSTOR</th>
<th>EBSCO</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>3,970</td>
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<td>2,341</td>
<td>926</td>
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<td>159</td>
<td>108</td>
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<td>New-generation warfare</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>258</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerasimov doctrine</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>233</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-linear warfare</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Gibridnaya voyna</em></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy of limited action</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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*Table 1.1: Frequency of Russian Warfare Concepts in Prominent Western Strategic Studies Journals, 2000-2023*


Russian way of warfare. They instead argue that Russian warfare remains a complex phenomenon in which actors attempt to choose a military strategy that best aligns with their objectives and available means.

The critics have a strong argument, and their primary critique aligns well with Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov’s own statement that “each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own unique character.” Gerasimov’s words notably echo Clausewitz’s assertion that wars vary according to their context, and that “the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish…the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.” Additionally, the Kremlin’s varying and often blurred approaches to warfare in Chechnya (1994-2009), Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Syria (2015-2017), Eastern Ukraine (2014-2022), and Ukraine (2022-present) also indicate Moscow’s tendency to adapt the character of its warfare to the context rather than relying on a singular form of warfare.

Despite the strength of the critic’s argument, it is important not to overstate that strength. An ability to adapt the character of warfare to a particular context

requires a baseline character from which to adapt. In practical terms, Russian military leaders do not start each new military operation from a blank slate. Instead, like all militaries, the Russian military carries its past victories and failures—its doctrine and lessons learned—into its current and future operations. Understanding these lessons learned abstractly through the various ideas described above can help to identify the dominant trends in modern Russian warfare. These dominant trends include the blurring or complete removal of the boundary between war and peace; a growing perception of warfare as a phenomenon that includes more than just military force to achieve political objectives, particularly the use of information operations; an increasing use of high-precision, long-range weapons, particularly from unmanned aircraft; and a growing role for covert operations.

**Research Design**

I used an intensive, analytical case study approach to investigate the character of modern Russian expeditionary warfare in a peripheral region. Expeditionary warfare refers to military operations and associated enabling activities that are conducted beyond a state’s existing military infrastructure, for example, beyond existing command and control, communications, intelligence, and sustainment networks. A peripheral region is an area where neither Russia nor the United States have vital or important national interests. Vital interests are those that would have an immediate negative effect on a country’s core national interests if unfulfilled. Important interests are those that would eventually damage
a country’s core national interests if unfulfilled. Peripheral interests are those that would result in damage to a country’s interests if unfulfilled, but not to the country’s core national interests.57

As a modern case of Russian expeditionary warfare in a peripheral region, I conducted a detailed analysis of the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 until mid-2020, with emphasis on the battle of Tripoli that occurred between early-2019 and mid-2020. During this latter period, the Kremlin and its affiliates provided covert military and information support to the rebel Libyan National Army’s attempt to seize the capital of Tripoli. The Kremlin also conducted an overt public diplomacy campaign to deny the Kremlin’s support for the rebel group and to bolster Moscow’s great power credentials.

The Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war is an important case of Russian expeditionary warfare in a peripheral region for at least three significant reasons. First, Russia’s intervention in the Libya civil war is the Kremlin’s first post-Soviet attempt to conduct an expeditionary operation outside of Asia or Europe. Although Russian military forces have previously supported peacekeeping operations in Africa and Europe, these operations did not include the same level of support or intensity of combat operations as the Libyan civil war. Second, North Africa in general, and Libya specifically, is a location of peripheral concern for the United States and Russia. Although North Africa’s

geostrategic position along the Mediterranean Sea, abundant energy reserves, and chronic instability have motivated US and Russian engagement in Libya in the post-Cold War era, American and Russian interests in the region are peripheral in nature. Third, despite the region’s peripheral standing to the United States and Russia, both countries have historical and contemporary interests in the region that have prompted military interventions in recent years. The United States supported the 2011 NATO intervention that enabled the overthrow of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi and has conducted counterterrorism throughout North Africa. Russia has conducted lucrative arms deals with the Libyan government for decades—Gaddafi was a close ally of the Kremlin during the Cold War—and intervened in Libya’s civil war beginning in 2015.58

The aim of analyzing the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war is to develop an abstract concept of modern Russian expeditionary warfare. Although this is a single case study, this concept of contemporary Russian expeditionary warfare builds on existing ideas about modern Russian warfare. As described in the previous section, these ideas include гибридная война, non-linear warfare, and the strategy of limited actions.

My analysis of the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 to mid-2020 focuses on Moscow’s diplomatic, informational, military, and economic activities. Diplomatic activities that I investigated included interstate meetings between key political and defense leaders, such as presidents,

ambassadors, and senior defense officials; recognition or non-recognition of other actors; political negotiations between senior officials; and treaties. Informational activities included overt media, as well as covert disinformation and misinformation campaigns. Military activities included combat operations, military training and exercises, the establishment of military bases in the region, and arms sales. Finally, economic activities included sanctions, embargoes, tariffs, favored trade status, and financial transfers. It is important to note that these lists of observable indicators are intended to be representative rather than exhaustive.

My assessment of Russia’s overt information campaign during the battle of Tripoli as presented in chapter four is based on an analysis of 2,854 news articles that four prominent international news agencies published about Libya between 4 April 2019 and 30 June 2020. Russian state news agencies RT, Sputnik, and TASS published 1,979 of the analyzed reports. The Associated Press published the remaining 875 articles. I analyzed articles from RT, Sputnik, and TASS to identify the dominant narratives about the Libyan civil war in Russian state media. I compared those narratives to a parallel analysis of narratives as found in news articles from the Associated Press.

I compared the Russian and Associated Press narratives simply to determine the extent of any differences between those found in the Russian agencies and those found in a prominent Western agency. I did not conduct the comparison to fact check RT, TASS, and Sputnik. Such a comparison is beyond the scope of this research. Although including a narrative analysis of additional

59 153 are from RT. 845 are from Sputnik. 981 are from TASS.
prominent Western news agencies, such as Reuters or the British Broadcasting Corporation, into the data set would provide a more representative sample of Western news media, I assume that the results would not be substantially different than what I found the Associated Press. I am comfortable making this assumption because the Associated Press is an independent news organization that has a reputation for reporting relevant information.60

I retrieved the TASS news articles from the Nexis Uni online database on 13 February 2021. I used simple search parameters to find any article that TASS published between 4 April 2019 and 30 June 2020 with the keyword “Libya.” Nexis Uni returned 1,070 TASS news articles; however, I used only 915 articles in my analysis. I omitted 89 of the articles because they only provided summaries of information that TASS already presented in other articles.61 I omitted 62 more of the reports because they contained only a title; there was no text in the article’s body.62 I omitted an additional 4 TASS articles because they did not relate to the Libyan war even though their content contained the keyword “Libya.”

I retrieved the Sputnik articles from the Sputnik website between 17 and 22 October 2022.63 I used the website’s search feature to also find any article that Sputnik published between 4 April 2019 and 30 June 2020 with the keyword “Libya.” Sputnik returned 845 articles; however, I used only 773 articles in my analysis, omitting 72 because they did not relate to the Libyan war. I retrieved the

61 The excluded summary reports were titled “TASS News Roundup.”
62 It is unclear why Nexis Uni produced these empty reports. I did not find similar empty reports on the public-facing TASS website.
63 https://sputniknews.com/
RT articles from the RT website on 14 November 2022. I also used the website’s search feature to find any article that RT published between 4 April 2019 and 30 June 2020 with the keyword “Libya.” RT returned 153 articles; however, I omitted 1 article from my analysis because it did not relate to the Libyan war. I retrieved the Associated Press reports from the Nexis Uni online database on 19 December 2022. Nexis Uni returned 875 articles; however, I used only 823 articles, omitting 52 because they did not relate to the Libyan civil war.

I analyzed English-language reporting. My rationale was that English-language reporting provided the Kremlin a more efficient way than Russian-language reporting to target various international audiences at the same time. An estimated 1.35 billion people speak English, making it the mostly widely spoken language in the world.64 English also is the most widely spoken language in Europe and one of the principal languages in Africa.65 As both continents are home to many languages—there are over 80 languages spoken in Europe and as many as 2,000 spoken in Africa—reporting the news in English provides RT,

Sputnik, and TASS an efficient way to connect with different audiences in Europe and Africa that are following international stories such the Libyan civil war.\textsuperscript{66}

I selected the date range of 4 April 2019 to 30 June 2020 because it corresponds with the Libyan National Army’s offensive to seize Tripoli. Although the offensive concluded on 5 June 2020, I included reports that the Associated Press, RT, Sputnik, and TASS published until the end of June because I wanted to assess how the different news agencies portrayed the offensive’s outcome.

**The Russian Intervention In Libya**

Based on an analytical case study of the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 until mid-2020, with an emphasis on the intense fighting in and around Tripoli from early-2019 until mid-2020, I argue that modern Russian expeditionary warfare can be characterized by the pervasive weaponization of diplomacy, widespread overt and covert information operations, and the limited deployment of military force. Each element of Russia’s national power played different roles in the Kremlin’s intervention in Libya. Moscow’s pervasive weaponization of diplomacy aimed to manipulate Libya’s domestic political system and the related international peace processes toward outcomes that favored Russian interests. The Kremlin’s overt information operations portrayed Moscow to global audiences as a benevolent great power that was engaged in a sincere effort to stabilize Libya, while simultaneously denying

Western reports that Moscow was also involved in activities that destabilized the war-torn country. Kremlin affiliates conducted covert disinformation operations to support Moscow’s preferred actors in Libya, to denigrate the UN-backed Government of National Accord, and to criticize any actor or international process that threatened Moscow’s interests in Libya. Finally, the Kremlin used its covert military support to convince the Libyan National Army of Moscow’s loyalty, which allowed the Kremlin to gain access to strategic oilfields, airfields, and ports under Libyan National Army control.

This characterization of the Russian intervention in Libya corresponds with key components of four Russian ideas. These ideas are sovereign democracy, *gibridnaya voyna*, the strategy of limited actions, and non-linear warfare. Sovereign democracy provides a lens through which to understand Moscow’s weaponization of diplomacy at the international level and within Libya to manipulate the respective political processes towards outcomes that favored Russian interests. *Gibridnaya voyna* provides vital perspective on the important role that information played in attempting to shift Libya’s geostrategic orientation away from the West and toward Russia. Finally, the strategy of limited actions combined with the key ideas of non-linear warfare help to understand the Kremlin’s use of limited covert military force for expeditionary operations in Libya. Building from these ideas, the Kremlin’s intervention in Libya can be understood as an armed attempt to manage the civil war in a similar way that Moscow manages its own domestic political system.
The other concepts discussed in the literature review—political warfare, hybrid warfare, the Gerasimov doctrine, new-generation warfare, and gray zone conflict—do provide some useful perspective on Russia’s intervention in the Libya civil war. However, the insights that these other concepts provide do not offer as much unique and comprehensive explanatory value as that which sovereign democracy, *gibridnaya voyna*, the strategy of limited actions, and non-linear warfare provide. There are also some important inconsistencies between the other concepts and the character of the Russian intervention in Libya. For example, the extremely limited use of military force in Kennan’s description of political warfare is inconsistent with the open warfare that the Libyan National Army and Wagner mercenaries waged in and around Tripoli from early-2019 to mid-2020. Neither the Russian mercenaries nor their Libyan counterparts combined regular and irregular forces at the tactical and operational levels to achieve synergistic effects in a way consistent with Hoffman’s description of hybrid warfare. The nature of the full-scale civil war between the rebel Libyan National Army and the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, as well as the overt deployment of Turkish military forces to Libya in early 2020, prohibit referring to the Libyan civil war as a gray zone conflict. Although the Gerasimov doctrine can help to describe the initial 2011 outbreak of the Libyan civil war, the concept does not accurately characterize Moscow’s intervention from 2015 to 2020, not the least of which because the Kremlin never resorted to the open use of force under the guise of peacekeeping forces in the conflict’s final stage. Finally, Moscow’s military operations in Libya utilized widespread information
operations as envisioned in Chekinov and Bogdanov’s description of new-generation warfare, but missing from the Kremlin’s approach were the prominent role of high-technology combat, use of long-range precision strike aircraft, and conventional ground forces.

Who is Vladislav Surkov?

Some readers may be skeptical of the prominence that I have afforded Vladislav Surkov’s ideas on sovereign democracy in my analysis. Although Surkov’s ideas on sovereign democracy have gained some attention, these ideas are not commonly associated with the Kremlin’s foreign policy. However, Surkov explicitly linked his ideas about sovereign democracy to Russian foreign policy. Surkov did not believe that Moscow could ensure Russia’s sovereignty only through managed democracy inside Russia. Surkov also believed that Moscow needed to retain a leading role in global affairs to ensure Russia’s sovereignty.

Some readers also may be skeptical about the prominence that I have afforded Surkov’s ideas about non-linear warfare. They may find it difficult to believe that some of the key ideas that manifested themselves in the Kremlin’s military campaign in the Libyan civil war were the brainchild of an author with limited military experience who chose to first publicly share his ideas through a science fiction story in a magazine for Russia teenagers that has a circulation of only about 2000 copies per year.67 It is important to note that I am not claiming

that Surkov was individually involved in the planning or the execution of the
Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war. There is insufficient evidence to
support such a claim.

Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the potential influence of Surkov’s
ideas on Putin and his inner circle. Surkov had a long career of service to the
Kremlin, earning him a host of revealing monikers, including the “Kremlin
demiurge,” “the real genius of the Putin era,” the “gray eminence,” the “political
technologist of all of Rus,” “Putin’s Rasputin,” Putin’s grey cardinal,” and the
“puppet master who privatized the Russian political system.” 68 The British
Broadcasting Corporation even referred to Surkov as the “most powerful man
you’ve never hear of.”69 This is quite a compliment for a man who got his political
start in the late-1990s as a bodyguard for the influential Russian businessman
Mikhail Khodorkovsky because they trained at the same martial arts club.70 Yet
Surkov eventually moved from bodyguard to public relations manager and
developed a reputation for his effective public relations campaigns.71 Surkov’s
growing reputation earned him an invitation to join Yeltsin’s presidential
administration in 1999 where he worked with Russian media giant Boris

68 Pomerantsev, “Putin’s Rasputin”; Mairbek Vatchagaev, “Did Surkov Step Down, or Was He
Forced to Step Down?,” Jamestown Foundation, May 23, 2019,
https://jamestown.org/program/did-surkov-step-down-or-was-he-forced-to-step-down-2/;
Pomerantsev, Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible, 65.
70 Pomerantsev, “Putin’s Rasputin.”
71 Pomerantsev.
Berezovsky, known as the “Godfather of the Kremlin.” Together Surkov and Berezovsky ran Putin’s successful 2000 presidential campaign.

Surkov held many roles within the Russia government after 2000, serving as a close advisor to Putin in varying capacities for over two decades. Surkov’s most prominent positions included deputy head of the presidential administration, deputy prime minister, and assistant to the president on foreign affairs. Within these positions, Surkov became one of the most prominent creators of Russia’s contemporary authoritarian system, with a wide-ranging portfolio that included domestic politics, foreign policy, ideology, propaganda, religion, and modernization. In domestic politics, Surkov created Putin’s United Russia political party and was the architect of the country’s managed democracy, which allowed Surkov to wield unparalleled influence in Russian politics, managing it like a vast reality television show where he ran pro-Kremlin youth groups, controlled political parties, and directed electoral campaigns. State-controlled propaganda was a major element of Surkov’s strategy to manage Russia’s democracy. Surkov controlled the media and turned it into a “Putin-worshipping

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72 Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, 66. Berezovsky was among the first in Russia to understand the power of television, helping an unpopular President Boris Yeltsin win a second term as president by persuading Russians that he was the only person who could prevent Russia from returning to communism.
73 Pomerantsev, “Putin’s Rasputin.”
74 Gruyter, “The Wizard of the Kremlin.”
76 Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, 65.
machine,” personally writing much of the television and social media propaganda.⁷⁸ While serving as deputy head of the presidential administration, Surkov met weekly in his Kremlin office with Russia’s television heads and told them how to portray Putin, who to attack, who to defend, and who to ignore.⁷⁹

Surkov also held influential foreign policy positions. He was the Kremlin’s policy supervisor in the North Caucasus from 2000 to 2012 and forged a close relationship with current Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov.⁸⁰

Surkov developed the Kremlin’s war-winning plan during the Second Chechen war to coopt to Moscow’s side the powerful Kadyrov clan and other like-minded Chechen nationalists where they—instead of ethnic Russian soldiers like during the First Chechen War—died while fighting the Chechen Islamists.⁸¹ Putin appointed Surkov in 2013 to oversee the Russian-backed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, regions whose independence the Kremlin recognized following the brief 2008 Russo-Georgian War.⁸² Surkov was also deeply involved in the 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea and follow-on fighting in eastern Ukraine. Surkov staged the independence referendums, scripted the “puppet politicians,” micromanaged the Donbas separatist groups, and promoted

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⁷⁹ Pomerantsev, Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible, 65.
⁸⁰ Vatchagaev, “Did Surkov Step Down, or Was He Forced to Step Down?”
the Kerch Strait bridge project that connected Crimea with southern Russia.\textsuperscript{83} Referring to the Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea, Surkov said “I am proud that I was part of the reconquest. This was the first open geopolitical counter-attack by Russia [against the west] and such a decisive one. That was an honor for me.”\textsuperscript{84}

Surkov used his many roles in domestic and foreign policy to promote and implement his ideas. Indeed, the prominent Soviet-born author Peter Pomerantsev has said that if you understand Surkov’s ideas, you will “understand not only contemporary Russia, but [also] a new type of power politics.”\textsuperscript{85} As Putin’s chief ideologue, Surkov authored many articles on the ideology of Putinism and was behind the highly influential concept of sovereign democracy that pervades the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{86}

Although Surkov’s background, numerous government roles, and ideology are not indications of his personal involvement in the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war, his personal involvement was not a prerequisite for his ideas on sovereign democracy or non-linear warfare to influence the Kremlin’s strategy in Libya. Surkov and his ideas had sufficient general influence within the Russian government at the time to influence Moscow’s strategy toward any country even if Surkov was not personally involved. Such indirect influence would be a natural consequence given the success of his ideas in Russian domestic politics, the

\textsuperscript{83} Ismayilov, \textit{Russia’s Military Interventions in Georgia and Ukraine}, 87; Pomerantsev, \textit{Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible}, 235; “614: The Other Mr. President,” \textit{This American Life}, April 14, 2017, https://www.thisamericanlife.org/614/transcript; Mackinnon and Standish, “Putin Fires His Puppet Master.”

\textsuperscript{84} Foy, “Vladislav Surkov: ‘An Overdose of Freedom Is Lethal to a State.’”

\textsuperscript{85} Pomerantsev, “Putin’s Rasputin.”

Second Chechen War, Russia’s post-2008 relations with Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and Russia’s war in the Donbas.

**Chapter Outline**

Chapter one, “Modern Russian Warfare & Libya,” describes the content and relevance of this thesis. I introduce the general research topic—the character of modern Russian warfare—the research question—“What is the character of modern Russian expeditionary warfare?”—and the relevance of both within the context of renewed Russo-American strategic competition. I conduct a literature review that focuses on the dominant concepts in strategic studies that relate to contemporary Russian warfare including political warfare, hybrid warfare, *gibridnaya voyna*, the Gerasimov doctrine, new-generation warfare, non-linear warfare, gray zone conflict, and the strategy of limited actions. I explain my research design and present the main claim of my research based on an intensive analytical case study of the Russian intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 until mid-2020, with emphasis on the period of intensified fighting from April 2019 until June 2020. I argue that modern Russian expeditionary warfare in Libya is characterized by the pervasive weaponization of diplomacy, widespread overt and covert disinformation operations, and the limited deployment of military force. This characterization of Russian expeditionary warfare in Libya synthesizes vital components of four key Russian ideas: sovereign democracy, *gibridnaya voyna*, the strategy of limited actions, and non-linear warfare.
Chapter two, “The Kremlin’s Well-Traveled Road to War in Libya,” analyzes the initial stage of the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war from 2015 until early-2019. I argue that the Kremlin sought to manage the domestic and international aspects of the Libyan civil war prior to the 2019 battle of Tripoli in a way that reflected how the Kremlin has sought to manage its own domestic political system: by infiltrating all the major actors and playing their interests against each other to move the Kremlin into a position to manage the conflict toward an outcome that favored Russian interests. I identify the Kremlin’s interests and objectives in North Africa and Libya. I analyze how Moscow has attempted to use its key historical relationships in Libya since the Cold War to pursue those interests. I describe the key events related to the outbreak of the Libyan civil war, beginning with Gaddafi’s ouster and death during the 2011 Arab Spring protests. I analyze Russia’s 2015 entry into the subsequent Libyan civil war, providing detail about the Kremlin’s diplomatic relationships with prominent Libyan leaders, as well as the Kremlin’s growing military, financial, intelligence, and informational support for the rebel Libyan National Army.

Chapter three, “Word of Power: Russian Military Operations in Libya,” analyzes how Moscow used military force during the battle of Tripoli. I argue that the Kremlin did not want the offensive to occur—but did not stop it either, providing only minimal support to the Libyan National Army. I argue that the purpose of Moscow’s growing military force was not to seize Tripoli, but to deepen the Libyan National Army’s reliance on the Kremlin and to force the militias in Western Libya to consolidate with the UN-recognized government, thus
limiting the number of key Libyan stakeholders and simplifying the negotiation process for Russia. I further argue that the Kremlin used its covert support for the Libyan National Army as an information operation that targeted the army’s highest leader, Khalifa Haftar, and convinced him that he had Moscow’s backing. This approach allowed Kremlin-affiliated mercenaries in Libya to gain control of key areas under Haftar’s control. I also argue that this information operation convinced other international powers of the need to engage with Russia during the peace process, thus ensuring Moscow’s participation in the international decision-making process and ability to advance Russian interests.

Chapter four, “Power of the Word: Russian Diplomacy and Information Operations in Libya,” analyzes Moscow’s use of diplomacy and information operations between 4 April 2019 and 30 June 2020. I argue that the Kremlin weaponized diplomacy to establish relationships with the key domestic and international stakeholders of the Libyan civil war, to understand and to manipulate their interests, and to infiltrate their decision-making processes as much as possible. I argue that this allowed Moscow to play the key stakeholders against each other and to keep the Kremlin in a position to manage the conflict toward an outcome that favored Russian interests. I concurrently argue that the Kremlin used the news about its widespread diplomatic campaign as the source material for a global overt information campaign to bolster Russia’s great power image and to deny any adverse Russian participation in the conflict, while simultaneously waging covert disinformation operations to support Moscow’s preferred actors in Libya, to denigrate the UN-backed Government of National
Accord, and to undermine any actor or international process that threatened Moscow’s interests in Libya

Chapter five, “Tipping the Scale: The Russian Intervention in Libya and the US-Russian Military Balance In North Africa,” analyzes how the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war helped to alter the US-Russian military balance in North Africa. I argue that the Kremlin used its intervention in Libya as part of its regional effort to tip the regional military balance in favor of Russia. I base my assessment on a ten-year analysis of five key factors between 2013 and 2022: each state’s military objectives, the arms trade, military training exercises, access to military installations, and military interventions. I conclude that Russia’s slight advantage in the regional military balance challenges American strategic regional interests in the short-term.

Chapter six, “Conclusion and Implications,” summarizes my argument and highlights important implications about what the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war suggests about the future of Russian expeditionary operations. These implications relate primarily to the Kremlin’s weaponization of diplomacy, widespread use of overt and covert information operations, and limited use of military force.
Chapter 2 – The Kremlin’s Road To War In Libya

“If Russia leaves global politics, ceases to influence world decisions, then most likely these decisions will be made to its detriment. It’s almost obvious. What to think about someone who can’t argue with you? His interests come last.” – Vladislav Surkov, 2006

Over the past fifteen years, Russia has reemerged as an important global actor seeking to reclaim its former great power status, an effort that has prompted renewed strategic competition with the United States. This competition has spread in varying degrees to countries on every continent, including to the oil-rich North African country of Libya, which occupies a position of geostrategic importance along the Mediterranean Sea and NATO’s southern flank. Although Russia and Libya had a robust relationship during the Cold War, that relationship collapsed along with the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia began to rebuild the relationship in 2008, only to watch it fall apart again in 2011 following a NATO-supported Libyan popular uprising that ousted long-time ruler Muammar Gaddafi after 42 years in power.

The Kremlin took advantage of the subsequent civil war to regain a foothold in Libya. Russian leaders initially relied on weaponized diplomacy to

infiltrate Libya’s domestic political landscape and to develop relationships with influential leaders on different sides of the conflict. These leaders included Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar, Government of National Accord Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, and Muamar Gaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi.

Moscow publicly claimed it was building relationships with leaders on different sides of the conflict to facilitate peace in Libya. However, Russian leaders’ public statements obscured their aim not simply to bring peace to Libya, but to ensure that any Libyan peace settlement favored Russian interests. To that end, the Kremlin also provided varying levels of military, financial, informational, and intelligence support to Haftar, al-Sarraj, and Gaddafi between 2015 and 2019. Although Haftar received most of the Kremlin’s support because of his reputation as the strongman that could stabilize Libya, Russian leaders did not trust Haftar to honor Moscow’s interests if he ever assumed political control of the country. To prevent that from happening, the Kremlin pursued various courses of action to subordinate Haftar to a political leader that Moscow thought it could control, such as Sarraj or Gaddafi. Although the Kremlin’s efforts to subordinate Haftar to either Sarraj or Gaddafi failed by early-2019, Moscow’s engagement in Libya did posture the Kremlin to manage the Libyan conflict toward an outcome that favored Russian interests.

**Russian Interests and Objectives in North Africa and Libya**

North Africa is important to Russian national security interests for at least three reasons. First, the region occupies a position of geostrategic importance
along the Mediterranean Sea and its vital sea lines of communication, including the Suez Canal in the east and the Strait of Gibraltar in the west. Russian rulers since Catherine the Great have believed that access to the Mediterranean Sea is a key component for making Russia a great power, access that in the modern area would provide Russia a strategic position along NATO’s southern flank.

Second, the region contains substantial energy reserves in Algeria, Egypt, and Libya. These three countries were among the top African petroleum producers between 2012 and 2022, exceeded only by Angola and Nigeria. Third, North Africa has a recent history of instability, terrorist threats, and interstate rivalries. Moscow wants to contain any potential terrorist threats as far from Russia’s borders as possible. North African leaders also are seeking external assistance to combat these terrorist threats and to compete against regional rivals. North African leaders’ desire for military assistance provides an opening for Russia to enhance its regional relationships, to improve its regional military positions, and

to insert itself as a regional powerbroker into issues that are of great interest to European states.91

Moscow’s regional interests are driving several important objectives in North Africa. Most importantly, the Kremlin wants to reestablish its great power status in the region, pulling countries in the region away from Western influence and toward Russia.92 This objective requires that Moscow rebuild diplomatic, military, and economic relationships with North African partners that collapsed with the Soviet Union in 1991. This objective also includes the Kremlin’s related efforts to discredit American and European reputations throughout North Africa. Second, the Kremlin wants to establish its military presence along North Africa’s Mediterranean coast to enhance Russian military power projection into Africa, Europe, and beyond.93 This desired network of permanent military bases likely includes an air base in Libya and maritime ports in Algeria, Egypt, and/or Libya.94 Such air and maritime access would allow the Russian military to expand its network of bases beyond the Caucasus and Syria and into the areas just beyond the Black Sea.95 Third, the Kremlin wants to increase its economic engagement

95 Jay Mens, “Blue Homelands and Red Strongholds: The Libyan Civil War in Turkish and Russian Strategy,” Comparative Strategy 41, no. 4 (July 5, 2022): 379,
in the region to gain access to commercial energy markets and earn money from the lucrative arms trade.96

Libya is particularly important to these regional objectives. First, Libya’s chronic instability provides Moscow an opportunity to bolster its great power status by showing that Russia can fix that what the West has broken.97 Kremlin leaders blame the United States and NATO for the long-running instability in Libya, regularly taking advantage of opportunities to remind Russian and global audiences of the role that the United States and NATO played in toppling Gaddafì in 2011. This is a central Russian narrative about Libya and is elaborated in more detail in chapter four. The Kremlin’s engagement in the Libyan peace process provides Russia justification to meet regularly with North Africa leaders, thus allowing Moscow to foster its regional diplomatic and defense relations as the Kremlin plays the role of a great power in the region. Russian engagement in Libya also allows the Kremlin to support proxies, such as Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army, that have been fighting terrorist groups in Libya since Gaddafì’s 2011 ouster.98 Finally, Libya’s instability has allowed hundreds of thousands of migrants to seek entry into southern Europe through Libya, which is


just 180 miles from Italy and 240 miles from Greece. Russian control of Libya would allow the Kremlin to weaponize migrant flows into southern Europe.

Second, Libya’s occupies an important geostrategic location in North Africa. Russian control of Libya would allow the Kremlin to exert control over the strategic waterways off Libya’s northern coast, which are important both for economic reasons and for the Russian military’s ability to project power into the Mediterranean Sea and deeper into Africa. The Libyan Sea—comprising the waters just north of Libya—lies at the very center of the Mediterranean Sea and has deep-water ports in the eastern Libyan cities of Tobruk and Darnah. The Libyan Sea also connects to the Black Sea in southwestern Russia through the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara.

Third, Libya possesses important strategic energy resources such as oil and natural gas. If Russia can gain control of Libya’s abundant energy resources, they would enable the Kremlin’s goal of becoming an energy superpower. Libya has the largest proven crude oil reserves in Africa and the tenth largest in the world, as well as the 22nd largest natural gas reserves in the world. Much of


the oil is in Libya’s southwest at the El Sharara oil field—Libya’s largest oil deposit—as well as in a region known as the oil crescent that is situated along Libya’s northern Mediterranean coast.102 Libya has been a major oil supplier to countries in southern Europe for decades because of low production and transportation costs.103 Before Libya’s civil war began in 2011, Libya was the third largest oil exporter to Europe, behind only Russia and Norway, while ahead of other significant global oil producers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq.104 Russian leaders publicly stated in mid-2017 that Moscow wanted to renew energy contracts signed during the Gaddafi era.105 Notably, Russian state oil company Rosneft began purchasing oil from Libya’s National Oil Corporation in mid-2017 with a one-year contract, and Tatneft relaunched its Libyan oil operations in late-2021 after a ten-year hiatus.106

“We must prevent the monopoly of one or two countries in any vital industry…The concept of Russia as an energy superpower seems to me to be quite consistent with this approach…the fuel and energy complex is our main economic complex, which provides the lion’s share of our national product…If we all pass today, drink, take a walk, then who will thank us?”

— Vladislav Surkov, 2006

103 Souleimianov, “Russia’s Policy in the Libyan Civil War,” 96.
Moscow’s Historical Relationships In Libya

The Soviet Union pursued a robust foreign policy in Africa during the Cold War, including substantial political, military, and economic ties with many countries, including Libya. Moscow developed a relationship with Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi in the mid-1970s, and the Kremlin became the most important arms dealer for Libya, providing more major conventional weapons to Libya during the early 1980s than to any other country in the world.\(^{107}\) Libyan purchases of Soviet military equipment throughout the Cold War included 4,000 tanks, 600 aircraft, 200 tactical missiles, 6 submarines, and numerous air defense systems.\(^{108}\) Libya also hosted more than 11,000 Russian soldiers from the late-1970s into the early 1980s and sent Libyan officials to the Soviet Union for specialized training.\(^{109}\)

The Soviet Union’s 1991 dissolution resulted in a significant decline in bilateral relations with Libya.\(^{110}\) However, Moscow revived its relationship with Tripoli in 2008.\(^{111}\) This revival included the equivalent of 10 billion dollars’ worth of Russian arms contracts in 2010—comprising 12 percent of Russia’s entire

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\(^{107}\) Fasanotti, “Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-Again-off-Again Friendship.”


\(^{109}\) Fasanotti, “Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-Again-off-Again Friendship.”

\(^{110}\) Stronski, “Late to the Party: Russia’s Return to Africa”; Fasanotti, “Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-Again-off-Again Friendship.”

arms exports that year—and Russian naval access to ports in eastern Libya—an important step in Moscow’s pursuit of bases along the Mediterranean Sea.\(^\text{112}\)

Then the Arab Spring happened, terminating Moscow’s revived relationship with Gaddafi, and confirming for Putin his worst fears about the West. In 2010, a wave of pro-democracy protests known as the Arab Spring began to spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Gaddafi refused to abdicate power when the protests reached Libya in 2011.\(^\text{113}\) He instead threatened to slaughter the rebels and encouraged his supporters to attack the “cockroaches” protesting his rule, leading to widespread violence.\(^\text{114}\)

Many Western, Middle Eastern, and African states called for international intervention to halt the fighting and to protect civilians.\(^\text{115}\) This prompted the UN Security Council to pass a resolution in February 2011, with Russian support, that condemned the violence and authorized several measures to curb the bloodshed, such as an arms embargo and an asset freeze targeting prominent Libyan government leaders.\(^\text{116}\) Following subsequent high-level diplomatic meetings between American and Russian leaders, the UN Security Council passed another resolution the following month in March 2011, from which Russia


\(^{115}\) Burns, Back Channel, 283–84.

abstained, that authorized UN member states to take all necessary measures to protect civilians under the threat of attack.\textsuperscript{117} This resolution allowed the establishment of a no-fly zone but not authorize the deployment of a foreign occupation force onto Libyan territory.\textsuperscript{118}

Russia’s abstention from the UN Security Council voting caused a rare—and perhaps manufactured—public split between then Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Putin condemned the resolution, saying that it resembled medieval calls for crusades, and compared the subsequent armed intervention with previous Western military operations of which he already had been critical.\textsuperscript{119} “What troubles me is not the fact of the military intervention itself,” Putin said. “I am concerned by the ease with which decisions to use force are taken in international affairs. This is becoming a persistent tendency in US policy. During the Clinton era they bombed Belgrade, Bush sent forces into Afghanistan, then under an invented, false pretext they sent forces into Iraq, liquidated the entire Iraqi leadership—even children in Saddam Hussein’s family died. Now it is Libya’s turn, under the pretext of protecting the peaceful population.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{117} Burns, \textit{Back Channel}, 283–84.
NATO assumed command of all foreign military operations in Libya in late-March 2011 and enforced the UN-authorized no-fly zone, arms embargo, and mandate to protect civilians. About 8,000 NATO personnel, 260 aircraft, and 21 naval vessels participated in operations that lasted until 31 October 2011. These operations included more than 26,500 aircraft sorties, of which about 9,700 attacked targets in Libya. The NATO mission destroyed more than 5,900 military targets, including about 400 artillery pieces and 600 armored vehicles. NATO also helped rescue over 600 migrants at sea. NATO estimated that the seven-month military operation cost approximately 43 million euro.\footnote{121}

The NATO mission enabled anti-Gaddafi forces to expand their zone of control from a small corner of northeastern Libya in March 2011 to nearly all of Libya by October 2011.\footnote{122} Amidst fighting in the city of Sirte in late-October, a crowd of Libyans found Gaddafi hiding with a gold-plated 9 mm pistol in a drainage pipe.\footnote{123} Bystanders videorecorded the event on their cellphones as the crowd removed Gaddafi from the pipe, beat him, and killed him.\footnote{124} Putin repeatedly watched the footage of Gaddafi’s death at the hands of the crowd.\footnote{125}

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  \item \footnote{124}{Osnos, Remnick, and Yaffa, “Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War”; Moammar Gadhafi Dead Video: Last Moments Alive Caught on Tape in Sirte: WARNING GRAPHIC VIDEO, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGm492qVEzA.}
  \item \footnote{125}{Burns, Back Channel, 283–84.}
\end{itemize}
The Arab Spring—and the events in Libya in particular—confirmed for Putin and other senior Russian leaders their worst fears about the contemporary Western use of military force. This was a theme that Putin notably addressed during a speech four years earlier at the 2007 Munich Security Conference during which he criticized the United States for its “hyper use of military force.”

Beginning with the color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), Kremlin leaders had become increasingly uneasy with popular revolutions that they believed might someday reach Moscow. This uneasiness further increased following Russia’s so-called Snow Revolution in December 2011 when reports of election fraud during Russian parliamentary elections brought tens of thousands of protestors onto the streets of Moscow and thousands more in cities across Russia. Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov expressed in 2013 a then commonly-held perspective amongst senior Russian leaders of these events, which he described as a new form of warfare that the West was waging against Russia. Gerasimov claimed

that these color revolutions demonstrated how warfare in the modern era was blurring the line between war and peace due to the increased role and effectiveness of nonmilitary means combined with the protest potential of local populations. Gerasimov’s perspective later became known in Western circles as the Gerasimov Doctrine, as discussed in chapter one.\footnote{Galeotti, “Gerasimov Doctrine.”}

**Outbreak of the Libyan Civil War**

Competing Libyan factions could not agree on a political framework following Gaddafi’s death in 2011, and the country descended into civil war. Several foreign states sought to advance their regional interests in Libya and developed clients within the competing factions. These client-patron relationships formed along ideological lines and contributed to Libya’s fragmentation.\footnote{Haftar’s military force is also known as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces or the Haftar Armed Forces. The United Nations Panel of Experts on Libya began using the term Haftar Armed Forces in November 2019 to emphasize that Haftar was not formally associated with the UN-recognized government of Libya based in Tripoli. See Lipika Majumdar Roy Choudhury, et al., Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973, United Nations, 9 December 2019, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2019_914.pdf. See also Jonathan M. Winer, “Origins of the Libyan Conflict and Options for its Resolution,” *Middle East Institute*, February 2019, 10-11, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-03/Origins_of_the_Libyan_Conflict_and_Options_for_its_Resolution.PDF.}

Qatar and Turkey supported the Islamist factions, whereas Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates supported the anti-Islamist factions, notably including the largest military force in the country at the time, the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army, led by Khalifa Haftar.\footnote{Jason Pack, “Why Global and Regional Powers Aren’t Standing up against Hifter’s Libya Offensive,” *Al-Monitor*, May 14, 2019, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/05/libya-offensive-tripoli-hifter-gna-international-backers.html#ixzz5p9q4NFEZ.}
Haftar had previously served in the Libyan army under Gaddafi and supported the coup that brought Gaddafi to power in 1969. However, after becoming a prisoner of war during Libya’s war with Chad in the late-1980s, Haftar turned against Gaddafi. Haftar was eventually released from prison to the United States in the early 1990s, where he became an American citizen and a US Central Intelligence Agency asset.\(^{132}\) Haftar returned to Libya in 2011 when the civil war began and obtained a leadership role amongst the rebel factions.\(^{133}\)

The Turkish and Qatari-supported bloc in the civil war eventually gained political power with the election of the Tripoli-based General National Congress in 2012. Subsequent 2014 elections resulted in a power transfer to a rival bloc called the House of Representatives that was based in the eastern city of Tobruk and received support from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. However, an electoral dispute marred the transfer of power and left both the Tripoli-based General National Congress and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives claimants to the mantle of Libya’s government.\(^{134}\) The United Nations facilitated a political agreement in December 2015 that created a temporary government. This government included a new Tripoli-based Government of National Accord that was tasked to serve as Libya’s executive authority and installed the existing Tobruk-based House of Representatives as


the legislative authority. The two governing bodies initially agreed to develop a permanent political framework for the country during their temporary term; however, various disagreements prevented cooperation.

The relationship between the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives further deteriorated in 2017. Khalifa Haftar, who had by then aligned with the House of Representatives, announced that the term of the previous UN-backed political agreement had expired, and he unilaterally declared the Libyan National Army as the sole legitimate Libyan institution until countrywide elections could be held. Haftar had been using the Libyan National Army and support he was receiving from external backers—which had grown to include France and Russia—to expand his control of eastern Libya, wresting control of important population centers from international terrorist groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State.

Haftar then deployed his forces westward in early 2019 and quickly gained control of the Fezzan region in southwest Libya without major fighting—including Libya’s largest oil field, El Sharara. Haftar transferred control of the area to his

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affiliates before continuing northward to seize areas closer to the capital, including the cities of Gharyan, Sabratha, and Tarhunah.\textsuperscript{138}

**Russia Enters the Libyan Civil War: Exporting Sovereign Democracy**

The Kremlin involved itself into the Libya civil war in 2015, initially relying primarily on diplomacy to pursue its goals. Moscow established diplomatic relations with key Libyan leaders between 2015 and 2019. The key leaders at the time were Government of National Accord Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar, and Muamar Gaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. Moscow initiated separate relationships with both Haftar and Sarraj around 2016, eventually attempting to broker a deal between Haftar and Sarraj in mid-December 2017 to recognize Haftar as the official head of Libya’s military while keeping Sarraj in his position as the country’s political leader. However, the deal collapsed, and Russia then began courting Saif al-Islam Gaddafi in 2018 as a potential political leader for Libya instead of Sarraj. By the time Haftar initiated his 2019 Tripoli offensive, the Kremlin also had established close contact with other influential Libyan leaders, including Government of National Accord Chairman of the High Council of State Khalid al-Mishri and Speaker of the House of Representatives Aguila Saleh Issa; the leaders of the

cities of Bani Walid, Misurata, Tarhuna, and Zintan; and the heads of the Amazigh, Toubou, and Tuareg tribes.139

Russian leaders were candid in their public statements about their diplomatic endeavors, repeatedly stating that the Kremlin wanted to build relationships with all sides of the Libyan conflict. However, the Kremlin’s public statements obscured their private motives. Documents circulated within Russian military circles in early-2019 revealed that the Kremlin was using its position as a mediator not simply to bring peace to Libya, but also to ensure that any Libyan peace settlement favored Russian interests. The Kremlin believed that only Haftar had the military power to stabilize Libya. But Russian leaders did not trust Haftar to respect Moscow’s interests if he ever assumed complete political control of Libya. To prevent Haftar from gaining too much power, the Kremlin sought subordinate him to a political leader that Moscow could control, such as Sarraj or Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, hereafter referred to as Saif to distinguish between him and his father.

The Libyan National Army: Military Power to Unite Libya

The Kremlin began to cultivate a relationship with Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar sometime between 2015 and 2016. The relationship appears to have begun as a Russian attempt to gain access to oil facilities in eastern Libya. Unidentified Russians approached Libyan militia leader Ibrahim

Jathran sometime in 2015 with a business proposal. The Russians offered to provide Jathran weapons and cash in exchange for exclusive access to oil facilities and seaports under his control in eastern Libya. However, Jathran turned down the deal and aligned himself with the UN-backed government instead. Three prominent Russian officials—Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov, and Security Council head Nikolai Patrushev—then met with Haftar in July 2016. Just a few months later, Haftar’s Libyan National Army seized the oil terminals from Jathran’s forces in September with newly acquired, sophisticated, Russian military equipment.

Moscow’s relationship with Haftar began to grow quickly after his forces seized Jathran’s oil terminals. Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Haftar in Moscow for separate meetings on 27 and 29 November respectively. Shoigu met again with Haftar early the next year on 11 January 2017. Shoigu attended the meeting from Moscow while Haftar attended virtually via a video teleconference hosted onboard a Russian aircraft carrier that was in the Mediterranean Sea on its way back to Russia after conducting military operations in Syria. Lavrov and Shoigu met again with Haftar during separate engagements in Moscow on 12 and 14 August 2017 respectively.

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140 Fasanotti, “Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-Again-off-Again Friendship.”
The initial purpose of the Russian meetings with Haftar throughout 2016 and 2017 was to discuss Russian support for Haftar’s counterterrorism operations in eastern Libya. However, Russian leaders began in early-2017 to support a political role for Haftar because of his success battling Islamist militants and restoring government control of oil production. Shoigu met again with Haftar on 7 November 2018 in Moscow. Putin confidant and Wagner Group owner Yevgeny Prigozhin also attended this meeting. The meeting’s public rationale was to discuss instability across Libya and North Africa. However, internal Wagner Group communications revealed that Haftar wanted the Kremlin to increase its military support for the Libyan National Army, to help establish a dialogue with other Libyan political and military groups, and to assist with Haftar’s upcoming presidential campaign. In return, Haftar promised to transfer oil and other economic assets under Libyan National Army control to Russia.

Around the same time as Haftar’s early-November 2018 meeting with Shoigu and Prigozhin, a Wagner affiliate developed a presidential campaign


146 Tsvetkova, “Libyan Commander Visits Russia to Ask for Help Fighting Islamists.”


strategy for Haftar. One of Prigozhin’s St. Peterburg employees, Valeria Darovskaya, prepared a detailed plan to get Haftar elected as the Libyan president. Based on Darovskaya’s analysis of both international perspectives and Libyan domestic factors, she believed that Haftar was the best candidate for the Libyan presidency. Although Darovskaya’s research suggested that Haftar’s domestic popularity was not as high as the front-runner, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, Darovskaya believed that Haftar was the better candidate because he had the military capability to neutralize Libyan terrorist threats, to control the spread of weapons, and to curb migration through Libya into Europe. Darovskaya identified these three factors of high importance for the international community.\textsuperscript{150} Saif, on the other hand, had only name recognition and lacked military capability.

Darovskaya’s proposed presidential campaign strategy for Haftar reflected the practices that Putin’s political technologist Vladislav Surkov had used to manage Russia’s domestic politics. During Libya’s electoral preparations, Darovskaya wanted to create the equivalent of a cult-of-personality around Haftar that would portray him to domestic and international audiences as a civilized, modern politician who was the only Libyan leader who could unite the country, end the chaotic civil war, and defeat radical Islam. Reminiscent of the Kremlin’s public relations campaigns that bolstered Putin’s reputation in Russia, Darovskaya wanted to portray Haftar as the “Savior of Libya,” the “Gatherer of the [Libyan] Lands,” and the conqueror of radical Islamists, such as al-Qaeda.

and Islamic State. Darovskaya wanted to develop a mass media pool, including print media and a social media center, to communicate these images of Haftar in ways that would resonate with domestic and international audiences. Darovskaya also wanted to establish electoral control mechanisms throughout Libya to ensure that Haftar won a future presidential election. “Without control of the voting results, the elections may be lost,” she wrote in her presentation. Finally, Darovskaya wanted to emplace measures to legitimize the electoral results to domestic and international audiences.¹⁵¹

Following Prigozhin’s attendance at the Ministry of Defense meeting on 7 November 2018, other Prigozhin affiliates met with Haftar for follow-up meetings in Sochi Russia on 25 and 26 November 2018.¹⁵² Prigozhin also personally held follow-up meetings on at least two occasions with Haftar in Benghazi Libya on 11 and 15 January 2019.¹⁵³ There is little additional information about the content of these meetings. However, it is unlikely that the meetings focused on preparing Haftar for an imminent military campaign against Tripoli. Analysis from employees of a Prigozhin-linked organization called The Foundation for National Values Protection—often returned to as Prigozhin’s “back office”—were skeptical of Haftar’s military capabilities and warned of shortcomings in his relationship with the Kremlin. Valeria Darovskaya, the same Prigozhin employee who prepared the political strategy for Haftar, conducted an analysis of potential

¹⁵¹ Darovskaya.
¹⁵³ “Russia’s Wagner Group Offers to Help Khalifa Haftar in the Fezzan,” Maghreb Confidential, January 31, 2019, Nexis Uni.
future scenarios related to Libya’s political situation. She assessed that Haftar had only a 25% chance of capturing Tripoli if he were ever to attempt it. Darovskaya also investigated several scenarios in which Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi either cooperated or competed. The Kremlin’s preference appeared to be cooperation and avoidance of renewed large-scale fighting. If that occurred, Darovskaya believed that the most likely outcome would be for the United States and/or the United Nations to gain the upper hand in Libya.\(^{154}\)

Another employee from the Prigozhin-linked Fund for the Defense of National Values named Pyotr Bychkov also expressed skepticism about Haftar in several early-2019 reports to his superiors. Bychkov wrote in one report that Moscow had upheld its end of the bargain from the November 2019 meetings, but Haftar had not. Bychkov reported that as of 20 March 2019 Russia had provided military technical support to Haftar’s forces; completed a political analysis of the Libyan situation for Haftar; recommended how he could boost his political influence in Libya through the press and social media; launched the Voice of the People newspaper, with a print run of 300,000 copies; initiated consultations with the Al-Hadath television channel; initiated cooperation with the main military and political groups in Libya; and organized negotiations between Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. However, Bychkov indicated that Haftar had not done anything in return. Bychkov instead noted that Haftar had excluded Russian specialists from key decision-making in Libya, denied transportation to personnel

scheduled to meet with Safi al-Islam Gaddafi, withheld information from Russian personnel in Libya about Libyan National Army movements, and misinformed Russian specialists about various other matters. Bychkov lastly noted that Haftar had granted the United Arab Emirates—instead of Russia—contracts to rebuild Benghazi and to manage its port in exchange for financial support, despite all the support that Moscow had already provided to Haftar.155

Bychkov wrote in other reports to his superiors in March and April 2019 that Haftar was pursuing his own objectives in Libya at the expense of Russian interests. Most importantly, Bychkov assessed that if Haftar ever achieved his political-military goals in Libya, he would not be loyal to Russian interests. Bychkov indicated that Haftar was not responding to Russian requests, was using his relationship with Moscow to increase his own profile, and was prohibiting peaceful resolution of the conflict under the Kremlin’s auspices.156 For example, Bychkov revealed that Haftar had leaked a photo to the public from the closed negotiations with the Russian Ministry of Defense in early-November 2018 to promote his international image and to leverage support from other international actors.157 Bychkov also noted that Haftar had turned on his previous partners in southern Libya during his offensive movement toward the capital, using Sudanese mercenaries and French air power to conduct military operations in the region that inflicted heavy civilian casualties.158

156 Bychkov, “On the Situation in Libya.”
158 Bychkov, “On the Situation in Libya.”
Bychkov proposed a few courses of action to his superiors that he believed could temper Haftar’s ambition and return the situation to a status quo that the Kremlin could control. In one course of action, Bychkov proposed using Sudanese mercenaries to support another leader, such as Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, to balance Haftar’s growing strength and force him to return to Russian-led negotiations. As a bonus, Bychkov believed that a joint demonstration of intent to attack Tripoli—but not an actual attack—by Saif with Sudanese mercenary support would force the disparate Tripolitania groups to unite, thus simplifying a Russian-led negotiation processes. In a second course of action, Bychkov proposed supporting Haftar with a powerful and loyal Russian ally, deputy head of Sudan’s ruling military council—and mercenary leader—Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. Bychkov noted that Hemedti and his mercenaries were willing to work with Haftar if requested, and that doing so would give Moscow inside leverage over Haftar if the Kremlin decided to provide further support for the Libyan National Army.\textsuperscript{159}

\textit{The Government of National Accord: International Political Legitimacy to Rule}

Moscow simultaneously began to develop relationships with UN-recognized Government of National Accord leaders beginning in the fall of 2016. Fayez al-Sarraj assumed control of the Government of National Accord in late-March 2016 in accordance with the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Agreement that was signed in late-2015. Although Russian leaders did not officially recognize

\textsuperscript{159} Bychkov.
Sarraj’s Tripoli-based executive council—because the Tobruk-based parliament would not approve Sarraj’s choice of ministers—Kremlin leaders established contact with Sarraj about six months after he entered office through an impromptu meeting that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov initiated with Sarraj on the side of the 71st UN General Assembly session in late-September 2016. Their conversation focused on implementing the 2015 UN-backed Libyan Political Agreement. Although media reports do not clarify which aspects of the political agreement the two leaders discussed, the topic almost certainly focused on Sarraj gaining approval for his cabinet from the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, as this was the issue that prevented Moscow from officially recognizing Sarraj.

The Kremlin held a longer meeting with Sarraj about a year later. The Kremlin invited Sarraj to meet with Lavrov in Moscow in early-March 2017. After the meeting, Lavrov highlighted Moscow’s historical relationship with Libya and desire to see Libya become united and prosperous again. Sarraj said his government wanted to develop deeper diplomatic, economic, and military ties with Russia. Sarraj also promised to work toward implementing the provisions of existing political agreements.

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Lavrov and Sarraj’s initial meeting propelled numerous lower-level engagements between Russian and Libyan officials throughout 2017. Putin’s Special Representative for the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov, met with Sarraj on the sidelines of the Arab League summit in March 2017 and then with Libyan Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq in Tripoli in April 2017.163 Moscow leveraged religious and cultural ties between Chechnya and Libya to hold a meeting between Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Maiteeq in Grozny in mid-September 2017, after which Maiteeq went to Moscow two days later for additional talks with Bogdanov.164 Maiteeq told reporters after the meetings that the Government of National Accord viewed Russia as an important player for creating stability in Libya. Bogdanov separately indicated that they discussed potential talks between Sarraj and Haftar.165

Moscow’s relationship with Tripoli appeared to deepen toward the end of 2017 as meetings occurred between more senior-level Russian and Libyan representatives. Lavrov met again with Sarraj in early-October 2017 and then with Sarraj’s foreign minister in mid-December.166 Putin also arranged a meeting in mid-December 2017 between Sarraj and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. These talks aimed to convince Sarraj to accept a new political agreement

164 “Chechen Leader Meets Libya’s UN-Backed Deputy Premier,” BBC Monitoring, September 14, 2017, Nexis Uni; Dudina, “VICE-PRIME MINISTER OF LIBYA FLIES TO CHECHNYA.”
that would recognize Haftar as the official head of Libya’s military while keeping Sarraj in place as the country’s top political leader. Russian and Egyptian leaders promised in return to persuade Haftar never to attack Tripoli.\textsuperscript{167}

However, Moscow’s relationship with Tripoli cooled when Sarraj did not accept the agreement. Russian leaders did not meet again with Sarraj until more than five months later, toward the end of May 2018, and only then as part of a multilateral conference in Paris. French President Emmanuel Macron hosted Sarraj, Haftar, and representatives from 19 countries, including Russia, to create a plan for Libyan elections toward the end of 2018.\textsuperscript{168} The Paris meeting resulted in a tentative agreement for elections in early-December 2018.\textsuperscript{169} However, the elections never occurred because of disputes between Tripoli and Tobruk over the electoral process. The United Nations aimed to resolve the disputes at a Libyan National Conference that was scheduled for early-2019.

\textit{Saif al-Islam Gaddafi: Popular Support & Willingness to Work With Moscow}

Russian leaders began to cultivate a relationship with Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, son of former Libyan ruler Muamar Qaddafi, around the time that talks between Haftar and Sarraj broke down in late-December 2017.\textsuperscript{170} Prior to the 2011 Libyan uprising, many Libyans and foreigners believed that Saif was

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\item \textsuperscript{167} “Sissi and Putin Press Terms on Libya,” \textit{Maghreb Confidential}, December 14, 2017, Nexis Uni.
\item \textsuperscript{168} “Libya Breakthrough to Be Sought at Paris Conference,” \textit{Agence France Presse}, May 27, 2018, Nexis Uni.
\item \textsuperscript{170} Candace Rondeaux, Oliver Imhof, and Jack Margolin, “The Abu Dhabi Express” (New America, November 2021), 8, http://newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/the-abu-dhabi-express/.
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Libya’s best hope for gradual reform. He was one of the country’s most influential people and a likely successor to his father. He spoke fluent English and studied at the prestigious London School of Economics. However, Saif tarnished his reputation when he supported his father’s 2011 attacks against Libyan protestors.\(^{171}\) Rebels captured Saif during the subsequent fighting and held him captive in the Libyan city of Zintan until mid-2016.\(^{172}\) While in captivity, a Tripoli court sentenced him to death in absentia for his actions during the 2011 uprising and the International Criminal Court found him guilty of crimes against humanity.

After Saif’s release from captivity—during which time he won over his captors—Saif began to rehabilitate his image in preparation for the Libyan presidential elections. Saif toured the country and developed political support amongst the country’s major tribal factions. A family spokesman announced to Egyptian television in mid-December 2017 that Saif aimed to run in the Libyan presidential elections, tentatively scheduled for the following year.\(^{173}\) Saif announced his presidential intentions around the same time that the Russia-brokered deal between Haftar and Sarraj collapsed.\(^{174}\)

Saif began to court Moscow sometime in 2018. He sent a member of his political delegation, Mohammed al-Galyoushi, to Moscow toward the end of the year to discuss Libya’s political crisis with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.


Galyoushi met with Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, who also was serving as Putin’s special envoy to the Middle East and Africa. Galyoushi delivered a letter to Bogdanov that presented Saif’s views about achieving reconciliation in Libya, including Saif’s support for the UN peace process. Saif also sought Russian participation in an upcoming UN conference that aimed to promote reconciliation amongst the warring Libyan factions. A few weeks after the meeting, Bogdanov told a Russian press agency that Saif should play a more prominent role in Libyan politics. Other Russian news agencies also began to highlight Russian support for Saif, predicting that he would become a frontrunner in Libya’s upcoming presidential elections. Separately, Saif secured Russian support in early-January 2019 on behalf of his brother who had been imprisoned in Lebanon in relation to his actions during the 2011 Libyan uprising.

Russian relationships with Saif began to deepen in early-2019. Wagner owner Prigozhin secured a 50 percent share in Al Jamahiriya Television sometime in early 2019 and revived the channel as a pro-Saif information source. The channel previously operated in Libya in support of Saif’s father from 1966 until Libyan rebel factions closed Al Jamahiriya stations in 2011. Although the channel resumed broadcasts in 2012 from a studio in Cairo Egypt,

179 Anthony Loyd, “Russia Grooms Gaddafi’s Son to Rule in Libya; A Web of Intrigue Surrounding Saif Gaddafi Leads Back to Moscow,” The Times, June 20, 2020, Nexis Uni.
the broadcasts only occurred every few months. A Wagner-affiliate named Anton Timchenko wrote a report to his superiors on 11 March 2019 in which he described how Wagner had revitalized the television station. Wagner re-equipped its studios, re-trained its employees, paid off its debts, helped to develop and broadcast new programs, and developed a network of news correspondents reporting daily in all major towns across Libya. After the Wagner revitalization, the channel was broadcasting daily to more than 6 million monthly viewers across the Middle East and North Africa. The channel became especially popular with Saif’s supporters.  

Wagner also began to conduct information operations on Facebook in early-2019 to support both Saif and Haftar. Separate Facebook groups focused on news reporting about the main Libyan regions and provided both pro-Gaddafi and pro-Haftar messaging. By March 2019, the campaign included 12 Facebook groups with a weekly audience of over 2 million users. Wagner claimed that the average audience for other prominent Libyan Facebook groups around the same time was only about 250,000 users.

Wagner-affiliated political operatives traveled to Libya in early-2019 to provide more information operations support for Saif. Two employees from The Foundation for National Values Protection—the same Russian organization that conducted political analysis for Haftar only five months prior—flew from Moscow

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to Libya on 14 March 2019. Their names were Maxim Shugaley and Aleksandr Prokofyev.\textsuperscript{182} Shugaley was an experienced political operative who had previously been involved in high-profile political incidents such as a 2002 Russian electoral dispute and Russian efforts to influence Madagascar’s 2018 elections.\textsuperscript{183} Shugaley and Prokofyev prepared an information operations strategy in late-March 2019 to promote Saif called “Libya’s Rebirth.” Their analysis indicated that Saif maintained a high level of Libyan popular support, including from several large tribes—the Tarhona, Touareg, Warfalla, and Warshfana—and Libyan diaspora in Egypt and Tunisia. However, the operatives also noted that Saif’s near absence from the information space and lack of organized political support hindered his potential as a serious political candidate. Shugaley and Prokofyev prepared a strategy to ensure Saif’s permanent presence in the information space, to develop his support amongst the Libyan people, to create a pro-Saif political party, and to make Saif a key stakeholder in Libya’s negotiation process.\textsuperscript{184}

The Russian operatives presented the information operations strategy to Saif sometime around early-April 2019. Prokofyev wrote a report about a two-hour meeting during which he met with Saif in the village of Zintan. Prokofyev


\textsuperscript{183} Kirkpatrick, “The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It.”

wrote that Saif was narcissistic, overly optimistic about his level of popular support, and lacked understanding about the organizational and technical challenges of running a political campaign. Saif asked for campaign support, including with public relations and information operations. Although Saif considered Haftar to be his biggest threat, Saif also believed that many of Haftar’s officers would eventually switch their allegiance to Saif.  

American intelligence officials alerted the Libyan government to the Russian operatives’ presence in Libya, which led to their arrest on 17 May 2019. Libyan security officials searched the operatives’ hotel room and found reports they had sent back to Russia about their meetings with Saif. Chairman of The Foundation for National Values Protection Alexander Malkevich acknowledged that the operatives worked for the foundation and that they actually had met with Saif not just once, but three times during 2019. However, Malkevich claimed that the meetings were part of a sociological study. The operatives were released from prison in late-2020. A Russian movie producer later turned their story into a film that has been published to YouTube. The film portrays Saif as the “Savior of Libya.”

The information operations support that Wagner and its affiliates provided to Saif successfully raised his profile. “Saif looks great,” a prominent social media

187 Kirkpatrick, “The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It.”
188 Loyd, “Russia Grooms Gaddafi’s Son to Rule in Libya; A Web of Intrigue Surrounding Saif Gaddafi Leads Back to Moscow.”
analyst later told the London Times. “Pro-Gaddafi platforms are rebranding him as this transformative, intellectual, peaceful leader; a man of the people. Since 2019 the Russian campaign has propped him up online in a way that has brought him back into consciousness, back into public shared memory.”

**Russian Military Support**

As the Kremlin slowly infiltrated the organizations of the key leaders in Libya’s domestic political landscape, Russian military personnel and equipment also began to deploy to areas in eastern Libya under Haftar’s control. Assets deployed from both the Russian military and a Russian private military company called the Wagner Group. These deployments bolstered Haftar’s military capabilities, enabled him to expand his control in Libya, and provided Russia with military access to Libya for the first time since the 2011.

The Russian military began to support the Libyan National Army as early as 2015. US and British officials reported to the New York Times that Russia was cooperating with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates in 2015 and 2016 to provide Russian weapons to Haftar’s forces that were fighting against Islamist terrorist groups in eastern Libya. US and Western officials also reported that Russian military advisors and intelligence officers regularly moved in and out of Haftar’s area of control in eastern Libya throughout 2017. The Russian presence increased throughout 2017 and 2018 with a growing number of

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189 Loyd.
190 Becker and Schmitt, “As Trump Wavers on Libya, an ISIS Haven, Russia Presses On.”
191 Becker and Schmitt.
Russian personnel observed in Tobruk and Benghazi, including special forces that operated closely with Haftar’s elite units. However, the Kremlin repeatedly denied the presence of any Russian military personnel in Libya.

Speculation also began in early-2017 that Russian leaders wanted to revive a 2010 Gaddafi-era deal to establish a naval base near Benghazi in eastern Libya. The speculation continued into the following year when Lev Dengov, head of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s contract group on Libya, told Egyptian media in mid-February 2018 that Haftar had asked the Kremlin to establish a military base in eastern Libya. Dengov said that Haftar directly contacted the Russian Ministry of Defense with his request. But Dengov did not confirm whether Russian military leaders accepted Haftar’s request. Although

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Libyan National Army Spokesman Ahmad Al-Mismari denied the reports, there is no evidence that Dengov retracted his statement.\textsuperscript{197}

\textit{Wagner Group Paramilitary Support}

The Russian Wagner Group private military company also began to deepen its relationship with Haftar in 2018, establishing positions in Benghazi and southeast Libya. British government officials and media outlets reported that Wagner had 300 personnel cooperating with Haftar’s forces in Benghazi in 2018. Wagner provided military training, ammunition, artillery, tanks, and unmanned aircraft for Haftar’s forces.\textsuperscript{198} Wagner also established a training camp in southeast Libya in 2018 that provided technical support for the maintenance and repair of Libyan National Army equipment and overhauled more than 500 military vehicles and field artillery pieces.\textsuperscript{199} At least 23 Russian specialists supported the technical mission between October 2018 and March 2019, inspecting 536 pieces of military equipment and repairing 125 of 345 damaged pieces, including 61 tanks, 57 armored vehicles, and 7 artillery pieces. The Russian technical team also purchased and delivered about $300,000 USD worth of spare parts to

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{197} “BBCM Libya Watchlist for 19 February,” \textit{BBC Monitoring}, February 19, 2018, https://advance-lexis-com.proxy1.library.jhu.edu/document/?pdmfid=1516831&crd=f74b00af-6baf-4b84-960ae36e9580e6db&pddocfullpath=%2Fshared%2Fdocument%2Fnews%2Furn%3AcontentItem%3A5RP3-5CX1-DYRV-303B-00000-00&pdcontentcomponentid=10962&pdteaserkey=sr14&pditab=al\lpods&ecomp=zznyk&earg=sr14\&prid=281d938c-26d8-4b72-877c-08df647512cb.
\item\textsuperscript{198} Alec Luhn, “Russian Mercenaries Help Rebel Libyan Army to Seize Oilfields,” \textit{The Daily Telegraph}, March 4, 2019, Nexis Uni; “Russia’s Wagner Group Offers to Help Khalifa Haftar in the Fezzan.”
\end{itemize}
Haftar’s forces. \(^{200}\) By early-2019, Wagner’s mission in Libya had expanded to include operational combat support and specialized tasks that Haftar would later heavily rely on during his Tripoli offensive, including operations as artillery forward observers, air controllers, electronic counter-measures operators, and sniper teams. \(^{201}\)

Wagner’s growing presence in Libya was important because of the group’s close ties to the Kremlin. \(^{202}\) Wagner operates as an unofficial element of the Russian military under the control of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, formerly known as the Main Intelligence Directorate. \(^{203}\) Wagner often operates alongside official Russian military and intelligence personnel to achieve the Kremlin’s military and foreign policy objectives. Wagner was involved in the Kremlin’s 2014 invasion of Crimea, the subsequent separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, and the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022. Wagner has also operated in other locations around the world, including Syria in the Middle East; the Central African Republic, Chad, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Sudan in Africa;


and Cuba and Venezuela in the Americas. Other countries where Wagner may have operated, but evidence is inconclusive, include Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.

Wagner’s services most often include providing military training, combat advising, and combat operations. Wagner mercenaries use equipment typically only employed by Russian military personnel, and Wagner trains at locations often co-located with or near Russian installations, including Wagner’s unofficial training ground that was established in mid-2015 near Krasnodar in southern Russia, right next to a Russian army base. The Wagner training facility is on the same compound in Molkino, Krasnodar as the 10th Separate Special Purpose Brigade of Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate.

Former Russian special forces officer Dmitry Utkin was previously believed to have founded the Wagner Group around 2015. Information prior to 2022 indicated that Utkin named the group after his own nom-de-guerre: “Wagner,” reportedly a reference to his interest in Nazi Germany and its

206 Atlamazoglou, “A Tablet Computer and a ‘shopping List’ Reveal How Russia Might Take on the US without Starting a Real War.”
209 Ibrahim and Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents”; Atlamazoglou, “A Tablet Computer and a ‘shopping List’ Reveal How Russia Might Take on the US without Starting a Real War.”
promotion of Richard Wagner’s music. However Russian businessman and Putin-confidant Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed in late-September 2022 to have founded the Wagner Group in 2014. “I cleaned the old weapons myself, sorted out the bulletproof vests myself, and found specialist who could help with this,” Prigozhin told the press service of one of his companies in his first public admission about his leadership of Wagner. Prigozhin was previously believed only to be Wagner’s financer, for which he received a US Department of Justice indictment for interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

Wagner mostly employs former Russian military personnel who obtain employment through short-term contracts for blue-collar jobs with shell companies. Between Wagner’s 2015 inception and the Kremlin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, about 10,000 mercenaries worked for Wagner, most often on short, conflict-based contracts that earned mercenaries as much as ten times the average Russian salary. Although private military companies are illegal in

210 Ibrahim and Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents.” Although most analysts judge that Utkin founded the Wagner Group, Bellingcat assessed in August 2020 that Utkin did not found the group. Bellingcat instead assessed that Utkin “was employed as a convenient and deniable decoy to disguise its state provenance” based on an online resume that Utkin posted seeking employment only a few months prior to the Wagner Group’s involvement in the 2015 invasion of Ukraine. See “Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed,” Bellingcat, August 14, 2020, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed.


212 Engelbrecht.

213 Atlamazoglou, “A Tablet Computer and a 'shopping List' Reveal How Russia Might Take on the US without Starting a Real War.”

214 Ibrahim and Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents”; Atlamazoglou, “A Tablet Computer and a 'shopping List' Reveal How Russia Might Take on the US without Starting a Real War.”

Russia, Russian federal law was amended in 2016 to allow citizens on the mobilization reserve “to participate in activities to maintain or restore international peace and security or to suppress terrorist activities outside the territory of the Russian Federation.”

**Other Support: Financial, Intelligence, and Information Operations**

The Kremlin also provided financial, intelligence, and information operations support to Haftar. Moscow began to provide financial support in 2016 for the Haftar-aligned branch of the Central Bank of Libya in response to a Libyan liquidity crisis. The UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli controlled Libya’s oil revenues, directing them from the main branch of Libya’s central bank to locations around the country. However, rival political officials in eastern Libya claimed they were not receiving their fair share from Tripoli. In response, the Kremlin began printing Libyan dinars at the Goznak state-money printing factory in Russia and shipping them to the Haftar-aligned branch of Libya’s central bank. Russia provided nearly 9 billion USD worth of Libyan dinars to the Haftar-aligned branch between 2016 and the start of the Tripoli offensive in early-2019. This total included about $2.9 billion USD worth of Libyan dinars in 2016, about $2.9 billion USD worth in 2017, about $1.7 billion USD worth in 2018, and about $1.4 billion USD worth in early-2019. Although both the

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Central Bank of Libya and many members of the international community protested the deliveries, they occurred anyway and diminished the credibility of Libya’s banking system.\textsuperscript{218}

The Kremlin began to provide intelligence support to Haftar in late-2018. Wagner conducted an analysis of the Libyan political situation, as discussed in detail above, and provided recommendations on how Haftar could increase his influence in Libya through the press and social media networks.\textsuperscript{219} Wagner also conducted regular sociological analyses of the Libyan civil war for Haftar.\textsuperscript{220}

Finally, the Kremlin began to provide information operations support for Haftar at least as early as 2019.\textsuperscript{221} Wagner started a pro-Haftar newspaper called \textit{The Voice of the People} with a print run of 300,000 copies and conducted consultations with the \textit{Al-Hadath} television channel to boost Haftar’s public image.\textsuperscript{222} Wagner initiated a Facebook campaign at least as early as the beginning of 2019 to support Haftar—as well as to support Saif. Separate Facebook groups focused on news reporting about the main Libyan regions and provided both pro-Saif and pro-Haftar messaging. The campaign included at least 12 Facebook groups in March 2019 with a weekly audience of over 2,000,000 users. Wagner claimed that the average audience for other prominent Libyan Facebook groups around the same time was only about 250,000 users.\textsuperscript{223}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item \textsuperscript{218} Fasanotti, “Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-again-off-again Friendship.”
\item \textsuperscript{220} Bychkov, “On the Situation in Libya.”
\item \textsuperscript{221} Bychkov.
\item \textsuperscript{223} “Appendix 2 – Facebook Operation,” 2; Bychkov, “On the Situation in Libya.”
\end{thebibliography}
Conclusion: Russia’s Great Power Ambitions Lead To Tripoli

Russia’s reemergence as a great power has brought the Kremlin back to many places that Moscow abandoned at the end of the Cold War, including Libya. Libya’s chronic instability, substantial energy reserves, and geostrategic location offered many possibilities that appealed to the Kremlin’s renewed great power ambitions. Moscow sought to develop those possibilities between 2015 and 2019 through a strategy that relied primarily on diplomatic maneuvering inside Libya to posture the Kremlin to manage the conflict, as well as on varying levels of military, financial, informational, and intelligence support to a few key Libyan leaders, principally Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar, Government of National Accord Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, and Muamar Gaddafi’s son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. The Kremlin infiltrated the organizations of these major leaders and tried to manipulate their ambitions for Moscow’s gain. However, the Kremlin allocated the weight of its efforts toward Haftar because of his superior military strength respective to the other Libya leaders. Although Haftar was a challenging partner, the Kremlin was able to manipulate Haftar’s request for support to increase the presence of Russian military and mercenary personnel in Libya.

The Kremlin’s use of diplomacy during the early years of its intervention in the Libyan civil war strongly reflected Vladislav Surkov’s ideas about sovereign democracy. Russian leaders and Kremlin affiliates infiltrated Libya’s domestic political landscape, developed relationships with Libya’s most influential leaders and exploited those relationships to the Kremlin’s advantage. Kremlin affiliates
also tried to manage Libya’s political system and information space in a way that resembled Moscow’s attempts to control its own quasi-democracy. By early-2019, Moscow’s weaponization of diplomacy in Libya had postured the Kremlin to manage the Libyan conflict toward an outcome that favored Russian interests.
“In previous wars the most important part was considered the conquest of territory. From now, it will be the conquest of the souls in the enemy state.”
– Evgeny Messner, 1960

“The simple-hearted commanders of the past strove for victory. Now they did not act so stupidly. That is, some, of course, still clung to the old habits and tried to exhume from the archives old slogans of the type: victory will be ours. It worked in some places, but basically, war was now understood as a process, more exactly, part of a process, its acute phase, but maybe not the most important.”
– Vladislav Surkov, 2014

Ironically, the most well-known characteristic of the Kremlin’s expeditionary warfare in Libya was the covert military support that Moscow provided to the rebel Libyan National Army’s failed attempt to seize the Libyan capital of Tripoli between April 2019 and June 2020. Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar attempted to seize Tripoli beginning in early-April 2019. Haftar’s forces initially advanced rapidly across Western Libya and toward Tripoli. However, when the offensive reached the capital, Haftar encountered strong opposition from militias that backed the Government of National Accord. Fighting between the Libyan National Army and government-affiliated militias quickly entered a stalemate, and both sides heavily relied on unmanned aircraft to conduct hundreds of airstrikes in mutually unsuccessful attempts to regain the initiative. The Kremlin covertly supported the Libyan National Army during the latter half of 2019 with a Russian private military company called the Wagner Group. However, overt Turkish support for the UN-recognized Government of National Accord reversed the Libyan National Army’s momentum in early-2020 and defeated Haftar’s offensive by June of the same year.
It is possible to view Haftar’s unsuccessful Wagner-backed Tripoli offensive as a Russian military failure. However, such a viewpoint assumes that the Kremlin unequivocally supported Haftar’s offensive and wanted him to seize Tripoli. That assumption is incorrect. The Kremlin did not want Haftar’s offensive to occur, and when it did occur, the Kremlin did not want the offensive to succeed. But the Kremlin did find a way to use the ill-fated offensive to achieve Moscow’s objectives in Libya. The Kremlin marginally increased its military support for Haftar during the Tripoli offensive to create the impression that Haftar had Moscow’s backing while manipulating the situation to gain control of key oil facilities, airfields, and ports under Libyan National Army control. From this perspective, Moscow did not use the Wagner Group as a tool of plausible deniability to aid Haftar as a Russian proxy. Moscow instead used Wagner as a poorly hidden prop in an information operation designed to convince Haftar and the rest of the world that the Libyan National Army had Moscow’s backing.

**Operation Flood of Dignity vs Volcano of Rage**

On 4 April 2019, Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar initiated *Operation Flood of Dignity* and ordered his forces to attack the Libyan capital of Tripoli. Haftar aimed to seize control of the city, stating that he intended to liberate the government from what he referred to as terrorists and criminals.\(^224\) If

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\(^{224}\) Haftar’s claim contained an element of truth. The four primary militias that controlled Tripoli in April 2019 exerted significant influence over state institutions. Although these militias brought a measure of stability to the capital, they also engaged in wide-spread criminal activity. Analysts closely monitoring the situation claimed in mid-2018 that the government was “powerless in the face of militia influence.” See Wolfram Lacher and Alaa al-Idrissi, “Capital of Militias: Tripoli’s Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State,” *Small Arms Survey*, June 2018,
Haftar could not overthrow the Government of National Accord, he at least wanted to place himself in a strong enough military position to dominate future political negotiations.\(^{225}\) The latter alternative was especially important in context of the offensive’s timing: the attack on Tripoli occurred about a week before a UN-facilitated conference that aimed to break the country’s political stalemate.\(^{226}\)

At the offensive’s beginning, the Libyan National Army was the country’s most powerful military force. Built around remnants of Gaddafi’s army, the Libyan National Army’s total strength was about 25,000 fighters, including a core full-time militia of 7,000 fighters and up to 18,000 auxiliary troops. Haftar also had access to as many as 2,900 additional Chadian and Sudanese foreign fighters. Yet despite the army’s relatively large size, the Libya National Army was a loose grouping of militias, many of which were not available for the attack on Tripoli because they were conducting tasks elsewhere in Libya.\(^{227}\) Consequently, the number of fighters involved in the attack on Tripoli is unknown. Estimates from Russian operatives at the time of the attack believed that Haftar had committed between 60 and 70 percent of his combat-ready units to the Tripoli offensive.\(^{228}\)


The relatively untrained but combat-experienced Libyan National Army largely comprised ground-based light infantry-style fighters supported by limited ground, air, and naval assets. Ground personnel were equipped with small arms, supplemented by low amounts of armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, artillery, and air defense equipment. The air force had about five to ten serviceable aircraft, and maritime forces possessed less than ten coastal patrol vessels.²²⁹

The Libyan National Army supplemented its rudimentary capabilities with support from France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates. The extent of each country’s assistance to the Libyan National Army circa April 2019 is unknown. However, key support available around the time the offensive began included military support from France, Jordan, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates; financial assistance from Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; and various types of information operations assistance from Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.²³⁰

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foreign-provided military equipment included low numbers of air defense systems, armed and unarmed unmanned aircraft, armored fighting vehicles, surface-to-air missiles, anti-tank weapons, high explosive laser-guided artillery munitions, and radio frequency jamming systems.\textsuperscript{231}

Russian-made Pantsir-S1 short-range air defense systems were particularly important for the Libyan National Army’s initial advance toward Tripoli.\textsuperscript{232} The United Arab Emirates provided at least two Pantsir-S1 systems to the Libyan National Army sometime between 5 March and 19 April 2019.\textsuperscript{233} Haftar used these systems to establish local air superiority around advancing ground formations.\textsuperscript{234} These systems easily destroyed government aircraft that tried to halt the initial advance, including Turkish-supplied Bayraktar TB-2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles.\textsuperscript{235}

It is important to note the capabilities and sophistication of the Pantsir-S1. Not only because of the role that it played in Haftar’s initial advance, but also because his forces lacked the capability to operate the air defense system without the expertise of Wagner Group mercenaries.\textsuperscript{236} The Pantsir-S1 is a $15 million, self-propelled anti-aircraft gun and missile system that provides air


\textsuperscript{233} “Libya Panel of Experts Letter Dated 29 November 2019.”


defense coverage for ground forces on the move against fixed- and rotary-winged aircraft, cruise missiles, and precision-guided munitions.\(^{237}\) The Pantsir-S1 can track up to 20 tactical aircraft-sized targets at ranges up to 20 kilometers and is equipped with up to twelve missiles and two cannons that allow the Pantsir-S1 to engage up to four targets simultaneously.\(^{238}\) The Pantsir-S1 first entered service with the Russian air force in early 2010 and has been exported to numerous countries and used in several conflict zones, including eastern Syria (2013), Ukraine (2014), and Libya (2019).\(^{239}\)

Haftar appeared to have Moscow’s backing as the Libyan National Army used sophisticated Russian-made equipment to quickly move across southern Libya and advance on Tripoli. However, a closer analysis of the Kremlin’s perspective of Haftar reveals a strained relationship. Lev Dengov, chair of Russia’s Contract Group for Intra-Libyan Settlement, told Haftar in early-April 2019 not to attack Tripoli.\(^{240}\) Dengov later told the media that it was “absolutely predictable that Haftar would get bogged down...[because he] isn’t capable of taking Tripoli. That’s clear.” Dengov also criticized Haftar for his unwillingness to sit at the negotiating table and concluded that the conflict would continue until a

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\(^{238}\) Missile Defense Project, “Pantsir S-1.”

\(^{239}\) “Pantsir-S1 / Pantsyr-S1 / SA-22 Greyhound.”

leader emerged who could unite Libya. "If that leader was Haftar, he would already be in Tripoli, the city would have fallen without a fight."  

Dengov’s public statements aligned with private, Wagner-affiliated assessments that were discussed in detail in chapter two. Most importantly, Kremlin operatives in Libya believed that Haftar lacked the military capability to seize Tripoli and that the West was likely to gain the upper hand in the event of a large-scale conflict. Haftar also failed to present his plan for seizing Tripoli to the Russian military command, despite their requests. Furthermore, if Haftar did seize Tripoli, Kremlin operatives did not believe that Haftar was a loyal ally. He resisted Russian control; instrumentalized his relationship with Moscow; failed to fulfill his promises; withheld information from Russian interlocutors in Libya, misinformed them, and excluded them from key decision-making process; and gave preferential treatment to the United Arab Emirates, despite the support that Russia had provided Haftar over the past several years.  

Haftar ignored the Kremlin’s order not to attack Tripoli and quickly encountered strong opposition from the Government of National Accord, which declared Operation Volcano of Rage to defend the capital. Political officials

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243 “Report on the Outcome of a Meeting on 22/04/19 with Russian Military Analysts in the Territory.”
246 Pack, “Kingdom of Militias.”
characterized their operation as a defense of Libya’s sovereignty and people.\textsuperscript{247} The government sought to achieve its objective with a rudimentary defensive perimeter on Tripoli’s outskirts. Lacking formal military forces, the government relied on militias from the surrounding areas to defend the city and succeeded in rallying a force comparable to Haftar’s in size and capability. The most prominent militias were from Misrata, Tripoli, Zawiya, and Zintan, providing about 5,750 fighters in total to defend Tripoli, with access to as many as 18,000 other fighters throughout the region. The government also relied on several hundred Chadian and Sudanese militants. Although the Libyan militias nominally aligned themselves with the Government of National Accord, militia leaders took little direction from the government and conducted minimal coordination with other militias on Tripoli’s frontlines. Relations were tense amongst the militias because many of them fought each other and the Government of National Accord during earlier phases of the civil war. The primary reason they came together in April 2019 was to oppose the Libyan National Army, not out of loyalty to the Government of National Accord.\textsuperscript{248}

Similar to the Libyan National Army, the relatively untrained government-aligned militias largely comprised ground-based, light infantry-style fighters with limited air, ground, and naval support. Also like the Libyan National Army, government-aligned fighters primarily used small arms and had low numbers of armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, artillery, and air defense equipment. A

\textsuperscript{247} “Sarraj Meets Western Mayors,” \textit{BBC Monitoring}, April 10, 2019, Nexis Uni.

small Government of National Accord air force had about 14 serviceable aircraft. Maritime forces had less than 15 vessels. Although the government had more total aircraft than the Libyan National Army, government forces had only four fighter or attack aircraft, whereas the Libyan National Army had at least seven similar aircraft.\(^\text{249}\)

The Government of National Accord also received support from several foreign powers, including Italy, Qatar, and Turkey. The extent of each country’s support to the Government of National Accord circa April 2019 is unknown. However, key foreign military support available during the campaign’s early months included similar assets to which the Libyan National Army had access, including armed and unarmed unmanned aerial vehicles, aircraft jamming systems, and armored personnel carriers. Turkey supplied almost all the support; Italian and Qatari contributions were minimal.\(^\text{250}\)

The relative parity between the government-aligned militias and the Libyan National Army favored the defense and enabled government fighters to halt the Libyan National Army offensive on the outskirts of Tripoli, leading to a concentration of fighting in districts south and southeast of the city center. Haftar’s representatives requested military support during the first few days of the offensive from the commander of Russian forces in Libya, almost certainly

\(^{249}\) “Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa,” 355–56.
General-Lieutenant Andrei Vladimirovich Khalzakov. Haftar wanted Russian unmanned aircraft to attack government-aligned artillery positions. But Khalzakov denied Haftar’s request. Haftar’s forces later requested Russian training on man-portable air defense systems, navigation systems, and control equipment from Russian troops deployed to Libya. These requests also were denied. Haftar later asked the Russians to move their established military base in Libya, which was equipped with air defense assets, closer to Tripoli to a location either in Jufra or Gharyan to provide planning assistance for Haftar’s operations in western Libya. Jufra was particularly important because it served as Haftar’s primary air and logistics hub for Libyan National Army operations in western Libya and as Haftar’s staging point for the Tripoli offensive. However, Russian leaders in Libya told Haftar that they could not support him without senior-command approval. Libyan National Army representatives left Libya for Moscow on at least one occasion in April to address Haftar’s requests in-person.

Dissatisfied with the Kremlin’s early 2019 responses, Haftar tried his own rudimentary information operation to pressure Moscow, to intimidate his rivals, and to convince international actors that Russia had a deep relationship with the Libyan National Army. Haftar leaked information to the press and to social media

252 Bychkov, “Possible Motives for K. Haftar’s Visit to Russia.”
networks in early-March 2019 about 300 Wagner mercenaries that were fighting on his side. The leaked information was published internationally in prominent media sources such as The Telegraph and The London Times. Wagner affiliates claimed that the leaked information convinced militias in Misrata to halt their plans to attack Jufra, which gained Haftar enough time to take the city.

Haftar also leaked photographs of a Libyan National Army column that included “white soldiers of European appearance” and military vehicles with fake, paper Russian license plates. Wagner affiliates claimed that Haftar wanted to use the leaked information to demonstrate to his rivals and international actors that Moscow was supporting the Libya National Army. Russia officials predictably denied the information, which only added to the intrigue of Wagner’s presence in Libya. Haftar also wanted to visit Moscow during the offensive’s early days to meet with Russian officials. Wagner affiliates believed that one of the main factor’s driving Haftar’s desire to travel to Moscow was to provide further evidence to the international community and Libyan political leaders that the Kremlin was supporting Haftar. As noted in chapter two, this was not the first time Haftar attempted to use meetings with Russian officials as disinformation about the depth of his relationship with the Kremlin. Haftar previously leaked a

256 Bychkov, “Possible Motives for K. Haftar’s Visit to Russia.”
258 Bychkov, “Possible Motives for K. Haftar’s Visit to Russia.”
259 Bychkov.
261 Bychkov, “Possible Motives for K. Haftar’s Visit to Russia.”
photo to the public from closed negotiations with the Russian Ministry of Defense in early-November 2018 to promote his international image and to leverage support from other international actors.262

As Haftar struggled to convince the Kremlin to support the Libyan National Army’s Tripoli offensive, heavy fighting occurred in key areas that changed hands repeatedly, including Ain Zara, Wadi al-Rabi, and the non-functioning Tripoli International Airport.263 Libyan National Army leaders claimed the regular territorial changes were part of a deliberate tactic to avoid the destruction that occurred in other cities earlier in the civil war, such as Benghazi and Derna. The goal of this so-called “Tripoli tactic” was to draw government-aligned forces to less populated areas on the city’s outskirts where the Libyan National Army could use artillery and air support to overrun government positions with minimal collateral damage and then withdraw. After government-aligned forces re-occupied the positions, the Libyan National Army re-attacked and temporarily held the ground, if possible, before again withdrawing.264

Whether the Tripoli tactic was deliberate or not, the result was the same: relative parity between the two sides resulted in a stalemate about a month after the campaign began.265 Less than a few hundred fighters from both sides

262 Bychkov.
263 Ibrahim and Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents.”
typically fought each other at any given time in a small number of districts on Tripoli’s outskirts while normal life continued in most of the city.  

Although numerous areas changed hands during the conflict’s early months, neither side gained a decisive advantage.

Both sides heavily relied on limited air assets to conduct hundreds of airstrikes in an attempt to break the stalemate. The use of unmanned aircraft was so prolific throughout the war that UN Special Representative to Libya Ghassan Salame later called the conflict “the largest drone war in the world.”

Libyan National Army air operations—which the United Arab Emirates heavily supported—focused on Tripoli, whereas Government of National Accord air operations—which Turkey heavily supported—sought both to defend Tripoli and to interdict long Libyan National Army supply lines running from Tripoli to eastern Libya. Superior Russian-made air defense systems and Emirati unmanned aerial vehicles gave the Libyan National Army an airpower advantage over government-aligned militias in the conflict’s early months; however, that advantage did not translate into operational success amidst the urban warfare in the capital of Tripoli.

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267 “Stopping the War for Tripoli,” 2; Pack, “Kingdom of Militias,” 9.

268 Interview with UN Special Representative for Libya Ghassan Salamé, United Nations Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB3jie4i7SI.


270 “Stopping the War for Tripoli,” 2; Samuel Ramani, “Turkey’s Military Intervention in Libya: A Surprise Triumph for Erdogan” 40, no. 5 (2020): 2; Ben Fishman and Conor Hiney, “What Turned
The most significant exception to the stalemate in Tripoli during the campaign’s initial months was a successful government counter-offensive in late-June 2019 that seized the important town of Gharyan about 90 km south of the capital. The Libyan National Army had been using Gharyan since early-April 2019 as its main forward operating base for the Tripoli offensive. Although the government’s seizure of Gharyan forced the Libyan National Army to move its main base from Gharyan to Tarhunah, about 90 km southeast of Tripoli, the Libyan National Army offensive continued without significant disruption.271

**Hiding a Bear in the Desert**

As Haftar’s offensive ground to a halt, Russian leaders and their operatives in Libya mulled over their options. They became increasingly convinced that Haftar’s offensive would fail, something that Haftar reinforced with his many requests for support. In April 2019, a Wagner affiliate in Libya reported to his superiors that Haftar had lost nearly half his fighters and would not be able to seize Tripoli without more manpower, ammunition, fuel, and funds.272 A separate Wagner affiliate also wrote to his director in April that the probability that

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272 Bychkov, “Possible Motives for K. Haftar’s Visit to Russia”; Bychkov, “Briefing on the Situation in Libya as of 06/04/2019, 9.”
Haftar’s offensive would succeed was zero. The report stated that although Haftar had committed up to seventy percent of his combat ready units to the offensive and had expended enormous amounts of ammunition, government-aligned forces had pushed Haftar back, and he had no more forces to commit to the fighting.\textsuperscript{273}

Russian political operatives in Libya sensed an opportunity to assert the Kremlin’s control over the conflict and to steer the situation toward Moscow’s interests. One recommended course of action indicated that the Kremlin sought peace in Libya. This course of action believed that Russia could score a diplomatic victory if the Kremlin could negotiate a ceasefire with Haftar, negotiations which the political operative claimed all of the key Libyan leaders in contact with Wagner would support.\textsuperscript{274} The operative further suggested that Russian-led reconciliation centers could be opened in all of Libya’s major cities to enable the ceasefire.\textsuperscript{275}

A separate course of action sought to unite Saif al-Islam Gaddafi with Haftar. Wagner affiliates arranged a telephone conversation in April between Saif and an unidentified individual aligned with Haftar. Saif agreed to support Haftar’s offensive against Tripoli. But Haftar was only willing to accept Saif’s support if he agreed not to seek political office Haftar.\textsuperscript{276} Clearly this arrangement did not work for the Russians, as they were looking for a way to exert control over Haftar, not

\textsuperscript{273} “Report on the Outcome of a Meeting on 22/04/19 with Russian Military Analysts in the Territory.”
\textsuperscript{274} Bychkov, “Possible Motives for K. Haftar’s Visit to Russia.”
\textsuperscript{275} Bychkov.
\textsuperscript{276} Pyotr Bychkov, “On K. Haftar’s Attitude to His Partners” (Interpreter, April 8, 2019), https://www.interpretermag.com/on-k-haftar/.
to diminish it. Saif was willing to support the offensive, but only because he believed it would weaken the Tripoli militia’s strength, damage Haftar’s reputation, and allow Saif to step forward in the future as a peacemaker, in contrast to Haftar’s growing status as a warlord.277

The final course of action—which the Kremlin eventually pursued—was a variant of a course of action that was proposed in March 2019 before Haftar began the offensive. The initial idea was to support Haftar with a powerful and loyal Russian ally, such as Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. Hemedti was a Sudanese mercenary leader who was then working as the deputy head of Sudan’s ruling military council. Wagner affiliates claimed in March that Hemedti and his mercenaries were willing to work with Haftar if requested, and that doing so would give Moscow inside leverage over Haftar.278 Although reports emerged during the conflict that Hemedti’s mercenaries had deployed to Libya to guard oil facilities in the country’s east, later reporting revealed that only about 200 Sudanese mercenaries had actually deployed to Libya and that they were from factions opposed to Hemedti.279

The plan to leverage Sudanese mercenaries to exert control over Haftar was a non-starter. But there was, of course, already a loyal mercenary group in Libya that the Kremlin could use: Wagner. In the fall of 2019, Russia began to increase its covert support to the Libyan National Army through the Wagner Group. Reports from the United Nations, the United States military, Libyan

277 Bychkov, “Briefing on the Situation in Libya as of 06/04/2019, 9.”
278 Bychkov, “On the Situation in Libya.”
government commanders, and a variety of news agencies indicated that the Kremlin used Wagner to deploy as many as 1,200 mercenaries to support the Libyan National Army during the latter half of 2019. The *London Times* notably reported in early-October 2019 that dozens of Wagner mercenaries died in a government-backed airstrike while fighting alongside Haftar’s forces and that seriously injured mercenaries were evacuated to Russia, including one fighter named Alexander Kuznetsov who Putin honored during a 2016 Kremlin ceremony. At least two senior Libyan National Army officers confirmed the presence of Russian personnel in Libya, claiming they were there to repair Russian-made equipment that Libya had owned for years, such as tanks and artillery. However, senior Russian officials repeatedly denied that any Russians were participating in combat operations in Libya, and that if there were Russians in Libya, they did not have a relationship with the Kremlin.

Despite Moscow’s denials, Wagner relied on a vast, centrally planned air bridge throughout the Middle East to support its logistical requirements, including a key node at the Russian Hmeymim military airbase in Syria. An in-depth UN

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investigation identified hundreds of covert unscheduled and/or charter flights originating from several countries in the region, including Eritrea, Jordan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates, to either Libyan National Army-controlled airports in eastern Libya or nearby airports in western Egypt. The majority of these flights originated from the Russian Hmeymim military airbase co-located with the Latakia / Bassel al-Assad international airport in Syria. The flights peaked in October 2018 and then again in January and February 2019, coinciding with reports of Wagner deployments to Libya.283

Wagner’s support provided an advantage to the Libyan National Army in a battle mainly fought by untrained militias on both sides of the conflict.284 The Wagner mercenaries were well-armed and well-trained.285 Their most important contributions were their specialized capabilities, such as calling in precision artillery and air strikes, providing sniper support, and conducting electronic countermeasures to disable Government of National Accord unmanned aircraft.286 Coordinating precision airstrikes arguably was Wagner’s most

285 Ibrahim and Barabanov, “The Lost Tablet and the Secret Documents.”
important contribution. Libyan National Army airstrikes caused high Government of National Accord casualties relative to other forms of combat, leading a senior Government of National Accord general to blame airstrikes for nearly two-thirds of his side’s casualties.²⁸⁷ It is notable that unmanned aircraft were the primary means to conduct precision-guided airstrikes because the requisite skills to conduct unmanned aircraft operations were beyond the known military capability of both Libyan National Army and Government of National Accord forces.²⁸⁸ Although airstrikes were important for both sides, the Libyan National Army conducted 890 strikes in 2019, whereas the Government of National Accord conducted only 336.²⁸⁹

Russia’s covert ground support—coupled with Emirati airpower and Egyptian logistic support—started to shift the campaign in the Libyan National Army’s favor toward the end of 2019.²⁹⁰ Although previous Libyan National Army operations benefitted from Emirati and Egyptian enablers, these assets were insufficient to enable Libyan National Army progress without a proficient ground element, such as Wagner, that could integrate the enablers into a relatively successful combined arms offensive. Emboldened by increased Russian support, Haftar announced the start of a renewed offensive in mid-December 2019 to

²⁸⁷ Kirkpatrick, “Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War.”
seize Tripoli which lead to heavy fighting in the city’s south. The Libyan National Army seized several areas of tactical significance, including a major Government of National Accord military camp. But victory continued to elude Haftar, eventually turning to failure when Turkey dramatically increased its support for the Government of National Accord in early-2020.

**Operation Peace Storm**

Turkish military support for the Government of National Accord between April and November 2019 helped to prevent the fall of Tripoli. However, Turkey’s assistance was insufficient to defeat the Libyan National Army offensive, and Turkish leaders slowly reduced their aid as the campaign dragged on. Despite the Libyan National Army’s growing threat to Tripoli, Ankara was decreasing its contributions to the Government of National Accord because of frustration with the Tripoli regime, low domestic support inside Turkey for its involvement in Libya, and the start of a major Turkish operation in Syria.

This situation began to change in November 2019 when the beleaguered Government of National Accord publicly signed a potentially lucrative and controversial maritime agreement with Turkey in exchange for increased military support. The maritime agreement created an exclusive economic zone in the

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291 Magdy, “Fighting Rages near Libya’s Capital amid Push by Rebel Army.”
Mediterranean between Libya and Turkey at the expense of Ankara’s regional rivals.\textsuperscript{294} This zone included significant natural gas reserves worth $700 billion USD that were discovered in early 2018.\textsuperscript{295} Ankara had approached Tripoli in early-2019 about the economic agreement; however, the Government of National Accord ignored this early interest.\textsuperscript{296} The worsening military situation in Tripoli eventually changed the Government of National Accord’s calculus, and a top Libyan government official referred to Ankara’s increased support in early 2020 as a life jacket that saved his government from drowning.\textsuperscript{297}

In addition to the economic benefits that Turkey believed it could accrue from supporting the Government of National Accord, regional power competition also motivated Ankara’s increased support in late-2019. Turkey’s initial involvement in Libya was rooted in a regional rivalry with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, all of which were trying to contain Turkish influence across the Middle East and North Africa. Haftar’s strengthened offensive in late-2019 threatened to shut Turkey out of Libya, and the Government of National Accord’s willingness to compensate Ankara prompted

greater Turkish involvement. However, Turkish leaders claimed their specific aim was to support the UN-recognized government, to balance the conflict on the ground, and to convince Haftar to seek a political settlement, something he was unwilling to do with the campaign in his favor.298

The new military agreement between Ankara and Tripoli dramatically escalated Turkish military support for the Government of National Accord, including increased ground, air, and maritime capabilities. In early-January 2020, the Turkish parliament authorized a one-year deployment of Turkish military forces to Libya.299 Turkey’s president confirmed in an early-January press interview that a Turkish general would lead the operation in Libya and that Turkish military personnel would train and advise Government of National Accord forces on the ground. The president also referenced non-Turkish units that would operate in Libya as combat forces, but he did not elaborate.300 The president may have been referring to the use of Syrian fighters in Libya. The Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army fought in Syria for years, and reports began to emerge in early-January 2020 that as many as 2,000 Syrians had arrived in Libya to support the Government of National Accord.301 In a late-February 2020 press

interview, the Turkish president confirmed cooperation with Syrian fighters in Libya: “Those going from…the Syrian National Army there [to Libya] have a common goal. They are there within the framework of these common goals.”

The number of Syrian fighters grew to as many as 11,600 by early-June 2020, with an additional 2,500 that went to Turkey for training. Turkey also deployed up to 1,500 of its own troops to Libya by the end of May 2020, including about 100 officers that coordinated with Tripoli officials and trained Libyan forces.

Turkey’s increased military support also included more robust air, air defense, and maritime capabilities that altered the initial airpower asymmetry between the Libyan National Army and the Government of National Accord, shifted air superiority to the government, and enabled successful ground operations. In January 2020, Turkey deployed multiple medium-range and short-range surface-to-air missile systems, including four G-class frigates, as well as advanced jamming systems, to create a layered air defense bubble over the capital. This bubble defended critical infrastructure, reduced the Libyan National Army air threat to government-aligned forces, enabled them to increase

305 Bryen, “Russian Pantsir Systems Neutralized in Libya”; “Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters,” 1.
their own air operations, and enabled successful ground operations for the first time in months.\textsuperscript{306}

Turkish electronic warfare support was especially critical for defeating the Libyan National Army’s Pantsir-S1 systems, which had earlier enabled Haftar’s initial rapid movement across western Libyan and onto Tripoli. Turkish forces in Libya use a land-based electronic warfare system known as the KORAL to suppress the Libyan National Army’s air defenses within an effective range of 150-200 kilometers. Turkey had previously developed the KORAL to enable the use of otherwise defenseless unmanned aerial vehicles during conventional warfare.\textsuperscript{307} Turkish forces used the KORAL to jam and deceive Pantsir-S1 radar equipment, leaving them vulnerable to airstrikes, often conducted with the same Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones that the Pantsirs shot down with ease earlier in the battle.\textsuperscript{308} Government-aligned forces conducted at least ten strikes on Pantsir-S1s between September 2019 and July 2020, destroying at least six systems and killing dozens of Wagner mercenaries operating the air defense platforms.\textsuperscript{309} Although the Pantsir-S1s successfully downed as many as 24 unmanned aircraft during the first six months of 2020, including 16 Turkish Bayraktar TB2s, the synergistic employment of the KORAL electronic warfare system with airstrikes eventually overwhelmed the Pantsir-S1s.\textsuperscript{310} At least one source, \textit{Africa }

\textsuperscript{306} Fishman and Hiney, “What Turned the Battle for Tripoli?”
\textsuperscript{310} Rondeaux, Imhof, and Margolin, 10, 23.
Intelligence, also indicated that Turkish drone operators received unspecified help from the United States to destroy the Pantsirs.\textsuperscript{311}

In contrast to Moscow’s covert approach, Ankara openly acknowledged its role in Libya. The Turkish president admitted as early as late-June 2019 that Ankara was providing military support to the Government of National Accord.\textsuperscript{312} Although this assistance violated a 2011 UN Security Council arms embargo on Libya—as did foreign support to the Libyan National Army—Turkey’s president justified supporting the Government of National Accord because it was the UN-recognized government of Libya and was not able to obtain military support from any other actor.\textsuperscript{313} After the military agreement was publicly signed between Tripoli and Ankara in late 2019, other Turkish officials similarly defended the intervention. They claimed the Government of National Accord had the right to self-defense but lacked the capacity. Although not all Turkish officials were open about the nature of their country’s involvement in Libya in early-2020, none denied Turkey’s presence in Libya.\textsuperscript{314}

Turkey’s increased involvement signaled that the Libyan National Army’s window of opportunity was closing, prompting increased Libyan National Army

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{311} “Jones Group Hopes to Train Tripoli’s Troops under Erdogan’s Shadow,” Africa Intelligence, July 13, 2020, Nexis Uni.
  \item \textsuperscript{312} Ragip Soylu, “Turkey Sold Arms and Equipment to UN-Backed Libyan Government, Erdogan Confirms,” Middle East Eye, June 20, 2019, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-sold-equipment-libya-erdogan-confirms.
  \item \textsuperscript{314} “Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters,” 5; Kirkpatrick and Walsh, “As Libya Descends Into Chaos, Foreign Powers Look for a Way Out.”
\end{itemize}
Notably, the Libyan National Army swiftly seized the strategic Government of National Accord-held coastal city of Sirte in early January 2020 when an influential local force switched allegiance to the Libyan National Army and Misratan forces helping to defend the city retreated. However, the development in Sirte had did not enable Haftar to seize Tripoli.

Turkey’s enhanced role also prompted discussions between high-level Turkish and Russian leaders. A few days after the Libyan National Army’s victory in Sirte, the presidents of Russia and Turkey issued a joint statement calling for a ceasefire and met senior Government of National Accord and Libyan National Army leaders in Moscow for unsuccessful peace talks. Turkey used the short-lived ceasefire to increase its military support for the Government of National Accord. Russia did the same, increasing the number of Russian Wagner mercenaries in Libya up to as many about 2,000. Wagner also recruited and deployed no more than 2,000 Syrian mercenaries to Libya. Subsequent

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ceasefires and peace conferences also failed, coinciding with increased posturing, foreign arms shipments, and fighting in Tripoli.\(^{320}\)

Turkey’s heightened support for the Government of National Accord eventually was enough to enable victory. In late-March 2020, the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord launched *Operation Peace Storm* to defeat the Libyan National Army attack on Tripoli.\(^{321}\) Over the next few months, heavy fighting occurred in and around the capital. Government-aligned forces seized numerous important locations, including Al-Watiyah airbase west of Tripoli in mid-May and then Tripoli and Tarhunah in early-June. Tarhunah was the Libyan National Army’s last stronghold near the capital. Its loss signaled the end of Haftar’s Tripoli offensive.\(^{322}\)

As Haftar’s offensive collapsed, Wagner retreated rapidly from the capital. Hundreds of Russian mercenaries were observed withdrawing from Tripoli during the Turkish-backed counter-offensive. The mercenaries evacuated from the capital through an airport in Bani Walid to the Jufra airbase in central Libya on 27


May 2020. The mercenaries withdrew on three military aircraft in only eight hours and their equipment was driven away on trucks that Turkish aircraft could have easily attacked but did not.\footnote{323} As Wagner personnel withdrew from in and around Tripoli under the watchful eye of an accommodating Turkish-led counteroffensive, Wagner mercenaries left a lot of equipment behind, including a Samsung computer tablet whose contents the British Broadcasting Corporation released to the public during the summer of 2021.\footnote{324} The tablet included much information about Wagner’s operations in Libya, including the code names of senior Wagner leadership and a ten-page list of equipment dated 19 January 2020 that Wagner requested to support its operations, including sophisticated equipment such as a main battle tank, armored personnel carriers, shoulder-fired air-defense missile systems, and anti-tank guided missile systems.\footnote{325}


Encore: Wagner Seizes Libya’s Oil

As Haftar’s Tripoli offensive collapsed and Turkish-backed forces began to regain control of locations around Tripoli, the Kremlin took advantage of Haftar’s losses and growing weakness. Wagner forces withdrew from areas around Tripoli, redeployed to key airfields and oil facilities throughout eastern and southwestern Libya, and sent more combat aircraft, cargo, and personnel into the country than during the height of the Turkish counteroffensive. 326

Russia deployed significant airpower to the Jufra airbase in central Libya during May and June 2020. US military officials publicly reported that 14 Russian aircraft—MiG 29s and SU-24s—arrived at the Jufra airbase during this period in the single most significant deployment of Russian combat power in the conflict. The aircraft flew to Libya through the Russian Hmeymim Air Base in Syria where their Russian markings were painted over to conceal their origin. Although Moscow denied reports that it sent the aircraft to Libya, there was no denying the air traffic control data that clearly showed the aircraft origin and route. 327


The timing and purpose of the aircraft deployment is extremely important. The aircraft deployed as Haftar’s offensive against Tripoli was collapsing—rather than before—to enable Wagner’s redeployment to key airfields and oil facilities in eastern and southwest Libya. The Kremlin could have easily deployed these aircraft at any point during the conflict, especially prior to Turkey’s deepening involvement in late-2020. But Moscow held back, providing low-level military support to Haftar through Wagner, but not enough support to enable the success of Haftar’s offensive. Moscow only risked visible escalation in a way that was impossible to deny convincingly with the aircraft deployment in May and June 2020. This is important because it demonstrated that the Kremlin was willing to flout the open secret that it was supporting Wagner during the mercenaries’ withdrawal, but not during Haftar’s offensive. These actions demonstrate that the Kremlin was willing to escalate the conflict—or at least to signal as such—to ensure Wagner’s control of strategic airfields and oil facilities for the Kremlin’s benefit, but not to support Haftar’s offensive.

Russia also increased its military transport flights into Libya from 53 flights in May 2020—during the height of the Turkish-led counteroffensive—to 59 flights in June, 75 flights in July, and then a peak of 93 flights in August, before dropping back down to 53 flights in September 2020.328 The number of Russian-
supplied forces deployed to locations across Libya—including Wagner and Syrian mercenaries—also increased to at least 5,000 in September 2020, up from about 4,000 in May of the same year.\textsuperscript{329}

Wagner used its increased combat power, personnel, and supplies to enable its control of vital oil infrastructure and airfields that was under Haftar’s control. Throughout January 2020, Haftar’s forces had seized and shutdown the important Brega, Es Sider, Hariga, Ras Lanuf, and Zouetina oil export terminals in eastern Libya; the prominent El-Feel and Sharara oil fields in southwest Libya; and the pipelines transporting oil from El-Feel and Sharara to export terminals near Tripoli.\textsuperscript{330} These seizures led to a sharp decline in oil output, from a high of 917,000 barrels per day in December 2019 to a low around 100,000 barrels per day by September 2020, the lowest point since the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi.\textsuperscript{331} The blockades cost Libya more than $10.0 billion USD in lost revenue.\textsuperscript{332} Haftar’s representatives justified the seizures because they said that the Government of National Accord was using the oil revenues to pay for foreign fighters in Libya, referring to the deployment of Turkish military forces and Syrian mercenaries to support the defense of Tripoli. Haftar’s representatives also

\textsuperscript{329} Marten.
demanded that the Tripoli government distribute a larger share of oil revenues to regions in eastern Libya under Libyan National Army control.\textsuperscript{333}

Russian mercenaries also strengthened their position in Libya, focusing on the area between Sirte and Jufra along what would later become a new informal red-line between Turkish-backed western Libya and Russian-backed eastern Libya. Russian mercenaries began to withdraw from Tripoli to Sirte on 7 June 2020.\textsuperscript{334} Russian planes arrived in late-June at the al-Ghardabiya air base near Sirte, carrying Syrian mercenaries and weapons.\textsuperscript{335} Wagner also established a headquarters near Sirte in mid-July 2020 at the Es Sider oil-exporting port—the country’s most important oil port.\textsuperscript{336} As Wagner’s presence grew, the Libyan National Oil Corporation warned in late-July 2020 about Wagner mercenaries at several key facilities near Sirte, including the Ras Lanuf petrochemical complex, the Zueitina port, and the Zillah oil field. Wagner mercenaries arrived on military aircraft at the Zillah oil field and examined the runway in preparation for military operations. The mercenaries then occupied housing designated for workers at the Zueitina port closer to Sirte.\textsuperscript{337} Wagner also deployed an S-300 anti-aircraft system to the Ras Lanuf area near Sirte on 10 August 2020.\textsuperscript{338}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{333} “Libyan Oil Production Reportedly down Again.”
\textsuperscript{334} “Tripoli Wants to Trade for End of Russian Support to Haftar,” \textit{Africa Intelligence}, June 10, 2020, Nexis Uni.
\textsuperscript{338} “BBCM Libya Watchlist for 10 August,” \textit{BBC Monitoring}, August 10, 2020, Nexis Uni.
\end{flushright}
About 360 kilometers south of Sirte, Wagner strengthened its position at the Jufra airbase in central Libya beginning in May 2020. Jufra occupied a location of operational significance during the Tripoli offensive and its aftermath. The airbase served as a key staging area and logistics hub for forward-deployed Wagner and Libyan National Army units operating in Tripoli during the offensive and then in central and southwestern Libya after the offensive collapsed. Jufra also enabled control of the supply routes to the Tamanhent and Brak airbases.

Concurrent with the arrival of Russia combat aircraft at Jufra in May and June 2020, Wagner began to transform the airbase into a command center to enable the control of the southern oil fields. Satellite imagery at Jufra beginning in mid-May indicated an increase in Russian ground forces, key assets, and other equipment, including Wagner mercenaries, Pantsir-S1 systems, and various types of anti-aircraft systems, vehicles, and tents. In early-August, a 21-vehicle convoy, including four trucks and two ammunition carriers, left the Jufra air base for Sirte, one of many subsequent convoys between the two locations.

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342 Bermudez and Katz, “Moscow’s Next Front: Russia’s Expanding Military Footprint in Libya.”
Wagner also began around the same time to assert control over the two vital oil fields in southwest Libya —El-Feel and Sharara. A platoon-sized element of about 30 Wagner personnel deployed to the region near the end of June 2020 and established a tactical headquarters on nearby high ground. Wagner personnel entered Sharara on 26 June 2020, and met with local tribes who were guarding the facility before then assuming control of Sharara in early-July. The Wagner presence expanded over the next year to include additional personnel at Sharara and El-Feel, and Wagner continued to develop its relationships with local militia commanders.

Wagner personnel then met with other tribes in the local area in early-August and began to provide the tribes technical expertise and maintenance for their Soviet-made equipment, including armored vehicles that had been inoperable for several months. The Wagner presence expanded over the next year to include additional personnel at Sharara and El-Feel, and Wagner continued to develop its relationships with local militia commanders.

Wagner eventually vacated the oil facilities near Sirte by October 2020, including Brega, Es Sider, Hariga, Sidra, Ras Lanuf, and Zueitina. Wagner’s departure signaled the end of the oil blockade, a development that the Libyan National Oil Corporation announced on 26 October 2020. However, Wagner

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345 “Russian Paramilitary Group Wagner Expands Southern Libyan Presence.”


347 “Haftar and Misrata Still Hold Key to Resolution of Conflict Following Ceasefire.”

personnel simply redeployed to reinforce key airfields and other oil infrastructure in central and southwest Libya, including Ghardabiya airport in Sirte, the Al Jufra and Al Khadim airfields in central Libya, the Brak al-Shati airfield in southern Libya, and the Sahara and El-Feel oil fields in southwest Libya.\(^{349}\)

Libyan and world leaders called for the departure of Wagner personnel throughout 2020 to no avail. On 10 November 2020, a Government of National Accord delegation that was traveling to Sirte for ceasefire negotiations was prohibited from landing at the Ghardabiya airport near Sirte because of Wagner’s presence at the airport, which included the operation of air defense equipment and jamming systems. The government delegation instead landed at the port of Sidra in Ras Lanuf and traveled overland to the ceasefire negotiations in Sirte.\(^{350}\)

During the negotiations, Wagner personnel refused to agree to leave their positions between Sirte and Jufra unless Tripoli guaranteed the demobilization of rival militias.\(^{351}\) Russian representatives in subsequent peace talks over a year later in mid-December 2021 continued to refuse to support the withdrawal of


\(^{350}\) “BBCM Libya Watchlist for 10 November,” BBC Monitoring, November 10, 2020, Nexis Uni.

\(^{351}\) “Far from the Gilded Conclave in Tunis, Sarraj and Haftar Negotiate the Ceasefire Nuts and Bolts in Sirte,” Africa Intelligence, November 12, 2020, Nexis Uni.
Wagner personnel from Libya unless the Tripoli-affiliated militias disarmed.\textsuperscript{352} In the interim year, Wagner dug defensive fortifications from Sirte southward toward Jufra beginning in early-January 2021. Satellite imagery showed a 70-kilometer-long trench-system that ran along a main road near Sirte and included more than 30 defensive positions dug into the desert and surrounding hillsides.\textsuperscript{353} Satellite imagery also showed the continued development of defenses at Jufra airbase and the installation of radar defenses at Brak airfield.\textsuperscript{354}

Wagner’s entrenchment in Libya demonstrated Moscow’s committed to stay and reap the return on its investment. Although Haftar lost the battle for Tripoli, the Kremlin was winning the war for Libya’s oil. As of early-2022, Russian state-owned energy corporation Gazprom had acquired producing concessions in the Ghadames basin in western Libya and the Sirte basin near central Libya, Russian oil and gas company Tatneft had begun to explore the Ghadames basin, and the Russian Rosneft oil company held an offtake agreement with Libya’s National Oil Corporation.\textsuperscript{355} Although some Wagner personnel redeployed from Libya to Ukraine in the spring of 2022, between 2,000 and 5,000 Wagner mercenaries and more than a dozen combat aircraft remained in Libya as of

\textsuperscript{352} “As the Political Process Falls Apart, the Military Return to Centre Stage,” \textit{Africa Intelligence}, December 15, 2021, Nexis Uni.
\textsuperscript{353} “Foreign Fighters Were Meant to Leave Libya This Week. A Huge Trench Being Dug by Russian-Backed Mercenaries Indicates They Plan to Stay,” \textit{CNN}, January 22, 2021, Nexis Uni.
Wagner's continued presence has allowed the Kremlin to use key airfields and oil infrastructure Libya to further its strategic ambitions Russian military aircraft have used Jufra airfield as a stopover point when flying to other locations in Africa, such as Mali and the Central African Republic, both of which also host significant numbers of Wagner personnel. Wagner's control of Libya's key oil infrastructure allows the Kremlin to remove up to a million barrels of oil from global supply if Russian leaders need leverage of Europe, leverage that has become increasingly important in light of Europe's energy crisis since the Kremlin's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Haftar almost certainly was not pleased with his relationship with Wagner or the Kremlin at the beginning of 2023. Although Wagner had continued to provide some military training to Haftar's forces, Wagner has not departed Libya nor significantly reduced its footprint since the Libyan National Army requested that Wagner do so according to an October 2020 ceasefire agreement. Wagner mercenaries that have remained in Libya also have operated largely

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358 Uniacke, “Libya Could Be Putin’s Trump Card.”

independent of their Libyan counterparts’ chain of command and have required Libyan National Army personnel to obtain permission to enter Wagner bases.\textsuperscript{360}

This dynamic very likely contributed to Haftar’s meeting with US Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns in January 2023. The central topic of discussion between Burns and Haftar was Wagner’s continued presence in Libya. Like other US officials, Burns wanted Wagner to depart Libya’s oil facilities, but Haftar was reluctant to make any promises. He still wanted assurances that Turkish forces and their Libyan counterparts in Western Libya would not then attack Libyan National Army forces in eastern Libya.\textsuperscript{361} As long as the Libyan National Army remains reliant on Wagner’s military capability to defend eastern Libya, Haftar is unlikely to turn on his Russian partners. Given the losses that the Libyan National Army sustained during the Tripoli offensive and Turkey’s sustained military presence in Libya, Haftar likely will remain reliant on the Wagner Group for some time.

**Conclusion: Haftar As Moscow’s Useful Idiot**

Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar attempted to seize the Libyan capital of Tripoli between April 2019 and June 2020. Haftar appeared to have Moscow’s backing as the Libyan National Army used sophisticated Russian-made equipment, such as the Pantsir S-1 short-range air defense system, to move quickly across eastern Libya toward Tripoli in early-2019.

\textsuperscript{360} Uniacke, “Libya Could Be Putin’s Trump Card.”

\textsuperscript{361} Magdy, “US Seeks to Expel Russian Mercenaries from Sudan, Libya.”
However, when Haftar’s offensive stalled on the outskirts of Tripoli just weeks after it had begun, Haftar reached out to Moscow for increased military support. Russian leaders denied Haftar’s initial requests because the Kremlin had not approved the offensive. Russian political operatives in Libya also believed that Haftar lacked the military capability to seize Tripoli and that if, somehow, he managed to succeed, then he would not be a loyal Russian ally, based on his poor relationship with Russian interlocutors already in Libya.

As Haftar’s offensive continued to flounder into the summer and fall of 2019, the Kremlin took advantage of Haftar’s growing weakness and began to increase Moscow’s role in the conflict and control over Haftar. The Kremlin enabled the deployment of as many as 1,200 mercenary personnel to Libya in the latter-half of 2019 from the Wagner Group private military company. Moscow supported these mercenaries with hundreds of flights that transported tens-of-thousands of tons of military equipment across a vast, centrally planned air bridge that included a key node at the Russian Hmeymim military base in Syria. Although Wagner’s support—particularly its specialized military capabilities, such as precision artillery and air strikes, sniper support, and electronic countermeasures—provided an advantage to the Libyan National Army and started to shift the campaign in Haftar’s favor toward the end of 2019, Tripoli remained out of Haftar’s reach. The Kremlin was providing enough support to Haftar to enable incremental progress and to deepen his reliance on Moscow, but not enough to achieve a decisive victory.
The battle for Tripoli shifted decisively in favor of the Libyan Government of National Accord in early-2020 after the Turkish government agreed to provide Tripoli with increased military support in exchange for Turkish access to lucrative gas reserves in the Mediterranean. The agreement dramatically escalated Turkish military support for the Government of National Accord and shifted the campaign into the government’s favor, while also prompting several high-level meetings between the Turkish and Russian presidents. Turkey’s heightened support enabled the Government of National Accord to conduct a successful counteroffensive from March until June 2020 that pushed the Libyan National Army and their Wagner partners out of Tripoli and back toward eastern Libya. As Haftar’s Tripoli offensive collapsed, hundreds of Wagner mercenaries retreated from the capital under the watchful eye of an accommodating Turkish-led counteroffensive that refrained from engaging the retreating Wagner forces. The retreating Wagner mercenaries redeployed to key airfields and oil infrastructure throughout eastern and southwestern Libya as Russian combat aircraft and additional mercenary personnel began to arrive in Libya—even more than during the height of the heaviest fighting for Tripoli.

The Kremlin’s eleventh-hour increase to its military presence in Libya indicates that Moscow was willing to use its military force to defend its position in eastern Libya, but not to enable Haftar to take Tripoli. If Moscow had wanted to enable Haftar’s victory over Tripoli, the Kremlin would not have waited until Wagner’s retreat from Tripoli in May 2020 to deploy close air support aircraft to Libya, to increase its mercenary strength in Libya, and to nearly double its logistic
support. The Kremlin could have taken these actions at almost any point during
the war, especially prior to Turkey’s entry in late-2019. Doing so could have
tipped the battle of Tripoli in Haftar’s favor. However, Russian military leaders
repeatedly denied Haftar’s full requests for military support, instead providing him
just enough support to maintain his dependence on Russia, but not enough
support to seize Tripoli.

Wagner’s military support for Haftar was a tool that the Kremlin used
against Haftar, not for him. When Haftar initiated his offensive against Tripoli in
early-2019, he attempted to instrumentalize Russian support to enable his
ambitions in Libya. However, the Kremlin instead instrumentalized Haftar’s
ambition and assigned him the role of useful idiot in the theatre of Moscow’s
managed conflict in Libya. The Kremlin’s covert military support for Haftar served
as a disinformation operation to convince Haftar of Moscow’s backing and
allowed the Kremlin to increase its military footprint in Libya at Haftar’s request.
This propaganda of the deed style operation was reminiscent of older Soviet
concepts, such as reflexive control, that sought to convey prepared messages to
specific audiences that would predispose them to voluntarily make
predetermined decisions that benefitted Moscow.

The Kremlin’s use of military force during the Tripoli offensive also aligned
well with Russian political technologist Vladislav Surkov’s ideas on non-linear
warfare, which challenge traditional Western viewpoints on the nature of military
victory in battle. Whereas the dominant paradigm in contemporary Western
warfare conceives of military victory in Clausewitzian terms, i.e., military victory in
battle is required to achieve a war’s political objectives, Surkov’s ideas emphasize that war is part of a larger political process in which battlefield victory is not necessarily the most important part. Another way of thinking about this is the common saying that it is possible to lose the battle—or even lose every battle—and still win the war.

From this perspective, the Kremlin used its military support for Haftar’s Tripoli offensive not to achieve a military battlefield victory in Tripoli, but as part of a larger political process that sought to convince Haftar of the Kremlin’s support, to increase Russia’s military footprint in eastern Libya, to make Moscow an indispensable powerbroker in the international peace process, and to bolster Russia’s great power image. Haftar and Wagner may have lost the battle of Tripoli, but Russia won the war for the control of Libya’s strategic resources.
Simultaneous with Wagner’s military support to the Libyan National Army, the Kremlin also employed weaponized diplomacy and widespread information operations as part of its strategy in Libya. These two elements operated synergistically. The information operations relied heavily on Moscow’s diplomatic engagements as source material for media narratives that bolstered Russia’s great power image, and the diplomatic engagements required Russian media and global social media platforms to reach international target audiences.

The Kremlin’s extensive diplomatic campaign during the Tripoli offensive included at least three main lines of effort. The first line of effort relied on engagement with Libya’s key powerbrokers to deepen their reliance on the Kremlin, to play them against each other, and to ensure that only Moscow emerged victorious from the Libyan civil war. The second line of effort relied on overt bilateral engagements with at least thirty-six key Libyan and international

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362 Fridman, Russian “Hybrid Warfare,” 57.
stakeholders to cultivate Moscow’s image as a trusted, third-party, great power negotiator. The third line of effort focused on participation in multilateral peace processes to protect Russian interests in Libya—not to bring peace.

The Kremlin’s information operations included both an overt and a covert component. The overt component used Russian state news agencies—such as RT, Sputnik, and TASS—as international platforms to communicate narratives about Moscow’s positive involvement in the Libya civil war. These news agencies relied on the source material from Moscow’s extensive diplomatic campaign as proof that Russia was committed to fixing Libya—a country that Kremlin leaders routinely claimed the West had broken in 2011. These Russian news agencies communicated at least six prominent narratives in support of the Kremlin’s great power ambitions in Libya. First, that Russia wanted peace in Libya. Second, that Russian leaders were engaged in a robust diplomatic campaign with a wide variety of international partners and Libyan leaders to negotiate peace. Third, that Russia and Turkey nearly succeeded where the West had failed in brokering an enduring ceasefire. Fourth, that Russia supported the UN-backed peace process. Fifth, that NATO has been a destabilizing force in Libya. Finally, that the Kremlin had not deployed mercenaries to support the Libyan National Army’s attempt to overthrow Tripoli.

The covert component of the Kremlin’s information operations relied on a mix of authentic, compromised, and fake social media accounts originating from locations around the world to propagate narratives to millions of viewers across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Kremlin affiliates used these social
media platforms to reach Libyans and international audiences with narratives that Moscow could not have communicated via its overt mass media without tarnishing Russia’s manufactured public image as a neutral great power. These narratives expressed support for Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, while also denigrating the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Turkish and Qatari support for the Libyan government, and the UN-backed peace process. The covert disinformation campaigns also sought to amplify Russian state-owned media across the Libyan information space and to further erode Libya's already broken socio-cultural cohesion.

**Russian Diplomacy During The Tripoli Offensive**

The Kremlin’s diplomatic engagements during the Tripoli offensive formed an extensive international campaign that comprised at least three main lines of effort. The first line of effort relied on engagement with Libya’s key powerbrokers, principally Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of the deceased Libyan autocrat Muammar Gaddafi. Although many argue that the Kremlin formed relationships with Haftar and Gaddafi respectively as an attempt by Moscow to hedge its bets in Libya, the information detailed in chapter two suggests otherwise. Instead, Moscow appears to have simultaneously supported both leaders not to diversify its investment in Libya, but because Haftar and Gaddafi had different strengths and weaknesses. Russian leaders supported both of them because the Kremlin want to benefit from each’s strengths, while also preventing either from gaining too much power. Haftar was
a strongman with the military capacity to stabilize Libya. But he was also an obstinate and manipulative partner who was not likely to remain loyal to Russian interests if he gained sole country of Libya. On the other hand, Gaddafi had widespread popular support in Libya and demonstrated a greater willingness to work with Moscow. But he completely lacked any military capacity to address Libya’s chronic instability.

Moscow’s second diplomatic line of effort focused on overt bilateral engagement with key Libyan and international stakeholders. Moscow openly cultivated diplomatic relations with leaders from both the UN-backed Government of National Accord and the rebel Libyan National Army. Moscow claimed that it was using these relationships to facilitate dialogue as a trusted third-party. Moscow also engaged in Libya-focused diplomatic engagements with the leaders of at least thirty-six international actors, including the African Union, the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations, as well as Algeria, Brazil, Chad, China, Cyprus, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Malta, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam.

Moscow’s third diplomatic line of effort was overt participation in multilateral peace processes related to the Libyan civil war. The first high-profile multi-lateral process was the Russia-Turkey brokered ceasefire talks. Senior Russian and Turkish leaders hosted these talks in Moscow on 13 January 2020 between Government of National Accord Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and
Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar. Although the ceasefire talks initially looked promising, bringing together the principal belligerents and their foreign backers, the talks ended in failure after only a few days. The second high-profile multi-lateral peace process was the Berlin Process. It was a prominent conference that German leaders hosted in Berlin on 19 January 2020, less than a week after the failed Russia-Turkey brokered ceasefire. Although the Berlin Conference also failed to achieve a lasting ceasefire agreement, the conference did result in a British-drafted UN Security Council resolution to endorse the conference outcomes. The UN Security Council approved the resolution, with 14 of the 15 members on the council voting in favor of the resolution. Only one member abstained: Russia. Russia’s UN representative rejected the resolution, stating that it was unclear whether all sides in Libya were ready to implement the resolution and also because the Kremlin objected to references in the resolution related to Russian mercenaries in Libya.363

Overt Russian Media Narratives: Russia is Great Again

Russian state news agencies RT, Sputnik, and TASS drew heavily on Moscow’s diplomatic engagements as source material for various narratives that aimed to advance the Kremlin’s objectives in Libya. RT, Sputnik, and TASS collectively published at least 1,840 news articles during the Tripoli offensive that

related to the Libyan civil war. These news articles communicated at least six prominent narratives. First, that Russia wanted peace in Libya. Second, that Russian leaders were engaged in an earnest diplomatic campaign with a wide variety of international partners to make peace in Libya a reality. Third, that Russia nearly succeeded in brokering an enduring ceasefire in January 2020—an endeavor at which the West had already failed numerous times. Fourth, that Russia supported the UN-backed peace process. Fifth, that NATO has been a destabilizing force in Libya and in a general sense. Sixth, that the Kremlin did not deploy mercenaries to support the Libyan National Army’s attempt to overthrow Tripoli. Each narrative is discussed in detail below.

Russia Wants Peace In Libya

*RT, Sputnik, and TASS* worked persistently during the Tripoli offensive to communicate a narrative that Russia was a peaceful great power. About 50 percent of the articles that the three agencies published about Libya during the offensive related to Moscow’s desire for peace in Libya. These articles focused on statements from senior Russian leaders about the belligerents’ need to pursue diplomatic solutions. For example, shortly after Haftar initiated the offensive, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called on all sides of the conflict in early April 2019 to stop using military force and to seek peaceful conflict resolution. Russian President Vladimir Putin released a similar

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364 These 1,840 articles were published between 4 April 2019 and 30 June 2020.
statement in late-April 2019, less than a month after the fighting for Tripoli began, that called for a ceasefire and a resumption of the UN-sponsored political process. Putin communicated a similar message to the press in early-January 2020 shortly after Turkey authorized a one-year deployment of Turkish military forces to Libya. Putin said in his message that it was “crucial to put an end to the armed confrontation…to introduce a ceasefire, [and] to take steps needed to resuming the political process.” Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov shared a similar message in late-April 2020, about a month after the beginning of the Turkish-backed Operation Peace Storm. Peskov’s statement repeated Moscow’s public stance that political negotiations between the opposing sides were the only way for Libyan to resolve its conflict.

Russian Leaders Are Working Hard To Bring Peace To Libya

RT, Sputnik, and TASS also spent significant effort communicating a narrative that Russia was highly engaged in an active diplomatic campaign to bring peace to Libya. Russian diplomatic engagements were a prominent topic in at least 40 percent of the analyzed articles. Engagements mentioned the most

366 “Putin, Erdogan Call for Political Solution to Libyan Crisis – Kremlin,” TASS, April 30, 2019, Nexis Uni.
367 Reuters Staff, “Turkish Parliament Passes Libya Deployment Bill, but Troops Unlikely for Now”; UN Secretary-General, “United Nations Support Mission in Libya: Report of the Secretary-General S/2020/41,” 2; Reuters Staff, “Turkish Military Units Moving to Libya, Erdogan Says”; Gumrukcu and Coskun, “Turkey Says It Will Send Military Experts, Advisers to Libya | Reuters”; “Turkey Is Set to Send Troops to Libya.”
frequently were with Turkey (186 articles), the Government of National Accord (118 articles), the Libyan National Army (115 articles), Germany (58 articles), and France (45 articles). *RT, Sputnik,* and *TASS* also reported on Russian diplomatic engagements with leaders from 32 other international actors, including the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations, as well as Algeria, Brazil, Chad, China, Cyprus, Egypt, Finland, Greece, India, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Malta, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam.

Turkey was a prominent figure in the Russian narrative about Moscow’s diplomatic engagements with other global powers. The *RT, Sputnik,* and *TASS* articles about Russian diplomatic engagements with Turkey comprised about ten percent of the agencies’ articles published during the Tripoli offensive. These articles showcased Russian leaders working with their Turkish counterparts to encourage intra-Libyan dialogue and peace. For example, *Sputnik* and *TASS* both published articles in early-December 2019 about a phone call between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Both articles reported that Putin and Erdogan voiced their concern about the fighting near Tripoli and urged that only “a speedy ceasefire and resumption of intra-Libyan peace talks could facilitate normalization in Libya.”

*RT* published a similar article in late-May 2020 about a phone call between

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu. Both leaders said they backed an immediate ceasefire in Libya and supported resuming the UN political process.\(^{371}\) RT published a subsequent article in mid-June 2020 about another phone call between Putin and Erdogan. The leaders expressed “mutual concern over the mass armed clashes ongoing in the country,” and Putin stressed the need for renewed intra-Libyan dialogue.\(^{372}\)

The Libyan Government of National Accord was another prominent figure in the Russian narrative about Moscow’s diplomatic engagements with other global powers. The RT, Sputnik, and TASS news articles about Russian diplomatic engagements with the Government of National Accord comprised about six percent of the news articles that the agencies published during the Tripoli offensive. These articles depicted Moscow as a neutral party in the Libyan war who continued to support the UN-recognized government. For example, TASS published an article in late-April 2019 about a phone call between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and Libyan Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohamed Taha Siala during which the two leaders discussed Libya’s situation. Bogdanov said during the call that Russia remained committed to the unity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of Libya, and that Moscow supported UN-backed political initiatives to achieve reconciliation.\(^{373}\) About six months later, Sputnik published an article in late-October 2019 about Moscow’s economic


\(^{373}\) “Russian, Libyan Diplomats Discuss Situation in Libya in Phone Call,” TASS, April 29, 2019, Nexis Uni.
support for Tripoli. The article highlighted a Russian agreement of intent to provide Libya with one million tons of wheat on an annual basis. The article also reminded its readers that Moscow had already been conducting joint projects with the Libyan national oil corporation to help restore Libya’s economy.  

Toward the end of the conflict, RT published an article in early-June 2020 about a meeting in Moscow between Russian and Libyan officials during which Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reiterated Moscow’s call for intra-Libyan dialogue and an immediate ceasefire.

The Libyan National Army was also a prominent figure in the Russian narrative about Moscow’s diplomatic engagements with other global powers. The RT, Sputnik and TASS news articles about Russian engagements with the Libyan National Army also comprised about six percent of the agencies’ articles published during the Tripoli offensive. These articles likewise depicted Moscow as a neutral party trying to bring Khalifa Haftar to the negotiating table. For example, TASS published an article in early-April 2019, near the beginning of Haftar’s offensive, about a telephone call between Russian Special Presidential Representative for Africa Mikhail Bogdanov and Haftar during which they discussed the escalation of violence in Libya. Although the Russian Foreign Ministry did attempt at this early point in the offensive to depict Haftar’s military operations against Tripoli as part of Haftar’s broader counterterrorism efforts, the

Kremlin’s statement reaffirmed Moscow’s principal position in support for the UN-led peace process. Early the following year, RT published an article in mid-February 2020 about a meeting between Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Haftar. After the meeting, the Russian Defense Ministry affirmed its commitment to Libya’s territorial integrity and said that the two leaders discussed the need to use political means to establish a ceasefire and to work toward normalizing Libya’s security situation. RT published a similar article toward the end of Haftar’s offensive in late-May 2020. The article provided information about a phone call between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and speaker of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives Aguila Saleh Issa who was aligned with Haftar. Moscow said during the meeting that it supported an immediate ceasefire and talks to end the fighting.

RT, Sputnik, and TASS also regularly highlighted Russian efforts to bring together representatives from the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army. Russian political leaders highlighted their willingness to work with both sides of the conflict as evidence of Moscow’s neutrality. Shortly after the Libyan National Army initiated its attack on Tripoli, the Head of the Russian Foreign Ministry Contact Group on the Intra-Libyan Settlement Lev Dengov told Russian reporters that Moscow had been maintaining contacts with both sides of

376 “Russian Diplomat Holds Phone Talks with Libyan National Army Commander Haftar,” TASS, April 6, 2019, Nexis Uni.
the conflict and urged them to resolve their disputes peacefully.\textsuperscript{379} When the fighting around Tripoli later flared in December 2019, Putin highlighted to the press during an annual news conference in mid-December 2019 that Russian leaders were in contact with senior leaders from both the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army.\textsuperscript{380} Russian leaders again highlighted Moscow’s neutrality in contrast to Ankara’s when Turkey deployed troops to Libya in early-2020, enabling militias affiliated with the Government of National Accord to begin gaining territory around Tripoli. Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov later told reporters in a press interview in late-April 2020 that Moscow firmly believed political dialogue was the only way to resolve the crisis and that Russian continued to maintain contact with all the conflict’s participants to enable such dialogue.\textsuperscript{381}

Germany was the most prominent European actor in the Russian narrative about Moscow’s diplomatic engagements with other global powers. The \textit{RT}, \textit{Sputnik}, and TASS news articles about Russian engagements with Germany comprised about three percent of the agencies’ articles published during the Tripoli offensive. These articles showcased Moscow and Berlin working together to facilitate peace in Libya. TASS published the first article in this narrative in late-August 2019. The article reported a phone call between Putin and German Chancellor Angela Merkel during which they agreed to work together to reduce

\textsuperscript{380} “Best Solution to Libyan Crisis Will Be Agreement on Dividing Power – Putin,” TASS, December 19, 2019, Nexis Uni.
\textsuperscript{381} “Kremlin Spokesman Reiterates Need to Resolve Libyan Issue through Political Means.”
tensions in Libya and to facilitate peace. 382 RT, Sputnik, and TASS published at least 20 more articles on the same topic throughout the rest of conflict. 383 Many of these articles were published in context of the German-led peace conference held in Berlin on 19 January 2020, which convened leaders from around the world, including from Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, and the Arab League.

Sputnik published two noteworthy articles about the positive working relationship between Putin and Merkel. These articles are worth highlighting because they illustrate the positive image that RT, Sputnik, and TASS attempted to build with their narratives about the Russian diplomatic campaign. Sputnik

382 “Putin, Merkel Discuss Outlook for Summit of Normandy Quartet, Syria, Libya, JCPOA,” TASS, August 29, 2019, Nexis Uni.
published the first article in mid-January 2020. It was titled “Putin Gets 'Nothing But Praise' From Merkel at Kremlin Talks, German Media Claims.” The article—which featured a picture of Putin giving a bouquet of flowers to Merkel—reported that Merkel displayed a remarkably friendly attitude towards Putin, and that she had “nothing but praise” for Putin’s position on a variety of important political issues, including the situation in Libya. See figure 4.1 below. The second article was titled “EU Should 'Reflect' on Possible US Withdrawal From 'Role of World Leader', Angela Merkel Says.” The article quoted Merkel saying that “in countries like Syria and Libya, countries in Europe’s immediate neighborhood, Russia’s strategic influence is great. I will therefore continue to strive for cooperation [with Russia].” Both articles depicted Germany as having a better relationship with Russia than with the United States.

France was the second most prominent European actor in the Russian narrative about Moscow’s diplomatic engagements with other global powers. The RT, Sputnik, and TASS news articles about Russian diplomatic engagements

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385 Burunov, “EU Should ‘Reflect’ on Possible US Withdrawal From ‘Role of World Leader’, Angela Merkel Says.”
with France comprised about two percent of the agency’s articles published during the Tripoli offensive. These articles presented a similar portrait of Moscow and Paris working together for peace in Libya. Putin met with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris in mid-August 2019 for their first of many meetings during the Tripoli offensive. Putin and Macron told the press after the meeting that they planned to coordinate their efforts to achieve reconciliation between the conflicting sides. They also expressed their joint commitment to promote order and to create long-term stability in Libya. Macron added that he was confident that Russia’s future was fully tied with Europe, and that they both believed Europe stretched from Lisbon Portugal to Vladivostok Russia. Putin and Macron held numerous subsequent engagements, including a phone call in mid-December during which they discussed the need to use diplomacy to solve the conflict and highlighted their support for UN-led peace initiatives. They also held a video conference in late-June 2020, after the failed Tripoli offensive, to call for an immediate ceasefire in Libya and the resumption of intra-Libya dialogue. The Kremlin press service highlighted that Putin and Macron noted “that as

387 “Putin Says He Wants to Coordinate Efforts on Libya with French President,” TASS, August 19, 2019, Nexis Uni.
388 “Macron Confident of Russia’s European Future after Meeting with Putin,” TASS, August 19, 2019, Nexis Uni.
permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Russia and France have special responsibility for maintaining international peace and security."³⁹¹

Unsurprisingly, Putin played the lead role in the Russian media’s narrative about Moscow’s diplomatic campaign to bring peace to Libya. Putin was the central Russian figure in at least 25 percent of the RT, Sputnik, and TASS news articles related to this narrative.³⁹² Putin was depicted as meeting with a wide variety of global leaders, as indicated above, including Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Emmanuel Macron. There were 26 articles about Putin meeting with Macron, 38 articles about meeting with Merkel, and 50 articles about meeting with Erdogan.

RT, Sputnik, and TASS also liked to quote external sources to promote Russia’s role as a peacemaker, including comments from representatives of the United Nations and the Munich Security Conference. For example, in mid-January 2020, TASS published an article that highlighted comments from the UN Secretary General’s official spokesperson, Stephane Dujarric. Dujarric told reporters that UN leaders hoped for the success of the Russian-sponsored talks that were held in Moscow in mid-January 2020 between representatives from the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army.³⁹³ TASS published a separate report the same day as the Dujarric article that contained

³⁹² In contrast, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, the next most frequently mentioned Kremlin official, was the central Russian figure in about nine percent of the narrative’s related news articles.
similar praise from the Chair of the Munich Security Conference, Wolfgang Ischinger. Ischinger lauded Russian President Vladimir Putin’s “effective methods for resolving crisis” such as Libya, with “political power of persuasion, clever diplomacy, and military support if necessary.” Ischinger simultaneously criticized then US President Donald Trump for his lack of such skills.\textsuperscript{394}

\textit{Russia And Turkey Are Striving to Negotiate A Ceasefire}

Russia and Turkey’s collaborative effort to broker a ceasefire between the Libyan National Army and the Government of National Accord in mid-January 2020 was one of the most significant stories of the Kremlin’s information campaign. About 11 percent of the news articles that \textit{RT}, \textit{Sputnik}, and \textit{TASS} published during the Tripoli offensive related to this single event. The news agencies communicated this story in support of the broader narrative that Russian leaders were highly engaged in an active diplomatic campaign to bring peace to Libya. The Russia-Turkey ceasefire story also added an extra element to this broader narrative that Moscow and Ankara were succeeding where the West had already failed.

The ceasefire story and its associated narrative began when Putin and Erdogan meet for talks in Istanbul in early-January 2020 and released a joint statement after the talks calling for a ceasefire in Libya.\textsuperscript{395} Although Haftar initially rejected the ceasefire proposal, he changed his mind and agreed to a


\textsuperscript{395} “Erdogan, Putin Call for Ceasefire in Libya at Midnight on January 12 - Turkish Minister,” \textit{TASS}, January 8, 2020, Nexis Uni.
ceasefire just a few days later. However, the ceasefire soon collapsed as each side accused the other of violations.

Despite the mutual accusations, Russia and Turkey invited both Sarraj and Haftar to Moscow for subsequent peace talks in mid-January 2020. Although representatives from both the government and the Libyan National Army attended the talks, Sarraj refused to engage in direct talks with Haftar. The negotiations lasted more than six hours and appeared at first to result in a breakthrough. Both sides initially pledged in a draft agreement to observe the Russia-Turkey brokered ceasefire and to establish a commission with Russian and Turkish supervision to determine a contact line between the warring sides. Sarraj signed the draft agreement. However, Haftar requested additional time to review the document before signing.

The Moscow peace talks were an extremely vital component in the overall Russian metanarrative that sought to bolster the Kremlin’s great power image.

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and to denigrate the West. *RT* claimed that Russia enjoyed “a unique position as the most trusted and impartial player in the Libyan peace process, which helped the country [Russia] bring together the two chief civil war rivals for talks in Moscow.”\(^{402}\) *RT* and *Sputnik* both drew attention to praise that “officials around the world” lavished on the ceasefire agreement, citing prominent African, European, and United Nations officials who lauded the talks as an important step forward.\(^{403}\) *RT* also cited several prominent Western news outlets that celebrated Russia’s role in hosting the talks. The German outlet *Der Spiegel* wrote that Russia and Turkey “not only have their seat at the table, they provide the table. And Europe is nowhere to be seen.” The British outlet *The Independent* wrote that European and Arab powers “scrambled to catch up [as Putin used] the levers of diplomacy” to take the lead in Libya.\(^{404}\) *RT* contrasted the initial success of the Moscow-hosted peace talks with “previous lengthy UN-backed talks on reconciliation…[that] eventually failed to bring peace to the war-ravaged land.”\(^{405}\) *RT* also contrasted Russia’s role in brokering the peace talks with NATO’s role in the 2011 overthrow of Gaddafi. *RT* said that the “peace talks in Moscow bringing


\(^{404}\) “Moscow Talks Offer Chance for Peace in Libya’s Post NATO-Intervention Bloody Civil War.”

\(^{405}\) “Libya’s Warring Parties Vow to Observe Ceasefire without Preconditions, Stop All Offensive Military Actions – Draft Agreement.”
together the leaders of Libya’s warring parties were a serious step forward in attempts to put an end to a brutal civil war sparked by NATO’s disastrous 2011 military intervention.”

This anti-NATO narrative was an important and recurring Russia narrative that is discussed in more detail below.

The optimism soon faded. Haftar left Moscow without signing the agreement. He said the draft did not include some crucial provisions that he wanted. For example, Haftar wanted the militias that were aligned with the government to be disarmed and dismantled. He wanted his military force to receive permission to enter Tripoli. He opposed Turkish participation in monitoring the ceasefire because he did not view Ankara as a neutral party. Haftar also wanted Libya to form a new national unity government with a vote of confidence from the Tobruk-based House of Representatives.

The Russian media narrative shifted in response to Haftar’s refusal to sign the Moscow-brokered agreement. Rather than portraying the Moscow talks as a failure, the updated narrative portrayed the Moscow talks as simply part of a wider, multilateral process. TASS began referring to the talks as part of “a

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406 “Moscow Talks Offer Chance for Peace in Libya’s Post NATO-Intervention Bloody Civil War.”
410 “Haftar Says Ceasefire Agreement Ignores LNA Demands.”
larger initiative to achieve peace.”412 RT, Sputnik, and TASS all began to frame the Moscow talks as laying the groundwork for a German-hosted summit in Berlin also scheduled for mid-January 2020.413 TASS notably featured a quote from UN Secretary General Spokesman Stephane Dujarric who said that he hoped the Moscow talks would “lead to the convening of the International Conference on Libya in Berlin.”414 Russian leaders also attempted to deflect discussions away from the shortcomings of the Moscow talks and back toward NATO’s role in the 2011 overthrow of Gaddafi. When asked about the Moscow talks’ failure to reach a ceasefire, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that “NATO bombed Libya’s statehood in 2011, and we are still facing the consequences of that illegal, criminal escapade, the Libyan people first of all.”415

Moscow Supports The International Peace Processes

Russia’s participation in the Berlin conference in mid-January 2020 received even more attention from RT, Sputnik, and TASS than the Moscow-hosted peace talks the week prior. About 14 percent of all the RT, Sputnik, and

414 “UN Hopes Moscow Talks to Help Organize Berlin Conference on Libya.”
TASS news articles published during the Tripoli offensive related to Russia’s participation in the Berlin Conference. RT, Sputnik, and TASS used the conference participation as key evidence to substantiate the Kremlin’s narrative that it supported the international peace process.

The January 2020 conference was the second meeting in a series of engagements known as the Berlin process that Germany initiated in 2019 with UN approval.416 The 2020 Berlin conference aimed to develop support for a plan to implement a ceasefire in Libya, to enforce the long-standing UN arms embargo, and to reform Libya’s economic and security sectors.417 The conference invited both Sarraj and Haftar to Berlin and included representatives from the Arab League, the European Union, and the United Nations, as well as Alegria, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, the Republic of the Congo, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States. Despite coordinated effort from across the international community, the conference failed to end the conflict.418

Just like the Moscow peace talks the week prior, the Russian news agencies RT, Sputnik, and TASS heavily leveraged Russia’s participation in the Berlin Conference to support the Kremlin’s information campaign. The Russian

media outlets featured numerous stories about Russian and German diplomats meeting in preparation for the Berlin Conference. These stories portrayed Russian diplomats as having set the stage for the Berlin Conference and striving to bring their German counterparts up to speed on the progress made in Moscow.\footnote{“Russian, German Diplomats Discuss Preparations for Libyan Settlement Conference,” TASS, January 14, 2020, Nexis Uni.} The Russian Foreign Ministry told TASS that “the German side was thoroughly briefed on the results of the intra-Libyan peace talks held in Moscow.”\footnote{“Russian, German Diplomats Discuss Preparations for Libyan Settlement Conference.”} RT asked its readers if the international community could help to finish what Russia and Turkey started.\footnote{“Berlin Peace Talks: In War-Torn Libya, Can Intl Community Help Finish What Russia & Turkey Started?,” RT, January 19, 2020, https://www.rt.com/news/478573-libya-berlin-conference-ceasefire/} TASS noted that Putin approved of the Berlin conference, and ran several stories about Putin meeting with Merkel prior to the conference.\footnote{“Putin Backs German Proposal to Hold International Conference on Libya in Berlin,” TASS, January 11, 2020, Nexis Uni; “Putin, Merkel Discuss Upcoming Berlin Conference on Libya.”} RT, Sputnik, and TASS also highlighted Putin’s participation in the Berlin Conference and noted that Haftar wrote a personal letter to Putin, thanking him “for his efforts to settle the Libyan conflict.”\footnote{“Putin to Take Part in Libya Peace Conference in Berlin – Kremlin,” RT, January 17, 2020, https://www.rt.com/news/478518-putin-to-take-part-in-berlin/; “LNA’s Haftar Thanks Putin for Russia’s Efforts Toward Peace in Libya in Personal Letter,” Sputnik, January 17, 2020, https://sputniknews.com/20200117/lnas-haftar-thanks-putin-for-russias-efforts-toward-peace-in-libya-in-personal-letter-1078062306.html.} RT noted at the conference’s conclusion that the German hosts did not have a clear plan to resolve Libya’s deadlock, making the role of Russia and Turkey even more important than before.\footnote{“‘Berlin Conference Showed Moscow & Ankara Have a Huge Role to Play in Solving Libya Crisis,’” RT, January 20, 2020, https://www.rt.com/news/478673-berlin-libya-huge-role-russia-turkey/}
The UN Security Council held a series of meetings in the weeks that followed the Berlin Conference to discuss a British-drafted resolution to endorse the conference outcomes. The resolution eventually passed with 14 of the 15 UN Security Council members states supporting the resolution. Only one state abstained: Russia. Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia abstained because he said it was unclear whether all sides in Libya were ready to implement the resolution. Nebenzia also objected to the resolution's references to mercenaries in Libya, and he indicated that it was too soon to approve a resolution on Libya without further input from the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army. He said that "the Libyans have just started a dialogue…[and] the parameters of the ceasefire mentioned by the Berlin communique should be determined specifically within the framework of their dialogue." Yet, despite Russia’s abstention from the vote, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov urged strict compliance with the resolution in subsequent United Nations Security Council meetings.

Russia’s muddled approach to the UN Security Council resolution endorsing the Berlin Conference was a Russian attempt to have its cake and eat it too. On the one hand, Russian leaders wanted to portray themselves as

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426 “UN Security Council Adopts Resolution Affirming Lasting Ceasefire in Libya, Russia Abstains.”
supporting the various international initiatives promoting peace in Libya, especially those originated directly from the UN Security Council on which Russia occupies a permanent seat. On the other hand, Russia did not want the international community to succeed where Moscow had failed. The Kremlin did not veto the resolution because that would have been too direct a challenge to Russia’s own narrative about supporting the UN-led peace process. Instead, the Kremlin abstained from the resolution, thus maintaining the appearance that it supported the international peace process without giving the international community a clear diplomatic victory where Russia had previously failed.

RT, Sputnik, and TASS leveraged both the Russia-Turkey ceasefire attempt and the Berlin Conference to bolster the Kremlin’s information campaign. Both events correlated with a significant increase in RT, Sputnik, and TASS reporting about Libya during January 2020; see figure 4.2 on the next page. The news articles about Libya that RT, Sputnik, and TASS published during January 2020 comprised over a quarter of all the news articles that the three agencies published about Libya during the entire 15-month period under examination.
Figure 4.2: TASS, Sputnik, & RT Monthly Reports on Libya, April 2019 to June 2020

NATO Is Bad, Always Has Been, Always Will Be

RT, Sputnik, and TASS used the instability from Tripoli offensive to advance a broader Kremlin narrative about NATO’s negative global role. RT, Sputnik, and TASS weaved this “NATO is bad” narrative into at least 18 percent of all the stories that they published about Libya during the Tripoli offensive, making it their second-most prominent narrative. Notably, RT negatively referenced NATO’s role in the 2011 overthrow of Gaddafi in 50 percent of its Libya-related articles. Sputnik and TASS displayed similar, albeit less frequent, tendencies, negatively referencing NATO’s role in the 2011 overthrow in about 25 percent and 8 percent of their respective Libya articles.
RT, Sputnik, and TASS began communicating the “NATO is bad narrative” within days of the start of the Libyan National Army’s offensive. TASS published an article in early-April 2019 titled “Russia opposed to assigning blame in Libyan crisis” in which Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov blamed NATO for the crisis in Libya. Although the article began with a paraphrase of Lavrov’s comment that Russia was “opposed to unilaterally apportioning blame,” Lavrov’s subsequent comments identified NATO’s actions in 2011 as the cause of Libya’s crisis, responsible for turning Libya into a “destroyed state and a black hole for terrorists, arms trafficking, and illegal migrant flows.”429 RT also ran a critical article in early-April 2019 that was unambiguously titled “US & NATO will always share blame for Libya’s re-descent into chaos” in which the author excoriated NATO’s role in Libya. The author highlighted Libya’s descent into chaos following Ghedaffi’s ouster, criticized NATO for its failure to rebuild Libya, and stated that NATO oversaw jihadist movements into Libya and empowered those “who have capitalized on the death and destruction left in the wake of the 2011 war.”430

Putin prominently advanced the “NATO is bad” narrative. Putin told the press in early-July 2019 that it was “right to remember how the whole thing started, who destroyed Libya’s statehood….it was NATO’s decision. It was European planes that bombed Libya. Here is the result: Libya’s statehood has been destroyed, chaos reigns on its territory.”431 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey

429 “Russia Opposed to Assigning Blame in Libyan Crisis,” TASS, April 6, 2019, Nexis Uni.
Lavrov echoed these comments in mid-January 2020, a few days prior to the Berlin Conference. Lavrov told reporters that NATO’s 2011 bombing destroyed Libya and that the Libyan people and the international community have been dealing with the consequences of that “criminal, illegal adventurism” ever since. The end of the news article is worth quoting in full because it includes a complete version of the “NATO is bad” narrative.

Libya’s collapse as a single state occurred in 2011 after an uprising in Benghazi fully supported by NATO. The alliance’s aircraft carried out massive airstrikes against Muamar Gaddafi’s government forces for eight months. The operation was terminated only after he had been murdered. Since then, there have been no effective government institutions in Libya, the civil war has been raging there with varying degrees of intensity, while the country’s territory has turned into a criminal zone for migrant smuggling and arms trafficking to EU countries.  

_RT, Sputnik, and TASS_ repeated aspects of this narrative several more times at key points in the remainder of the conflict. For example, a few weeks after the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord launched Operation Peace Storm in late-March 2020, _TASS_ published an article about the renewed fighting and highlighting that it violated the outcomes of the mid-January 2020 Russian-backed Berlin Conference that sought to restore Libya’s statehood after it was “demolished by NATO almost ten years ago.”  

Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev told reporters in mid-June 2020, shortly after the success of the Turkish-backed counteroffensive, that NATO’s “substitution of international norms with the rule of force, which is imposing freedom and

democracy with fire and sword in places where they cannot exist by definition...led to the tragedy of...Libya."\(^{434}\)

\(\text**RT, Sputnik, and TASS also regularly linked the instability in Libya to the Kremlin’s broader historical grievances against NATO. TASS published a critique of NATO in mid-June 2019 titled “Voluntary dissolution in 1991 would have been logical end of NATO’s history.” The article quoted Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council Alexander Venediktov saying that NATO was a relic of the Cold War that has failed to justify its continued existence and “could boast of nothing but shameful bombardments of Yugoslavia in 1999 or Libya in 2011.”\(^{435}\)

Sputnik published a similar report in early-December 2019 tilted “NATO Dinosaur Plods On.” The article’s author criticized NATO for its post-Cold War enlargement, saying that “It wasn’t Russia that attacked the former Yugoslavia and the Balkans in the late 1990s, nor conducted regime-change wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. It wasn’t Russia that oversaw a coup d’état in Ukraine in 2014. In all the mayhem over the past three decades since the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO has relentlessly ramped up foreign wars, destabilizing the entire globe.”\(^{436}\) The author dramatically concludes that “The NATO dinosaur plods on... for now. But the disaster of poverty and unsustainable international tensions that it leaves in its wake suggest that the beast is soon heading for long-overdue extinction. Either that, or the planet could very well be made extinct from

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its reprehensible rampaging.” *RT* ran a final historical grievance-based article in mid-June 2020 toward the end of the Tripoli offensive. The article was titled “In 2011 Russia and Turkey did not stop NATO in Libya. Now their voices speak loudest as they try to end 9 years of chaos.” The article’s author was a former US Marine Corps intelligence officer named Scott Ritter who served in the Soviet Union as a weapons inspector. Ritter said that Russia opposed the US-led NATO intervention but failed to exercise its veto powers on the UN Security Council in 2011, a decision that Moscow “went on to bitterly regret sitting out, as the increasingly violent and morally muddy Arab Spring swept through the Middle East.” Ritter points out how Russia has learned from its previous mistake and was working to “bring an end to the notion of a NATO foothold in the region, gaining some absolution for earlier inaction, and reinforcing the perception that the West can no longer unilaterally remold the rest of the world according to its geopolitical priorities.”

*These Are Not The Russian Mercenaries You Are Looking For*

The Kremlin’s overt information campaign also advanced a narrative that Moscow had not deployed mercenaries to Libya. The aim of this narrative was to obscure the Kremlin’s covert support for the Libyan National Army. Although denials from Russian officials about their covert support comprised only about three-and-a-half percent of the Libya-related reports that *RT*, *Sputnik*, and *TASS*

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published during the Tripoli offensive, Russian leaders only made these denials
to directly counter high-profile non-Russian accusations about the Kremlin’s
covert support. The Kremlin was not offering up denials at other times during the
war if nobody else was mentioning it. There would be no reason to bring
unnecessary attention to the issue. Despite the small percentage of news articles
that communicated these denials, they are very important to highlight because
any evidence to the contrary would have undermined the rest of the Kremlin’s
information campaign.

Russian denials ranged from simple rebuttals to more complicated
attempts to ‘deny-and-counter-accuse.’ A few days after the Libyan National
Army attacked Tripoli in early-April 2019, British media released a high-profile
report that Russia was covertly supporting the Libyan National Army. A
spokesman for the Russian Embassy in London refuted the accusation,
highlighted that Moscow maintained contacts with both sides of the Libyan civil
war, and reminded his audience that NATO—not Russia—was responsible for
the crisis in Libya.\footnote{438} His rebuttal was a trifecta of the Russian information
campaign, emphasizing deny and counter-accuse, Russia’s role as a broker of
the peace, and anti-NATO sentiment.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov refuted a similarly high-
profile \textit{New York Times} article published in November 2019 about the arrival of
200 Russian mercenaries in Libya.\footnote{439} Ryabkov’s rebuttal was similar to the

\footnote{438} “Russian Embassy in London Refutes Media Reports on Moscow’s Support for Libya’s Haftar,” TASS, April 8, 2019, \url{https://tass.com/politics/1052745}.
previous statement from the Russian Embassy in London. Ryabkov said that “We [Russia] are acting in the interest of the Libyan settlement, we are supporting the existing effort, including through the United Nations; we maintain a dialogue with those who somehow influence the situation.”

Amidst the Moscow-hosted peace talks in mid-January 2020, the Government of National Accord made another high-profile accusation about Russian military contractors supporting Haftar. This accusation garnered a direct response from Putin. Putin claimed that any Russians in Libya at the time as mercenaries did not represent Russia and did not receive money from the state. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov reaffirmed Putin’s claim in mid-February 2020 while discussing the issue with reporters. Peskov stressed that “Vladimir Putin, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, has neither deployed forces to Libya, nor issued any orders on that score.”

Russia’s UN envoy, Vasily Nebenzya, responded in mid-May 2020 to a subsequent high-profile report from a UN panel of experts that claimed that Wagner Group had deployed between 800 and 1,200 mercenaries to support Haftar’s Tripoli offensive. Nebenzya refuted the accusation, saying that “once again: there is no Russian military in Libya…the majority of the [UN] document is based on unverified or clearly fabricated information with an aim to discredit

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442 “Kremlin Stresses Russia Has No Forces in Libya,” TASS, February 17, 2020, Nexis Uni.
443 Lederer, “UN Experts: Libya’s Hifter Got Fighters from Russian Company.”
Russia’s policy in Libya…The information there cannot be verified, especially its part based on ‘confidential discussions…The people who allegedly fight in Libya remain on our country’s territory. The so-called ‘injured’ are in reality in perfect health. All of this can be verified.”

The most prominent—and perhaps purposefully ambiguous and incredulous—Russian denials occurred during the Tripoli offensive’s collapse in late-May 2020. The United States military released imagery of Russian MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter aircraft that had deployed to Libya via the Russian Hmeymim Air Base in Syria where their Russian markings were painted over to conceal their origin. RT published in late-May 2020 the first denial from the three Russian media outlets about the US military reports. RT’s report carried an ambiguous statement from Andrey Krasov, first deputy chairman of the Russian Duma Defense Committee, that reaffirmed the Kremlin’s usual talking points about supporting peace in Libya but did not directly deny the aircraft deployment. Krasov said that “Russia's position is well-known: we are in favor of ending the bloodshed in Libya, we urge all parties to the conflict to refrain from using weapons and sit at the negotiating table.”

444 “Russia’s UN Envoy Slams UN Experts’ Report about Vagner Group’s Activities in Libya,” TASS, May 19, 2020, Nexis Uni.
446 “Moscow DENIES US General’s Claim of ‘Russian Mercenary Jets in Libya’. Is This AFRICOM’s New ‘Worse than ISIS’ Moment?”
TASS published the next two Russian denials, which were equally as ambiguous. One TASS article simply referenced the US military’s claim that 14 Russian-made military aircraft deployed to Libya and then repeated previous Russian denials about its activity in Libya without adding anything new. The other TASS denial focused on semantics, again without directly refuting the US military’s claim. Viktor Bondarev, head of the Russian Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security, said that if there really were any MiG-29s in Libya, then they were Soviet-made, not Russia-made.

Sputnik published a final denial related to the aircraft deployment, but this rebuttal came from Libyan National Army spokesman Ahmad al-Mismari rather than a Russian official. Al-Mismari also offered a vague statement in response to the reports and then shifted the conversation toward a counteraccusation aimed at Turkey. Al-Mismari said that “We find strange such statements…that we have various types of Russian aircraft…we also find it strange that these reports do not mention the interference and expansion of Turkey in our country and the transfer of tens of thousands of mercenaries from Turkey.”

Overt Russian Media Cooperation: From The Mouths of Many, The Truth

The Kremlin’s attempt to deny its covert support for the Libyan National Army was an integral part of Moscow’s information campaign in Libya. Moscow wanted to maintain its image as a benevolent great power, a supporter of the UN

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peace process, and a diplomatic powerbroker in Libya. Any credible evidence linking Russian military support to the Libyan National Army threatened to unravel the Kremlin’s overall information campaign and wider strategy. Russian officials therefore repeatedly denied any accusations that the Kremlin was using the Wagner Group to provide covert support to the Libyan National Army.

Russian state news agencies RT, Sputnik, and TASS amplified denials from senior Kremlin officials. Similarities in the reports’ titles, content selection, and word choice suggest that the Russian agencies coordinated their efforts to bolster the denials’ plausibility. RT, Sputnik and TASS collectively published at least 24 articles with either near identical or similar wording covering senior Russian officials’ denials at key points during the Libyan civil war. Side-by-side comparisons of the news articles are included in Appendix 3 – Kremlin Denials Of Russian Presence In Libya.

The Kremlin’s denials emphasized similar talking points as those described in the previous section about overt Russian narratives. The denials focused on claims that Russia was not supporting either side of the Libyan civil war; that reports of Russian mercenaries in Libya were fake news based on unsubstantiated rumors to discredit the Kremlin’s positive policy toward Libya; that any Russian mercenaries in Libya did not represent the Russian state nor receive financial support from Moscow; that any Russian

“I saw a two-dimensional world, endless in length and width, but without height. Without sky...flat and simple...We became two-dimensional. We understood only yes and now, only black and white. There was no ambiguity, no half-tones, no saving graces...We understood everything literally, and that meant we were absolutely unsuited for life, helpless.”
– Vladislav Surkov, “Without Sky”

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equipment in Libya was left-over from the Cold War; and that Russia was working with both sides of the conflict to bring peace to Libya, in contrast to NATO’s role in bringing war to Libya.

**Overt Russian Media Comparison With The Associated Press**

The narratives about the Libyan civil war as found in *RT*, *Sputnik*, and *TASS* differed substantially from those found in the *Associated Press*, a prominent, independent American news agency with global coverage. The Russian press narratives focused heavily on Moscow’s positive role in the Libyan civil war, whereas the *Associated Press* reported about various topics, of which Russia’s role in the civil war was not prominent. For example, whereas the Russian news outlets focused heavily on portraying Moscow as broker of the peace, the *Associated Press* focused on migration through Libya and into southern Europe, human rights challenges associated with the conditions that migrants experienced during their journey to Europe, terrorist issues stemming from Libya’s instability, the compounding effects of the coronavirus epidemic on war-torn Libya, and illegal arms proliferation emanating from Libya. The *Associated Press* paid relatively little attention to Russia’s role in the conflict—positive or negative—typically only mentioning Russia in conjunction with the other external actors that also were involved in the conflict or mentioning Russia when evidence surfaced about the Kremlin’s covert military and information operations in Libya.
These differences between the reporting from the Associated Press and the reporting from RT, Sputnik, and TASS does not appear to represent an Associated Press bias against Russia and toward the United States, but rather an unsurprising bias of the Russian state news media toward Russia. For comparison, the Associated Press focused relatively little on US policy toward Libya during the Tripoli offensive, mentioning the United States in only about 20 percent of its articles and featuring the United States with even less frequency. However, RT, Sputnik, and TASS mentioned Russia in nearly every single article that they published about Libya during the Tripoli offensive.

Despite the general differences throughout the conflict between the narratives in the Russian news agencies and those in the Associated Press, there were significant similarities between the narratives in January 2020. The Associated Press narratives during this month focused on the same issues as the Russian narratives, namely, the Kremlin’s role as a broker of the peace as on display during the ceasefire negotiations in Moscow and Russia’s participation in the Berlin Conference. For example, the Associated Press published an article in early-January 2020 titled “Leaders of Turkey, Russia Urge Jan. 12 Cease-Fire in Libya” that highlighted Putin meeting with Erdogan in Istanbul to discuss a ceasefire in Libya. The Associated Press quoted a joint statement from Putin and Erdogan that claimed both sides were committed to securing an immediate ceasefire and starting an inclusive intra-Libyan political process under UN
It is unsurprising that RT, Sputnik, and TASS also published articles on the same day about the same meeting and joint statement.

The similarity between the narratives found in the Associated Press and those found in RT, Sputnik, and TASS during January 2020 is significant. It indicates that the Kremlin’s use of the Moscow-hosted ceasefire negotiations and participation in the Berlin conference helped to bolster Russia’s great power image, a key strategic objective for Moscow. However, the similarity between the Associated Press content and the RT, Sputnik, and TASS content was almost certainly not due to the direct influence of Russian narratives on the Associated Press. The similarities between the narratives were more likely a function of Moscow making a smart decision to host peace talks and to participate in the Berlin conference. These venues simply offered good press for Moscow, as demonstrated by above-average reporting from both the Russian media outlets and the Associated Press during January 2020. The volume of articles that the Associated Press published in January 2020 was the outlet’s second highest monthly volume during the Tripoli offensive, and the volume for the Russian media outlets was by far its highest. See figures 4.3 and 4.4 on the next page. However, the Associated Press reporting volume in January 2020 was just a little above the average monthly reporting on Libya during the rest of the conflict.

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whereas the reporting volume from the Russian agencies was 5 times higher than their average monthly reporting on Libya during the rest of the conflict.\footnote{The average monthly reports about Libya from \textit{RT}, \textit{Sputnik}, and \textit{TASS} during the other months of the conflict was 96 vs 52 from the \textit{Associated Press}. During January 2020, \textit{RT}, \textit{Sputnik}, and \textit{TASS} published 493 related reports, and the \textit{Associated Press} published 89.}
Covert Russian Information Campaigns: Flies In The Spider’s Web

Concurrent with Moscow’s overt information campaign, Kremlin affiliates also conducted at least three separate covert information campaigns in support of Moscow’s strategic, regional, and country-level objectives. The campaigns began as early as 2014 and lasted throughout the duration of the Tripoli offensive. The campaigns collectively relied on a mix of authentic, compromised, and fake social media accounts to propagate narratives to at least 2 million followers across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Kremlin affiliates conducted or enabled the campaigns from locations around the world, including Denmark, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The covert information campaigns relied almost exclusively on social media platforms to reach Libyans and international audiences with narratives that Moscow could not have communicated via its overt mass media without tarnishing Russia’s manufactured public image as a neutral great power. These narratives expressed support for Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, while also denigrating the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Turkish and Qatari support for the Libyan government, and the UN-backed peace process. The covert campaigns also sought to amplify Russian state-owned media across the Libyan information space and to further erode Libya’s already broken socio-cultural cohesion.

“Our sovereignty depends on this…who we are in the world wide web: spiders or flies.”
– Vladislav Surkov, 2006
The ultimate aim of the simultaneous covert information campaigns is ambiguous. The most obvious aim would have been to build support for Russian proxies and to attack their opponents. However, this perspective does not entirely account for the Kremlin’s simultaneous support for both Haftar and Saif throughout the Tripoli offensive. The Kremlin wanted to subordinate Haftar to a Libyan political leader, an arrangement that Haftar would not accept. When Haftar rejected Saif as a potential political partner in early-2019, the Kremlin could have reduced its information support for Haftar and shifted the priority of its effort towards building Saif’s political credentials. But Haftar’s information support from Russia continued.

A less obvious aim for Russia’s simultaneous information support for both Haftar and Saif during the Tripoli offensive would have been to keep the Libyan electorate divided between the two leader. This would have served to perpetuate Libya’s broken socio-cultural cohesions and prevented Libya’s historically disparate regions from coalescing around a single leader. Continuing to provide information support to both Haftar and Saif also ensured that they remained divided and working against each other, at least until the Kremlin could convince them to work together or find different actors to assume their roles as the respective military and political saviors of Libya.

*Pro-Haftar & Pro-Saif Information Campaign, May 2014 to October 2020*

Prigozhin-affiliated entities conducted information campaigns that targeted social media users in Libya with both pro-Haftar and pro-Gaddafi narratives from
2014 until mid-2020. These campaigns began as described in chapter two. Prigozhin-linked entities, including the Wagner Group, conducted these campaigns on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and television.

The first Prigozhin-affiliated campaign ran from as early as May 2014 until late-October 2019 and gained nearly 400,000 followers on Facebook and about 29,300 followers on Instagram. The campaign included a Facebook network of at least 14 accounts, 12 pages, and 1 group, as well as an Instagram network with at least 1 account. None of the content was managed from inside Libya. Rather most of it was managed from locations in Egypt with at least one additional manager per page that was based in a separate country. These other countries included Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The campaign coordinated inauthentic behavior across Facebook and Instagram using a combination of authentic, compromised, and fake accounts that all claimed to be based in Libya. The campaign shared pro-Haftar and pro-Gaddafi narratives, while also sharing local news in a structure that resembled other Russian-affiliated influence operations. Frequent topics included Libyan politics, militia violence, allegations of Turkish support for terrorism in Libya,

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meetings between Putin and Haftar, and the early-2019 arrest of Prigozhin employees Maxim Shugaley and Aleksandr Prokofyev, as discussed in chapter 2. The posts were typically in Arabic and frequently shared stories from the Russian state-controlled media agencies RT and Sputnik. The posts also attempted to direct users to content outside of Facebook and Instagram. The campaign spent the equivalent of only $10,000 US dollars on ads, paid primarily in US dollars, euros, and Egyptian pounds.452

A cluster of five Facebook pages shared pro-Haftar narratives with over 121,000 followers. The narratives praised Haftar’s military victories, posted pro-Haftar poetry, provided operational updates, disparaged the UN-recognized government for its alleged support of the Muslim Brotherhood, and criticized both Turkey and Qatar. The most prominent page in the pro-Haftar cluster was the “Libya First” page, which had 41,453 followers and was administered from Egypt and Spain. Second was the “Libyan National People” page, which had 32,353 followers and was administered from Egypt and Romania. Third was the “Voice of Libya” page, which had 22,045 followers and was administered from Egypt, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Fourth was the “Libya Forever” page, which had 13,851 followers and was administered from Egypt and Portugal. Last was the “Knights of Libya” page, which had 12,227 followers and was administered from Egypt, the United States, and the Netherlands.453

Two Facebook pages shared pro-Gaddafi narratives with over 113,000 followers. The narratives praised Libya’s former leader Muamar Gaddafi and his son Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. The pages featured multiple daily posts, with consistent timing and frequency, that received moderate engagement; typical posts received between 100 to 300 likes, as well as a few comments and shares. About 200 posts were posted verbatim to both pages. The pages exhibited at least four surges in likes that followed consistent and suspicious follower growth on both pages. The most prominent of the two pro-Gaddafi pages was the “Libya Gaddafi” page, which had 73,496 followers—more than any of the campaign’s pro-Haftar pages—and was administered from Egypt and Italy. The other page, “Falcons of the Conqueror,” had 39,539 followers and was administered from Egypt and the Netherlands.454

Four Facebook pages shared regional news stories in a structure that resembled other Russian-affiliated influence operations. The four Facebook pages were created to appear as Libyan news networks and shared mostly news and political commentary with a little over 158,000 followers—more than either the pro-Haftar or the pro-Gaddafi page clusters. The pages posted about twice per day. Although the topics tended to change regularly in response to Libyan political and military developments, the posts generally included a photo of a leading figure or military equipment and a brief news story or political commentary. The pages communicated neutral narratives when they were first established, but slowly shifted toward pro-Haftar and anti-government narratives

454 Grossman, Bush, and DiResta.
as the Tripoli offensive progressed. The narratives became especially critical of Turkey toward the end of 2019 when Ankara began to increase its military and economic ties with Tripoli. The most prominent page in the regional news cluster was the “Tripoli News Network,” which had 49,286 followers and was administered from Egypt, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and an unidentified location. Second was the “Fezzan News Network,” which 40,877 followers and was administered from Egypt, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Romania, the United Kingdom, the United States, and an unidentified location. Third was the “Libya News Network,” which had 37,590 followers and was administered from Egypt, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, the United Kingdom, the United States, and an unidentified location. Last was the “Cyrenaica News Network,” which had 30,503 followers and was administered from Egypt and Singapore.455

Two television stations separately shared pro-Saif and pro-Haftar narratives. Wagner audited the Al Jamahiriya television station in January 2019 and revived it as a pro-Saif information source, as discussed in chapter two. Wagner appears to have helped the station create a Facebook page in March 2019, a Twitter account in September 2019, and an Instagram account in October 2019. Although the television station began with sharing Muamar Gaddafi nostalgia content and pro-Saif narratives, as well as genearl news stories, the station’s narratives began to change in December 2019. The station began to share more information that supported the Libyan National Army and

455 Grossman, Bush, and DiResta.
criticized Turkish military support for the Government of National, almost certainly in response to the potential threat that Ankara’s increased support for Tripoli posed for Moscow’s interests in Libya. The station’s regular audience criticized the change in tone, causing the station to shift back toward its pro-Saif content, which likewise drew criticism from the pro-Haftar audience.\textsuperscript{456}

Wagner also audited the Libyan National Army-aligned al-Hadath television station in February 2019 and presented to the channel’s leader recommendations about how to optimize broadcasting. The channel also operated social media sites including a Facebook page with about 875,000 followers and a Twitter page with about 89,000 followers as of March 2020. The pages remain operational as of February 2023 with about 980,000 and about 112,400 followers respectively.\textsuperscript{457}

\textit{Pro-Saif Information Campaign, January 2019 to April 2020}

Prigozhin-affiliates ran a related information campaign in Libya from January 2019 until late-April 2020 that also targeted social media users in Libya with pro-Gaddafi and anti-government narratives. The campaign appeared to operate only on Facebook and included a cluster of 18 pages with nearly 200,000 followers. The number of followers per page ranged from a low of 3,071 followers to a high of 61,228 on a page called “The Colonel’s Jamahiria,” which was administered from Egypt and four other hidden locations. The page

\textsuperscript{456} Grossman, Ramali, and DiResta, “Blurring the Lines of Media Authenticity.”
\textsuperscript{457} Grossman, Ramali, and DiResta.
administrator’s locations for most of other pages also were hidden on Facebook; however, the locations that were available included Egypt and Oman. The pages across the campaign posted at near identical rates, frequently sharing the same messages at the same time, and regularly linked to content from the Russian state news agencies *RT* and *Sputnik*.458

The campaign narratives focused on praising Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and criticizing the Government of National Accord. The pro-Safi narratives sought to create the impression that he had broad popular support amongst the Libyan people. The anti-government narratives criticized Tripoli’s lack of capability to provide services for its residents, criticized the government’s use of foreign military mercenaries to conduct military operations, accused the government of corruption, claimed the government was over-stating the number of coronavirus cases to distract people from violence around the capital, and criticized Turkish involvement in Libya. Several of the pages shared a Prigozhin-linked Jana News Agency article that described the results of a poll that the Russian Foundation for National Values Protection claimed it conducted about Libya’s presidential elections. This was the same organization that conducted political analysis for Haftar in late-2018 and for Saif in early-2019 as described in chapter two. The poll indicated that Saif was the presidential front-runner and that only four percent of Libyans would vote for Sarraj if presidential elections were held in early-2019.459

459 Grossman and DiResta.
Pro-Haftar & Pro-Saif Information Campaign, March 2019 to June 2020

Prigozhin-linked entities and Libyan National Army operatives ran another, more sophisticated information campaign primarily between March 2019 and June 2020 that targeted Libyan social media users with narratives supportive of the Libyan National Army, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and Russia, while attacking the Government of National Accord, Turkey, and prominent international peace processes, such as the January 2020 Berlin Conference. The campaign operated on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube and frequently linked to websites, the most common of which was the Russia state-owned media outlet RT.\(^{460}\)

The Facebook component of the campaign included 29 pages with nearly 1.4 million followers. The distribution of the followers across the pages ranged from a single person on the least popular page to a high of more than 235,000 followers for the most popular page. The most popular was the pro-Saif al-Islam Gaddafi Al Jamahiriya television channel Facebook page, which was administered in Egypt and Libya.\(^{461}\) The other Facebook pages were primarily administered from Egypt, but also included administrators in Libya, Russia, Sudan, and Syria. The most significant Instagram account was also for the Al Jamahiriya television channel and had 16,100 followers. The Twitter component included at least 9,100 users that followed at least two accounts that contributed to the campaign. Finally, a YouTube channel affiliated with the campaign posted two movies about the Libyan conflict that had about 750,000 and one million


\(^{461}\) Grossman et al., 9–11.
respective views as of 15 December 2020; the number of views at the end of the Tripoli offensive in June 2020 is unclear.\textsuperscript{462}

Similar to the previous information campaigns, this campaign also featured a mix of authentic and fake accounts that all claimed to be based in Libya. Media staff from the Libyan National Army’s Moral Guidance Department operated some of the accounts. Other accounts presented themselves as legitimate, Libyan news outlets and mixed factual, localized content with disinformation. The highest amount of localized content focused on eastern Libyan, particularly the Libya National Army stronghold of Benghazi. The remaining set of accounts presented themselves as Libyan nationalists who were opposed to the presence of Turkish military personnel in Libya. The most prominent Libyan nationalist element was a protest movement that called itself “Stop Terror.” It hosted Libyan news podcasts with added commentary and ran a cluster of telephone call-in numbers on WhatsApp, Telegram, and Viber that users could dial to report Turkish-military terrorist activity. The “Stop Terror” campaign also amplified information about anti-Turkish demonstrations and sold merchandise such as buttons and flags.\textsuperscript{463}

The campaign spread narratives that aligned with Russian objectives in Libya, Pro-Libyan National Army narratives aimed to bolster and to protect the organization’s reputation, praising the military force as a source of security in eastern Libya and countering attempts to hold the force responsible for violent

\textsuperscript{462} Grossman et al., 8, 16–17, 47.
\textsuperscript{463} Grossman et al., 40–52.
crimes, such as the murder of a prominent Libyan lawyer who was critical of eastern military groups. Pro-Saif al-Islam Gaddafi narratives sought to promote his political rise and to strengthen his potential as a Libyan presidential candidate. Pro-Russian narratives advocated for the Libyan government to release from jail the two Russian political operatives that were arrested in Libya in the spring of 2019 for their attempts to interfere in Libya’s elections as discussed in chapter two. Anti-Government of National Accord narratives emphasized government corruption, unfair distribution of oil revenues, poor provision of essential services, and the adverse effects of Tripoli’s growing relationship with Ankara. Anti-Turkey narratives focused on Ankara’s general foreign policy failures and criticism of the Turkish forces in Libya. Turkish forces were characterized as invaders, occupiers, and colonists. Libyan politicians and military personnel that cooperated with the Turkish troops in Libya were called traitors, spies, and mercenaries. \(^{464}\) Lastly, narratives that opposed international peace efforts, such as the January 2020 Berlin Conference, attempted to discredit these processes as foreign exploitation and thinly-veiled attempts to steal Libya’s oil. \(^{465}\)

**Concurrent Egyptian and Emirati Information Campaigns**

An Egyptian marketing firm called New Waves and an Emirati firm similarly called Newave conducted separate social media campaigns targeting

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\(^{464}\) Grossman et al., 11–14, 17–21.

\(^{465}\) Grossman et al., 21–22.
Libyan users with pro-Haftar content from as early as 2015 until August 2019.\textsuperscript{466} The campaigns relied primarily on Facebook and Instagram. The Facebook component included a network of at least 259 accounts, 102 pages, 5 groups, and 4 events. The Instagram component included at least 17 accounts. The campaigns generated more than 13.7 million followers.

The New Waves and Newave campaigns coordinated inauthentic behavior across Facebook and Instagram using compromised and fake accounts. The accounts impersonated general users, public figures, and local news organizations to run pages and to make comments that artificially increased user engagement. The campaigns focused on Libyan politics, elections, and local news, as well as other topics such as animals, crafts, fashion, and humor to build audiences and to direct users to the other pages.\textsuperscript{467} The campaigns spent the equivalent of $170,000 US dollars on ads, paid primarily in US dollars and Emirati dirhams.

The campaign narratives supported Haftar and opposed Turkish and Qatari influence in Libya. The content portrayed Haftar’s adversaries as terrorists, regularly alleging that Turkey and Qatar were state sponsors of terrorism in Libya.\textsuperscript{468} Although Meta Platforms Incorporated—Facebook’s parent


\textsuperscript{467} Karan, Kaul, and Kassab, “Facebook Disabled Assets Linked to Egypt and UAE-Based Firms.”

\textsuperscript{468} Karan, Kaul, and Kassab.
company—did not publicly attribute the campaigns to any state government when Meta announced the campaign takedown on 1 August 2019, the campaign narratives paralleled the political interests of Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, all of which were supporting Haftar at the time. The campaigns also shared many similarities with another campaign that Meta did attribute to Prigozhin-linked companies in late-fall of 2019.

Conclusion

Concurrent with the Wagner Group’s covert military support to the Libyan National Army between April 2019 and June 2020, the Kremlin also employed weaponized diplomacy and widespread information operations as part of its strategy to gain a foothold in Libya while also maintain its image as neutral, great-power peacemaker. The Kremlin’s diplomatic engagements and information operations were synergistic. The information operations relied heavily on Moscow’s diplomatic engagements as source material for media narratives that bolstered Russia’s great power image, and the diplomatic engagements relied on Russian media and global social media platforms to reach their target audiences in Africa, Europe, and beyond.

The Kremlin’s extensive diplomatic campaign during the Tripoli offensive included at least three main lines of effort. The first line of effort relied on engagement with Libya’s key powerbrokers to deepen their reliance on the Kremlin, to play them against each other, and to ensure that only Moscow emerged victorious from the civil war. The second line of effort relied on overt
engagements with at least thirty-six key Libyan and international stakeholders to cultivate Moscow’s image as a trusted, third-party, great power negotiator. The third line of effort focused on participation in multilateral peace processes to protect Russian interests in Libya—not to bring peace to the war-torn country.

The Kremlin’s information operations included both overt and covert components. The overt component used Russian state news agencies—such as RT, Sputnik, and TASS—as international platforms to communicate narratives about Moscow’s positive involvement in the Libya civil war. These agencies relied on the source material from Moscow’s diplomatic campaign as proof that Russia was committed to fixing Libya—a country that Kremlin leaders routinely claimed the West had broken in 2011. These Russian news agencies communicated at least six prominent narratives in support of the Kremlin’s great power ambitions in Libya. First, that Russia wanted peace in Libya. Second, that Russian leaders were engaged in a robust diplomatic campaign with many international partners and Libyan leaders to negotiate peace. Third, that Russia and Turkey nearly succeeded where the West had failed in brokering an enduring ceasefire. Fourth, that Russia supported the UN-backed peace process. Fifth, that NATO is a destabilizing force. Finally, that the Kremlin had not deployed mercenaries to support the Libyan National Army.

Moscow simultaneously conducted covert disinformation operations during the Tripoli offensive to exploit audiences that Kremlin political technologist Vladislav Surkov would have characterized as two-dimensional: people who uncritically accepted the narratives offered to them online, on television, and in
The covert operations relied on a mix of authentic, compromised, and fake social media accounts originating from locations around the world to propagate narratives to millions of viewers across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Kremlin affiliates used these social media platforms to reach Libyans and international audiences with narratives that Moscow could not have communicated via its overt mass media without tarnishing Russia’s manufactured public image as a neutral great power. These narratives expressed support for Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, while also denigrating the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Turkish and Qatari support for the Libyan government, and the UN-backed peace process. The covert disinformation campaigns also sought to amplify Russian state-owned media across the Libyan information space and to further erode Libya’s already broken socio-cultural cohesion.

Although the effect of the Kremlin’s diplomatic campaign and information operations during the Tripoli offensive is unknown, the level of effort and coordination that the campaigns entailed demonstrates the priority and potential that the Kremlin places on weaponized diplomacy and information warfare in the contemporary era, even in peripheral conflicts like the Libyan civil war. These operations involved agencies, actors, and assets across the Russian national security landscape, working toward a common goal. Their relative success in Libya suggests that future Russian interventions in peripheral conflicts like Libya will also include robust attempts to combine diplomacy and information to achieve synergistic effects.
Chapter 5 – Tipping The Scale: The Russian Intervention In Libya and the US-Russian Military Balance In North Africa

The Kremlin’s successful expeditionary operations during the Libyan civil war from 2015 until 2020 were part of a broader effort to increase Russia’s military footprint in North Africa.\textsuperscript{469} Although Moscow largely departed North Africa when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russian leaders began to re-engage in the region during the early-2000s and took advantage of the opportunity that the Libyan civil war afforded to increase the Kremlin’s military influence and access in North Africa. Based on a net assessment of the US and Russia military balance in the region over a ten-year period from 2013 to 2022, the Kremlin’s successful strategy during the Libyan civil war, combined with other elements of its regional military engagement, tipped the military balance in North Africa away from the United States and toward Russia.

This assessment is based on significant asymmetries in the US-Russian military balance in North Africa. These asymmetries relate to American and Russian regional objectives, major arms transfers, combined military training exercises, access to military installations, and military interventions respectively. This assessment also discusses significant strengths and weakness in the respective US and Russian approaches, offers a hypothesis about the Kremlin’s perspective of the military balance, and identifies plausible scenarios that could significantly change the balance in the near-term. Most importantly, this

\textsuperscript{469} North Africa comprises the countries of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia
assessment shows that Moscow is poised to continue leveraging its advantage in the military balance to increase the Russian military’s access and influence throughout Africa and could also attempt to threaten NATO’s southern flank from positions in North Africa.

This assessment of the US-Russian military balance in North Africa focuses on traditional components of military force and engagement, i.e., components that directly relate the ability of the US and Russian militaries to conduct armed military operations in North Africa. Although Russian military leaders and theorists increasingly think about modern warfare as a multidimensional phenomenon that uses both military and non-military means, senior Russian military leaders still view the main content of warfare as preparing for and conducting armed military operations.\textsuperscript{470} This understanding reaffirms the centrality that hard-power military means and the ability to deploy those means have both for modern warfare and the military balance between Russia and the United States throughout the world. This is especially true in regions like North Africa where the Kremlin’s military objectives require the physical presence of Russian military or affiliated forces.

**Key Asymmetries in the US-Russian Military Balance in North Africa**

The US-Russian military balance in North Africa displayed five key asymmetries between 2013 and 2022 that weighted the military balance in favor of Russia. Of the five key asymmetries, four were in Russia’s favor. First, Russia

\textsuperscript{470} Gerasimov, “Vectors of Military Strategy Development.”
focused mainly on its great power ambitions during the ten-year period, whereas 
counterterrorism was the primary US military objective. Second, the value of 
military armament that Russia exported to the region was more than twice the 
value of what the United States exported. Third, Russia conducted only about 
half as many military training exercises with its North Africa partners as the 
United States conducted. The Russia military training exercises also tended to be 
of a lower quality. Fourth, Russia had access to more military installations than 
the United States by the end of the ten-year period. Finally, Russian military 
interventions in North Africa were more aggressive than those that the United 
States military conducted.

*Military Objectives: Russian Advantage…For Now*

The first key asymmetry in the US-Russian military balance in North Africa 
was a disparity between US and Russian military objectives between 2013 and 
2022. Whereas Russia’s renewed great power ambitions shaped its regional 
military objectives throughout the ten-year period, the United States focused 
principally—albeit not exclusively—on regional counterterrorism objectives as 
part of Washington’s wider global war on terrorism. Analyzing Russian and US 
military objectives in North Africa was an important component of assessing the 
overall military balance because each side’s objectives drove their respective 
strategic approaches during the ten-year period. If either of the state’s objectives 
were not oriented toward strategic competition with the other, then even an
internally well-executed approach would not maintain or improve that state’s position in the overall military balance.

North Africa was important to both Russian and US national security interests between 2013 and 2022 because of the region’s geostrategic location along NATO’s southern flank; proximity to the Mediterranean Sea and its vital sea lines of communication, including the Suez Canal in the east and the Strait of Gibraltar in the west; and substantial energy reserves in Algeria, Libya, and Egypt. North Africa also was an unstable region troubled by interstate rivalries and terrorist threats. North African leaders sought external assistance to address their security issues, and their desire for help provided openings for both Russian and US militaries to improve their respective regional positions.

As discussed in chapter two, Moscow’s renewed great power ambitions shaped its military objectives in North Africa. First, Moscow sought to reestablish its defense relations in North Africa, while weakening those of Europe and the United States. Moscow maintained defense relations as a great power throughout North Africa during the Cold War but those relationships collapsed with the Soviet Union in 1991. Moscow was working to rebuild these defense relations between 2013 and 2022 as part of its broader political objective to reassert its great power status. Second, great powers have great militaries, and great militaries are capable of projecting power where needed. To that end, Kremlin leaders have sought for many years to establish a military presence

along North Africa’s Mediterranean coast that would enable Russia to increase its military’s power projection into Africa, Europe, and beyond. Moscow’s search for military bases in North Africa between 2013 and 2022 focused on securing air bases in Libya and maritime ports in Algeria, Egypt, and/or Libya to expand Russia’s external network of bases beyond the Caucasus and Syria.\(^{472}\) Third, the Kremlin aimed to increase its regional arms trade. Moscow’s motivation to increase its regional arms exports were not focused simply on the economic benefits of the sales. Moscow also wanted to develop deeper defense relationships with regional partners, and arms sales provide a way to achieve that objective. Arms importers often request training and technical support for imported weaponry, which can provide Russian an opportunity to deploy military forces to North Africa at the request of host-nation governments.\(^{473}\)

In contrast to the Kremlin’s great power ambitions in North Africa, US regional military objectives between 2013 and 2022 focused primarily—albeit not exclusively—on preventing threats from emanating out of North Africa. Countering regional terrorist threats, stabilizing Libya, and stemming the flow of migration through North Africa into southern Europe have been among the top US military objectives in the region. Countering Russian influence in the region also has grown as a priority in recent years.\(^{474}\) Following US participation in the


\(^{473}\) “Russia Military Power,” 14–19.

2011 NATO operation that contributed to the overthrow of longtime Libyan
dictator Muammar Gaddafi, the US military has conducted counterterrorism
operations in Libya against both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Various other
US agencies also have attempted to help stabilize Libya and to contain the
second-order effects of the subsequent civil war, including stemming the flow of
migration and its attendant security risks into southern Europe. The US military
also has sought to reduce the magnitude of terrorist threats in Algeria, Morocco,
and Tunisia through training and security assistance to the respective host-nation
militaries.

The US military added countering Russian influence to its list of regional
military priorities in 2020 and then elevated the objective to the top of US regional
military priority in 2022. Public US military statements from 2020 to 2022
indicate that the US Africa Command—the American military command
responsible for US military operations in North Africa—has principally sought to
counter Russian influence in North Africa through counterterrorism support and

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"United States Africa Command 2021 Posture Statement to Congress" (Washington, DC, April
gen-townsendpdf; “United States Africa Command 2022 Posture Statement to Congress”
(Washington, DC, March 15, 2022), https://www.armed-
services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/AFRICOM%20FY23%20Posture%20Statement%20ISO
%20SASC%2015%20MAR%20Cleared.pdf.

475 “United States Africa Command: The First Ten Years” (Kelley Barracks, Stuttgart, Germany:
africa-command-the-first-ten-years.

476 Christopher M Blanchard, “Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy” (Congressional

477 Marina Ottaway, “American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism Is Not Enough,”
Viewpoints, no. 42 (n.d.): 2–3.

478 “United States Africa Command 2020 Posture Statement to Congress”; “United States Africa
Command 2022 Posture Statement to Congress.”
training to North African militaries. The logic behind this approach is that North African leaders will be less likely to build defense relationships with the Kremlin if they can procure high quality military assistance from Washington.

US support for African partners can help to counter the Kremlin’s influence by eliminating opportunities for Russian engagement. But such US support has a limited effect on Moscow’s more aggressive military operations, such as the Kremlin’s support for the Wagner Group during the Libyan civil war. The US military has also attempted to deal with these more aggressive Russian activities in ways that do not escalate conflict with Russia or threaten American lives. However, the effects of such limited US attempts have had limited effect on the overall military balance. For example, the commander of US Africa Command highlighted in a 2021 US congressional hearing that the command had widely publicized information about the Kremlin’s use of the Wagner Group in Libya, including declassified satellite imagery. The publicized information succeeded in drawing media reporting and public attention to Wagner’s increasing presence in Libya, but Moscow’s efforts continued, nonetheless. The commander of US Africa Command later testified in a 2022 US congressional hearing that the military command acted during 2021 to disrupt Russia’s goal of establishing a military foothold in Libya; however, the commander did not provide details during the hearing about the nature of the disruption. The command’s public website and social media accounts also did not report any related information.

480 “United States Africa Command 2022 Posture Statement to Congress.”
The above comparison between Russian and US military objectives in North Africa indicates that the United States has been slow to shift from prioritizing counterterrorism in the region to competing with Russia. Whereas Russia has viewed its objectives in North Africa from the perspective of renewed great power competition for many years, the United States publicly adopted a similar viewpoint only a few years ago. Additionally, counterterrorism priorities drove US military operations in North Africa between 2013 and 2022 in ways that have did posture the US military well to respond to aggressive Russian militarism in North Africa. In contrast, the Kremlin’s regional military objectives have allowed the Russian military to obtain a limited presence in North Africa along the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite Russia’s early lead in prioritizing great power competition with the United States in North Africa, the Kremlin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine will limit Russia’s continued ability to pursue great power competition in regions that are not vital to Russian national security interests, such as North Africa. While Russia dedicates its strategic effort to the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine, the United States can make up for lost time in North Africa.

Arms Transfers: Russian Advantage…For Now

The second key asymmetry in the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is that Russia has the advantage in arms transfers. Arms transfers are a key part of international defense diplomacy and the military balance in North Africa because arms transfers are about more than gaining financial revenue.
While the financial aspect of arms transfers certainly is appealing, state
governments also use arms transfers as an opportunity to deepen defense
relations and to conduct follow-on military activities, such as conducting weapons
training, executing joint training exercises, and negotiating basing agreements to
enable the associated training.

Russia was more involved in arms transfers to North Africa between 2012
and 2021 than the United States; data for 2022 is not yet available. This
assessment is based on trend indicator values from the Stockholm International
Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).\textsuperscript{481} Trend indicator values depict the volume of
major conventional weapons delivered from exporter to importer. These values
are based on the known production costs of the weapons, not the sales price of
arms transfers, nor are trend indicator values directly comparable with figures
such as military expenditures or equipment values. These latter figures vary in
ways over time that are inconsistent and make year-on-year comparisons
unreliable. SIPRI developed the trend indicator value as a common unit to
overcome these types of challenges and to allow comparisons of international
transfers of major conventional weapons over time.\textsuperscript{482}

Russia placed more emphasis on arms transfers to North Africa between
2012 and 2021 than the United States in real terms, in relative terms, and over
the ten-year period. In real terms, the Russian trend indicator value for arms
transfers to North Africa was 9.868 billion versus the American value of only

\textsuperscript{481} “Importer/Exporter TIV Tables,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed
\textsuperscript{482} “Sources and Methods,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed
4.299 billion—less than 44 percent of the Russian value. In relative terms, Russia transferred about 16.5 percent of its global total value of arms transfers to North Africa, whereas the United States transferred only about 4.4 percent of its global total. Russian arms transfers to North Africa also trended upward over the ten-year period, despite a downward trend in Russian global arms transfers during the same period. In contrast, American arms transfers to North Africa trended downward over the ten-year period, despite an upward trend in American global arms transfers during the same period. See figure 5.1 below. The top half of the graph depicts US global arms transfers with a solid dark blue line and Russian global arms transfers with a solid dark red line; associated exponential trendlines are depicted with dashed lines of the same colors. The bottom half of the graph
depicts US arms transfers to North Africa with a solid blue line and Russian arms transfers to North Africa with a solid red line; associated exponential trendlines are depicted with dashed lines of the same colors.

The asymmetry between US and Russian arms transfers to North Africa between 2012 and 2021 is shown in greater detail in figure 5.2 below. The Russian value generally exceeds the US value throughout the ten-year period, except in 2013, 2015, and 2021 when arms transfers from the United States to North Africa countries were slightly higher than those from Russia. Russian arms transfers also trended slightly upward over the ten-year period, whereas US arms transfers trended downward during the same period. Although there was a significant surge in Russian arms transfers in the middle of the ten-year period, the surge did not significantly change overall Russians trend.

![Figure 5.2: US & Russian Arms Transfers to North Africa, 2012-2021](image-url)
Looking at North African arms customers, Russia and the United States competed over Egypt between 2012 and 2021 but were on opposite sides of the Algeria-Morocco regional rivalry. However, Russian arms transfers were greater than US arms transfers in both cases. The trend indicator value for Russian arms transfers to Egypt was 3.584 billion versus 2.175 billion from the United States. Likewise, the trend indicator value for Russian transfers to Algeria was 6.248 billion versus 1.835 billion from the United States to Morocco. See table 5.1.

<table>
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<th>Libya</th>
<th>Morocco</th>
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<td>9</td>
<td>1,835</td>
<td>246</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5.1: US & Russian Arms Sales to North Africa Per Country, 2012-2021.* Values shown as SIPRI trend indicator values in billions.

Despite Russia’s advantage over the United States in arms transfers to North Africa between 2012 and 2021, this asymmetry is unlikely to continue over the next five years. The Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022 has consumed enormous quantities of materiel—including more than fifty percent of its operational tank fleet—which will force the Russian military to focus on rearming itself over the next five years instead of exporting arms on the global market. Western sanctions against Russia also have caused the Russian economy to contract, which will limit the availability of funds for arms development and procurement. The combination of these factors has forced Russia to start importing arms to meet its needs in Ukraine. Russia clearly is not able to export arms to the rest of the world if the Kremlin needs its armament production capacity to focus on the war in Ukraine. Although the United States
also has sent large stockpiles of materiel to aid Ukraine’s war effort, US arms deliveries to Ukraine have not diminished US stockpiles to the same degree that the war has reduced those in Russia.\textsuperscript{483}

The Kremlin’s protracted war in Ukraine also has demonstrated the shortcomings of Russian arms as compared to those from the West. Western arms have enabled Ukraine’s numerically smaller military to maintain its defense of Ukraine much longer than most had anticipated when the war began in early-2022. Some countries around the world are taking notice and are becoming increasingly reluctant to continue spending large amounts of money on demonstrably inferior Russian weapons.\textsuperscript{484}

\textbf{Military Training Exercises: US Advantage}

The third key asymmetry in the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is that the United States conducted a higher-volume of high-quality training exercises than Russia with North Africa partners between 2013 and 2022. Military training exercises were important to the military balance during the ten-year period because they signaled North African preferences toward working with either the United States or Russia, allowed the US and Russian militaries to demonstrate their capability to deploy military forces to North Africa, and enabled


both the US and Russian militaries to enhance their interoperability with North African partners.

The United States conducted a total of 21 training exercises with North African partners from 2013 to 2022 that involved at least 100 personnel, whereas Russia conducted only 12 such training exercises.\textsuperscript{485} Table 5.2 below and table 5.3 on the next page list the major Russian and US military training exercises that each country conducted with North African partners from 2013 and 2022. Each exercise is identified by its name; the number of domains in which military forces trained during the exercise, e.g., air, land, and sea; the type of exercise, e.g., bilateral or multilateral; the number of countries involved in the exercise; and a range of the number of personnel that participated in the exercise between 2013 and 2022. The years are listed in the column headings. An “X” in a column year indicates that the exercise was conducted that year. An “X” annotated with an asterisk indicates the first year that the associated exercise was conducted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Personnel</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>17</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>22</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RUS</td>
<td>Arrow of Friendship</td>
<td>Air</td>
<td>Bilateral (Egypt)</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bridge of Friendship</td>
<td>Sea</td>
<td>Bilateral (Egypt)</td>
<td>10 vessels</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defender of Friendship</td>
<td>Air</td>
<td>Bilateral (Egypt)</td>
<td>300 - 1000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X *</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desert Shield</td>
<td>Land</td>
<td>Bilateral (Algeria)</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vostok</td>
<td>Air/Land/Sea</td>
<td>Multilateral (17 total)</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Table 5.2: Russian Military Training Exercises With North African Countries, 2013-2022}

\textsuperscript{485} The references for these exercises are available in \textit{Appendix 4 – References for US & Russian Military Training Exercises With North African Partners, 2013-2022}. The references are grouped according to the exercises and listed in chronological order.
The US military training exercises were also of a higher quality than the Russian exercises, based on the number of participants involved and the number of domains in which the training occurred. The US training exercises typically trained military forces across multiple domains, e.g., air, land, and sea; always included multiple partners, from 9 to 21; and always included at least several hundred personnel, from 200-7800. The Russian training exercises in comparison tended to be of lower quality, i.e., the exercises typically trained forces in only one domain, almost all the exercises included only one partner—usually Egypt—and the exercises tended to include a much smaller number of personnel that those that the United State hosted, usually less than 100.

Although Algeria participated in Russia’s extremely large Vostok training exercise in 2022—the first African country ever to participate in the exercises—Vostok was an extreme outlier in comparison to the typical exercises that Russia conducted with its North African partners between 2013 and 2022. It is also important to note that the first iteration of each exercise that the United States conducted during the ten-year period began prior to 2013, whereas the Russian exercises did not begin until 2015.
The Russia military will likely remain behind the United States in terms of military training exercises over the next five years. Although Russia had begun to increase the quantity and quality of its training exercises with African partners from 2015 to 2022, this trend halted when Russia invaded Ukraine in early-2022. Notably, Egypt did not hold any of its usual training exercises with Russia during 2022. The only North African country that was willing to conduct joint military training exercises in 2022 was Algeria, which participated in the second iteration of exercise Desert Shield and made the long trip to join the Russian Vostok exercise for which Algeria’s participation almost certainly was an afterthought.

*Military Installations: Russian Advantage*

The fourth key asymmetry in the US-Russian military balance in North Africa between 2013 and 2022 was that the Russian military had more military installations than the United States in North Africa. Access to military installations was one of the most important components of the military balance over the ten-year period because it allowed either Russian or US military personnel in North Africa to conduct military operations and to support the onward movement of other military forces.

Russian access to military installations in North Africa increased between 2013 and 2022, whereas US access decreased. Table 5.4 on the next page provides information about military installations in North Africa to which either US or Russian forces had regular access at any point between 2013 and 2022. The Russian military signed a five-year airbase use agreement with the Egyptian
military in 2017. However, it is unclear if Moscow and Cairo renewed the agreement in 2022. The Kremlin also exploited the chaos of the Libyan civil war to gain unacknowledged military access to at least four airfields in Libya: Al-Jufra, Al-Khadim, Brak al-Shati, and Ghardabiya. Although the Kremlin denies any links to the private military company known as the Wagner Group that reportedly controls the airfields, there is sufficient evidence indicating Russian aircraft transiting through these locations to suggest that the Russian military could use these bases to deploy military forces quickly to North Africa if needed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Egypt</th>
<th>Libya</th>
<th>Tunisia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>MFO contingent since 1982</td>
<td>Use of air base near Bizerte since 2016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>Medical facility moved to Italy in 2019</td>
<td>Departed Misrata &amp; Tripoli in 2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Signed airbase use agreement in 2017</td>
<td>Al-Shati, Al-Jufra, Al-Khadim, &amp; Qardabiya airfields</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4: US & Russian Access To Military Installations In North Africa

In contrast to the increase in Russian military bases in North Africa, US military bases in the region decreased between 2013 and 2022. US military

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personnel operated from only one country, maybe two, in North Africa by the end of 2022. There has been a continent of US personnel deployed to Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula since 1982 in support of the Multinational Force and Observers peacekeeping mission. The US contingent comprised 452 personnel in 2022. Contingents from 12 other countries also supported the peacekeeping mission. US military personnel also began conducting counterterrorism operations in 2016 in Tunisia from an airbase near Bizerte. However, it is uncertain if the mission continued into 2022; the latest information confirming a US presence at Bizerte was from 2021. US military forces were previously deployed to two bases in Libya and to one additional installation in Egypt. The US military conducted counter-terrorism operations from the bases in Libya, and the US forces in Egypt worked at a medical facility. However, the United States closed its bases in Libya when the civil war escalated in early-2019, and US forces departed the Egyptian medical facility in 2019 because of security deficiencies.

The number of Russian military installations in North Africa will likely remain higher than US installations over the next five years. North African governments have been hesitant to make shared-use agreements with either the United States or Russia, and this dynamic is unlikely to change. Additionally, even if Egypt did not renew its airbase agreement with Russia in 2022, Moscow still retains access to at least four airfields in Libya. The Kremlin is unlikely to abandon those airfields because its military has been using them to enable operations locations such as the Central African Republic and Mali.494

Despite the higher quantity of Russian military installations in North Africa, the US military possesses the capability to mitigate the Kremlin’s military footprint in the region. The US military has a larger global network of military bases—including bases nearby in southern Europe and east Africa. The US military also has better expeditionary capabilities than the Russian military and could quickly deploy several thousand military personnel to North Africa if needed. Finally, the total number of Russian military or affiliated forces in North Africa in early-2023 ranged from about only 2,000 to 5,000 personnel spread across a variety of small sites that possessed defenses which would provide limited protection against sophisticated US conventional weapons.495


495 Al-Atrush and Pitel, “Russia Reduces Number of Syrian and Wagner Troops in Libya”; Kovalenko, “Four Risk Groups PMC ‘Wagner.’”
Military Interventions: Russian Advantage

The final key asymmetry in the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is the Russian military’s greater willingness to intervene in regional conflicts. Military interventions were an important part of the military balance between 2013 and 2022 because these interventions demonstrated the degree to which US or Russian leaders were willing to incur political and economic costs to achieve their military objectives. Since 2013, US forces have participated in two significant military interventions of varying durations in North Africa, both of which relate to Libya and predominantly used airpower to achieve their objectives. The first significant intervention was a counterterrorism operation that the United States conducted in Libya following the 2011 NATO-led removal of Gaddafi. Various terrorist groups—notably including militias affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—exploited the chaos in Libya that followed the toppling of Gaddafi’s government and established safe havens in the country. US military forces conducted about 550 airstrikes against these groups between 2012 and 2020.496 A small number of US special forces participated on the ground; however, their role primarily related to coordinating airstrikes with Libyan government forces and sharing intelligence.497 The US military reported that

these forces withdrew from Libya in 2019 in response to the escalation of the Libyan civil war.\footnote{498} In contrast to the US preference for airpower and the withdraw of its limited ground presence from Libya in 2019, the Kremlin increased its military presence in Libya during the same year. As discussed in chapter three, Russian leaders cooperated with a private military company known as the Wagner Group to covertly deploy up to 2,000 Russian mercenaries and 2,000 Syrian mercenaries to Libya. These mercenaries supported the Libyan National Army’s 2019 attempt to seize Tripoli and the army’s retrograde to eastern Libya after the offensive failed. The Russian military also deployed at least a dozen combat aircraft to Libya in support of the Wagner Group and its ground operations, conducting airstrikes and other combat operations.\footnote{499} The Russian military also conducted more than 330 transport flights into Libya during the Tripoli offensive, carrying mercenaries and up to 17,200 tons of supplies.\footnote{500} Finally, the Kremlin has continued to increase its military footprint in the Libya since end of the Tripoli offensive. Russia increased its military transport flights flying into Libya for several months following the offensive. The number of Russian-supplied forces deployed to locations across Libya—including Wagner and Syrian mercenaries—also increased to at least 5,000 in September 2020, up from about 4,000 in May.

\footnote{500} Nichols, “Russia Steps up Support for Private Military Contractor in Libya: U.N. Report.”
of the same year. Although some Wagner personnel redeployed from Libya to Ukraine in the spring of 2022, between 2,000 and 5,000 Wagner mercenaries and more than a dozen combat aircraft remained in Libya as of early 2023.

The Kremlin’s willingness to conduct air and ground combat operations in Libya contrasts with the US reliance on airpower in Libya and the withdrawal of US forces from the country in 2019. Although the US military conducted hundreds of airstrikes between 2013 and 2020, the US government did not deploy ground troops, preferring to avoid the risks associated with such deployments. However, Russian forces participated in both air and ground combat operations during the Tripoli offensive. The Kremlin used deniable contract personnel to mitigate the potential political risks of the intervention.

**US & Russian Strengths & Weaknesses**

The most significant strengths and weaknesses of the US approach toward achieving its military objectives in North Africa relate to the alignment between US military activities and policy goals, an alignment that produced mixed results between 2013 and 2022. The primary strength of the US approach is that it has prevented groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda from using North Africa as a sanctuary to conduct attacks against US interests. From this perspective, US arms transfers, military training exercises, basing

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502 Al-Atrush and Pitel, “Russia Reduces Number of Syrian and Wagner Troops in Libya.”
agreements, and limited US military interventions have enabled the US military to achieve its regional counterterrorism objectives at a relatively low cost.

The US approach also has displayed two significant weaknesses. First, although US counterterrorism operations in North Africa have been successful, they may not have been necessary if the United States and NATO had either refrained from enabling Gaddafi’s 2011 removal from power or planned differently for post-conflict Libya. US President Barack Obama said in a 2016 interview that the Libyan intervention did not work and that failing to plan for post-conflict Libya was probably the worst mistake of his presidency. 503 Although this is a controversial subject that goes beyond the scope of this research, it is difficult to disentangle Gaddafi’s ouster from the ensuring civil war, the increased regional instability, and the growth of terrorist groups in Libya. Second, the US focus on counterterrorism operations has not adequately accounted for Russia’s growing militarism in North Africa. Even though US leaders shifted their regional military objectives between 2013 and 2022 from countering terrorism to competing with Russia and China, the withdraw of the limited US presence in North Africa in 2019 contrasted with US policy goals to counter growing Russian influence. Rather than decreasing counterterrorism forces that are deployed to North Africa, the US approach could benefit from greater use of existing counterterrorism partnerships to increase US access and influence in the region.

The most significant strengths and weaknesses of the Russian approach toward achieving its military objectives in North Africa relate to the alignment between Russian military activities and policy goals. The primary strength of the Russian approach is that the Kremlin succeeded in growing its military footprint in North Africa at a relatively low cost. Russian military leaders successfully used the Wagner Group to gain a small foothold in Libya—including the deployment of thousands of proxy military forces and access to several small military bases—without many of the typical political costs associated with the foreign deployment of military personnel. US Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland described the Russian presence in Libya in 2020 as a game changer that reflected the Kremlin's low-risk and high-gain approach.\footnote{Paul Stronski, "Implausible Deniability: Russia’s Private Military Companies," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/02/implausible-deniability-russia-s-private-military-companies-pub-81954.}

The Russian approach in North Africa has also displayed at least one significant weakness. The Kremlin has not achieved the formal permanent basing rights that Russian leaders seek. Although some progress had been made in Egypt with the 2017 basing agreement the agreement between Moscow and Cairo was a co-use agreement, not a permanent basing solution. It is also unclear if Cairo renewed the agreement with Moscow at the end of 2022. Furthermore, Russia’s presence in Libya is a result of the UN-recognized government’s inability to control its territory. If the government eventually negotiates a power-sharing agreement with the rebel Libyan National Army—
unlikely in the short-term, but possible in the long-run—Moscow could lose access to its constellation of airfields in Libya.

**Russian Leaders’ View of the Military Balance**

The head of Russia’s contact group in Libya Lev Dengov summarized the Kremlin’s perspective of the US approach toward North Africa during a 2017 interview. Dengov said that “the United States stated some time ago that Libya is not a priority direction for them; they are occupying themselves with internal American politics, and have effectively handed over Libyan affairs to Italy, France, and even Algeria. At the moment, we cannot say for sure what the United States’ position is on this score, but the recent visit to London by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson for talks with his British colleagues suggests that efforts are being stepped up on this topic.”

Although Dengov’s remarks were specific to Libya, his opinion reflected how Russian leaders viewed overall US policy toward North Africa between 2013 and 2022: disengaged and ambiguous, but growing in importance.

Russian leaders have sought to exploit an ambiguous US policy toward North Africa to advance Moscow’s great power ambitions. As previously highlighted, Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to restore Russia to the former great power status of the Soviet Union. This overarching national strategic objective is driving Russian leaders to re-engage with countries that the Kremlin abandoned at the end of the Cold War, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia,

505 “Diplomat Hails Chechen Leader’s Role in Libyan Settlement.”
Libya, and Egypt. Based on the scope of Moscow’s military activities in North Africa, Russian leaders likely define the regional military balance in similar terms as those employed in this net assessment, focusing on arms transfers, military training exercises, military installations, and military interventions.

Moscow likely regards the permanent basing of Russian military personnel and equipment in North Africa as the primary metric for measuring the regional military balance. Although other forms of involvement can help to bolster the defense relationship between Moscow and its North African counterparts, signing and executing a permanent basing agreement represents the greatest degree of commitment from an African state. This is because most of the other military activities listed above primarily benefit the African state, whereas the establishment of a Russian military base on African soil—or, to a lesser degree, the signing of an agreement to allow the Russian military to use an African military base—primarily benefits Moscow, while also increasing the likelihood of damaged relations with the United States or European countries.

This assessment reflects the historic trajectory of Russia’s military relationship with Egypt, Moscow’s most advanced military relationship in North Africa. This relationship began in the early-1950s, primarily consisting of arms sales. Although Cairo balked for decades at advancing the military relationship to a strategic partnership, contemporary Egyptian leaders’ perception that US leaders had shifted their attention away from the Middle East prompted Cairo to upgrade its relationship with Moscow. Cairo signed an agreement with Moscow

in 2017 to allow Russian combat aircraft to use Egyptian bases. Leaders from the
two countries signed a Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation
Agreement in 2018. Finally, Egyptian military forces conducted their largest air

Despite Moscow’s relative success in Egypt, Russian leaders are probably
frustrated with their lack of progress elsewhere. Moscow has military cooperation
agreements of varying intensity with every North African country, and Russia’s
top two African arms importers are Algeria and Egypt.\footnote{Jakob Hedenskog, “Russia Is Stepping Up Its Military Cooperation In Africa” (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018), 1–4, \url{https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206604}.} However, the Egyptian
government is the only administration in North Africa to sign a military basing
agreement with Moscow, albeit a temporary one that may not have been
renewed at the end of 2022. Other North African governments have generally
engaged with Moscow only when they believe that doing so will not damage
existing relationships with the United States or European countries.\footnote{Pieter Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020” (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2021), 2, \url{https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020_v2.pdf}.} This
reluctance to develop stronger ties with Moscow has prevented the Kremlin from
translating its widespread military activities in North Africa into a network of
permanent military bases.\footnote{Wehrey and Weiss, “Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa,” 4.}

Russian leaders are likely to have two primary concerns about the military
balance with the United States in North Africa. First, Russian leaders probably
are concerned about the enduring nature of their military relationships in North Africa and Moscow’s future ability to leverage those relationships to achieve the Kremlin’s strategic objectives. North African leaders contribute to this concern because of their pragmatism and ability to use the rivalry between Russia and the United States to extract support from both sides without committing to either.\textsuperscript{511} This could result in a situation in which Russian investments in North Africa do not stimulate existing military relationships to progress beyond a transactional state. Even worse for the Kremlin, Russian investment may end up being wasted if courted African leaders choose to support the United States even after receiving significant support from Russia. Second, Russian leaders likely are concerned about the unpredictable nature of political power in North Africa and fear that US involvement in the region’s political order could cause unexpected transfers of power. Moscow maintains an abiding misperception that common people do not spontaneously revolt against their political authorities, and Putin has accused US leaders of fomenting the Arab Spring that began in late-2010. The turnover in autocratic rulers that resulted from the Arab Spring caused Putin to lose influence in the region when the ousted rulers departed power.\textsuperscript{512} In a similar way, Russian leaders almost certainly worry that they could lose some of their current influence in North Africa if another round of popular revolutions led to a revised line-up of North African rulers.

\textsuperscript{511} Wehrey and Weiss, 4.
\textsuperscript{512} Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s Growing Influence in North Africa.”
Plausible Future Scenarios That Could Alter the Military Balance

Three plausible scenarios that could change the US-Russian military balance in North Africa relate to the relatively low security capacity of North African military forces, chronic regional instability, and the Kremlin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A fourth, less-likely, scenario relates to the longstanding and escalating regional competition between Algeria and Morocco. Although there are other military-related developments that are more likely to occur than these four scenarios, such as the establishment of new arms deals or the start of new joint training exercises in the region, these latter sorts of developments would be insufficient to alter the regional military balance without accompanying follow-on changes to the presence of US and Russian forces in the region.

The first plausible scenario that could change the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is the emergence or worsening of a terrorist threat that prompts one or more of the governments in the region to request US or Russian military support. Governments across North Africa are already fighting numerous terrorist threats; however, unlike other governments in Africa, such as the Central African Republic, Mali, or Mozambique, North African governments have not yet requested that the US or Russian militaries deploy military trainers or combat personnel to the region to help fight terrorist groups. This dynamic could change if existing security problems worsen and compel one or more North African governments to request support from either the US or Russian military.

A second plausible scenario that could change the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is an unexpected military coup. Military coups have
occurred with relatively high frequency in Africa as compared to other regions of the world—more than 200 coups have occurred in Africa since 1950—and recent research suggests that African coups are on the rise as democratic governments struggle with their responses to various challenges, such as fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.513 If a coup occurred in North Africa, US and Russian military forces could come into direct or indirect confrontation if either country initiated, supported, or acted in opposition to such a military coup. As the Arab Spring demonstrated, unresolved grievances can quickly flare and provide Washington and Moscow justification to intervene with military force on the side of a respective partner or ally.

The third scenario that could change the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is the redeployment back to Russia or Ukraine of all Russia military and contract personnel deployed to Libya. Russia had between 2,000 and 5,000 total military or contract personnel deployed to Libya as of early-2023.514 Although some had departed Libya to support the Kremlin’s war against Ukraine, the vast majority remained in Libya. Further setbacks for the Russian military in Ukraine could force the Kremlin to recall all its military and contract personnel from Libya for operations in Ukraine.

The final scenario that could change the US-Russian military balance in North Africa is an increase in tensions between Algeria and Morocco. As noted

514 Al-Arush and Pitel, “Russia Reduces Number of Syrian and Wagner Troops in Libya.”
previously, Russia has a historical relationship with Algeria, including billions of dollars of arms sales, and the two countries conducted several joint training exercises between 2013 and 2022. In contrast, the United States has a strong relationship with Morocco, also including billions of dollars of arms sales, extensive security cooperation, and US designation of Morocco as a major non-NATO ally. These relationships put the United States and Russia on opposite sides of a long-standing regional rivalry. Algeria and Morocco have been at odds for decades following a short border war between the two countries in 1963.

Successive Algerian governments since then have supported an independence movement called the Polisario Front that seeks to control a region in Morocco called Western Sahara. The United States did not officially recognize either the Moroccan government’s claim or the Polisario Front’s claim to Western Sahara prior to 2020. However, US President Donald Trump announced in late-2020 that the United States had recognized the Moroccan government’s claim, a significant policy change that coincided with a Moroccan pledge to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel.

Tensions between Algeria and Morocco increased following Trump’s late-2020 announcement. The Polisario Front conducted more than 1,000 low-level attacks against Moroccan targets in 2021. These attacks prompted the Algerian government to cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in late-August and to

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issue a statement promising retaliation in early-November.\textsuperscript{517} In the midst of these escalating tensions, the Algerian military conducted its first-ever joint military training exercise with the Russian military in October 2021, and the US military conducted its annual Africa Lion exercise in Morocco with more than 7,800 participants, including a simulated attack on a pair of Russian-made surface-to-air missile systems.\textsuperscript{518} Although Morocco attempted to restore diplomatic ties with Algeria in 2022, the situation remains tense. Neither the United States nor Russia has publicly stated an intent to intervene in the Algeria-Morocco dispute. However, latent tensions could flare over the next five years and trigger a request from either Algeria or Morocco for increased support from Russia and the United States respectively.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Kremlin’s successful intervention in the Libyan civil war was part of a broader Russian effort to increase Moscow’s military presence across North Africa. Although Moscow had largely departed North Africa when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russian leaders began to reengage in the region during the early-2000s with a mindset oriented toward strategic competition with the


United States. Moscow’s main military goals were to rebuild its regional defense relations, to increase its regional arms trade, and to establish a military foothold along North Africa’s Mediterranean coast. In contrast, America’s regional military goals emphasized countering regional terrorist threats, stemming the flow of migration into southern Europe, and stabilizing Libya.

The different regional military objectives that Russia and the United States held in North Africa led to four important asymmetries in the military balance between 2013 and 2022. First, Russia exported more major arms than the United States to North Africa. These arms exports were an important part in restoring Russia’s regional defense relations and providing regional engagement opportunities for the Russian military. Second, the United States conducted a higher volume of high-quality military training exercises than Russian with North Africa partners. Although these military training exercises provided the United States important opportunities to conduct counterterrorism training with North Africa partners, the exercises did not posture the US military to counter Russia’s growing regional influence. Third, the Russian military gained access to more military installations than the United States in North Africa between 2013 and 2022. Whereas the United States reduced its military presence in the region over the ten-year period in response to deteriorating security conditions, the Kremlin took advantage of the worsening conditions to increase its military installation access. Finally, Russian leaders demonstrated a greater willingness than the United States to intervene in regional conflicts over the ten-year period, which allowed Moscow to gain access to strategic regional resources.
Although the US regional military strategy between 2013 and 2022 prevented terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda from using North Africa as a sanctuary to attack US interests, the US focus on counterterrorism operations did not prevent Russia from increasing its regional military footprint. Projecting forward until 2028, Moscow almost certainly will continue to leverage its advantage in the military balance to increase the Russian military’s access and influence throughout Africa and could also attempt to threaten NATO’s southern flank from positions in North Africa. Unless the Kremlin’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine causes Moscow’s to reduce the rather limited resources that it has dedicated to North Africa, Russia’s growing regional presence likely will increase competition with the United States for regional military partners, create challenges for Western military operations in and around North Africa, and enable Moscow’s southward push into Africa.
Chapter 6 – Conclusion & Implications

The Kremlin’s strategy in Libya between 2015 and mid-2020 relied on the weaponization of diplomacy, widespread overt and covert information operations, and the limited deployment of military force. These characteristics of Moscow’s intervention strongly reflect contemporary Russian thinking on the concepts of sovereign democracy, the strategy of limited actions, *gibridnaya voyna*, and non-linear warfare. Importantly, no single concept provides a comprehensive understanding of the Kremlin’s intervention. Instead, a combination of at least these four concepts is necessary to develop a wholistic understanding of the Kremlin’s intervention in Libya.

The Kremlin’s weaponization of diplomacy during the Libyan civil war included at least three lines of effort to manipulate Libya’s domestic political system and related international peace processes. The first line of effort relied on covert engagement with and support for Libya’s key powerbrokers to deepen their reliance on the Kremlin, to play their interests against each other, and to ensure that only Moscow would emerge victorious from the Libyan civil war. The second line of effort relied on overt bilateral engagements with at least 36 key Libyan and international stakeholders to cultivate Moscow’s image as a trusted third-party great power. The third line of effort focused on undermining multilateral peace processes to protect Russian interests in Libya.

The Kremlin’s overt information operations relied on Russian state-owned media agencies to portray Moscow to global audiences as a benevolent great
power that was engaged in a sincere effort to stabilize Libya. These media agencies communicated at least six prominent narratives. First, that Russia wanted peace in Libya. Second, that Russian leaders were engaged in a robust diplomatic campaign with a wide variety of international partners to make peace in Libya a reality. Third, that Russia nearly succeeded in January 2020 where the West had failed in brokering an enduring ceasefire in Libya. Fourth, that Russia supported the UN-backed peace process. Fifth, that NATO is a destabilizing force. Sixth, the Kremlin did not deploy mercenaries to support the Libyan National Army’s attempt to overthrow Tripoli.

Kremlin affiliates conducted covert information campaigns using prominent social media outlets—such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube—to spread narratives in support of the Kremlin’s interests. However, the covert campaigns focused on narratives that Moscow could not have communicated via its overt mass media without tarnishing Russia’s manufactured public image as a neutral, great power that was dedicated to restoring peace in Libya. The covert narratives emphasized support for Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, while denigrating the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Turkish and Qatari support for the Libyan government, and the UN-backed peace process. The covert disinformation operations also helped to amplify Russian state-owned media across the Libyan information space and to further erode Libya’s already broken socio-cultural cohesion.

The Kremlin bolstered its diplomatic and information operations in Libya with a limited deployment of military force to exploit Libyan National Army
commander Khalifa Haftar’s Tripoli offensive from early-2019 until mid-2020. The Kremlin did not want the offensive to occur, but when Haftar initiated the offensive without Moscow’s consent, Wagner affiliates developed a way to manipulate the offensive toward achieving Moscow’s policy objectives in Libya. The Wagner Group private military company marginally increased its support for the Libyan National Army during the offensive, which convinced Haftar that he had Moscow’s backing, while simultaneously exploiting the opportunity to gain control of key oil infrastructure and airfields under Libyan National Army control. From this perspective, Wagner’s covert support functioned as a poorly hidden prop in an information operation that convinced Haftar and the rest of world that he and Moscow were partners.

The Kremlin’s combination of informational, diplomatic, and military operations to achieve its objectives in Libya strongly reflected contemporary Russian thinking related to the concepts of sovereign democracy, the strategy of limited actions, *gibridnaya voyna*, and non-linear warfare. Importantly, no single concept provides a wholistic understanding of the Kremlin’s strategy during the Libyan civil war. Instead, a combination of at least four concepts is necessary. The concept of sovereign democracy provides an appropriate lens through which to understand the Kremlin’s diplomatic campaign, as well as some aspects of the information campaign. The concept of *gibridnaya voyna* provides vital perspective on the Kremlin’s information campaign, as well as the respective roles that the diplomatic and military campaigns played within the wider information campaign. Finally, the concepts of non-linear warfare and the
strategy of limited actions provide an apt description of the nature of the
Kremlin’s military campaign. Each of these concepts, their utility for describing
different aspects of the Kremlin’s intervention in Libya, and associated
implications are discussed below.

**Weaponized Diplomacy & Sovereign Democracy**

Russia’s weaponization of diplomacy during the Libyan civil war strongly
reflected Vladislav Surkov’s ideas about sovereign democracy both at the state-
and international-level. The manifestation of these ideas as part of an
expeditionary military operation is important in context of the increasing
importance that Russian military leaders and theorists have given non-military
elements in contemporary warfare. Although related discussions tend to focus on
the role of information operations in contemporary warfare, Russia’s
weaponization of diplomacy during the Libya civil war—in line with the concepts
of sovereign democracy—demonstrates that diplomacy also has the potential to
play a strong role in future expeditionary conflicts.

Moving forward, analysis of contemporary Russian warfare could benefit
from using Surkov’s ideas about sovereign democracy as a lens to understand
how the Kremlin is using diplomacy to enable its military operations. Particular
attention should be paid to how the Kremlin uses diplomacy to infiltrate the
political establishment of targets states, to play key leaders against each other
for the Kremlin’s benefit, and to undermine international peace processes that do
not respect Moscow’s perceived great power interests. Attention also could be
paid to how lessons learned from the Kremlin’s expeditionary operations inform adaptations in Russian domestic political control.

Russia Exports Sovereign Democracy to Libya

Russia’s domestic strategy in Libya strongly reflected Surkov’s ideas about sovereign democracy at the state-level. As introduced in chapter one, sovereign democracy at the state-level refers to a political system that has the façade of a democracy—including features such opposition political parties, debate, and elections—but is directed like an expansive political theatre by an autocratic regime.\(^{519}\) Rather than repressing dissent to maintain political control, sovereign democracy attempts to control all forms of political discourse and to infiltrate all the major political movements, exploiting them and playing them against each other to keep any opposition off-balance and confused.\(^{520}\) These methods allow the regime to maintain power through influence and manipulation rather than violence.

Moscow believed that stability in Libya required both the military power of Khalifa Haftar’s Libya National Army and the political legitimacy of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj’s UN-recognized government. The Kremlin initiated separate relationships with both Haftar and Sarraj around 2016 to infiltrate their organizations, to exploit them, and to play them against each other, and to keep them under Moscow’s control. As the war progressed, Russian leaders became

\(^{519}\) Gruyter, “The Wizard of the Kremlin.”
\(^{520}\) Pomerantsev, “Putin’s Rasputin”; Pomerantsev, Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible, 67.
increasingly skeptical that Haftar would honor Moscow’s interests if he ever assumed sole political control of Libya. To prevent Haftar from gaining too much power, the Kremlin attempted to keep him subordinate to a political leader that Moscow could control, ideally Sarraj because he was already at the head of the UN-recognized government. Moscow attempted to broker a deal between Haftar and Sarraj in mid-December 2017 that would have recognized Haftar as the official head of Libya’s military while keeping Sarraj in his position as the country’s political leader. However, the deal collapsed, and Russia began courting Muamar Gaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, in 2018 as a potential political leader instead of Sarraj. Although Saif did not have the international political legitimacy to rule Libya, the Kremlin began to support Saif’s presidential aspirations in early-2019 to help him obtain the formal legitimacy he lacked.

Russian leaders were candid in their public statements about their diplomatic endeavors, repeatedly stating that the Kremlin was working to build relationships with all sides of the Libyan conflict. However, Russian leaders’ public statements obscured their desire not simply to bring peace to Libya, but to ensure that any Libyan peace process undermined Western interests and favored Russia. Moscow did not want peace in Libya unless the Kremlin could control that peace. To that end, the Kremlin maintained its relationships with Sarraj, Haftar, and Saif, while also developing new relationships with additional Libyan leaders including Government of National Accord Chairman of the High Council of State Khalid al-Mishri; Speaker of the House of Representatives...
Aguila Saleh Issa; the leaders of the cities of Bani Walid, Misurata, Tarhuna, and Zintan; and the heads of the Amazigh, Toubou, and Tuareg tribes.\(^{521}\)

Moscow’s use of sovereign democracy in the Libyan theatre of war successfully postured the Kremlin to manage the conflict by early-2019 toward an outcome that favored Russian interests. Although the Kremlin had limited success in its attempts to control Sarraj, the Kremlin did successfully infiltrate Libya’s most powerful organizations, develop relations with their key leaders, and exploit their interests to Moscow’s benefit. Russian leaders built on these diplomatic successes in the second act of the Kremlin’s strategy of limited action that began in early-2019.

*Russia Exports Sovereign Democracy to the Global Stage*

Moscow’s international level diplomatic campaign from early-2019 to mid-2020 also strongly reflected Surkov’s ideas on sovereign democracy. As described in chapter one, sovereign democracy in international affairs seeks to ensure that Russia maintains a leading role among the most influential global powers. Russian leaders attempt to use this leading role to influence international affairs, as much as possible, in much the same way that Moscow directs Russian domestic politics. The Kremlin uses the interconnection of globalization as a primary point of entry to engage with and attempt to influence all sides of a given issue or conflict. These engagements primarily seek to protect Russian interests and to destabilize any state, organization, or international institution that does not

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\(^{521}\) Bychkov, “On the Situation in Libya.”
recognize Russia’s great power interests. Related purposes also include preventing the monopoly of one or two countries in any industry that is vital to Russian national security interest, pitting member states against each other in international organizations, like the United Nations or NATO, when the member states’ respective interests diverge, and obtaining advantage for a favored party against its opponents.

This abstract description of sovereign democracy in international affairs applies to the Kremlin’s Libya-focused, international diplomatic campaign at the international-level from early-2019 to mid-2020. Moscow abdicated its position amongst the leading global powers that were active in Libya when Russia abstained from the UN Security Council vote in March 2011, which authorized member states to take all necessary measures to protect civilians from Gaddafi’s regime. Moscow’s abdication prohibited Russia leaders from managing the subsequent conflict in Libya in a manner that favored Russian interests and enabled Western countries to advance their interests. Moscow viewed both developments as threats to its great power image and strategic interests.

As the Libyan civil war progressed, Russian leaders attempted to turn their previous weakness into a strength, using their 2011 abstention from the UN-authorized NATO mission to portray Moscow as a neutral third party that was ideally postured to lead international peace efforts and to achieve reconciliation between the warring Libyan parties. Russian leaders conducted diplomatic engagements under this pretense with at least 36 international actors between April 2019 and June 2020, including the African Union, the Arab League, the
European Union, and the United Nations, as well as Algeria, Brazil, Chad, China, Cyprus, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Iran, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Malta, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam.

The Kremlin’s widespread diplomatic campaign enabled Moscow to regain a leading role in the Libyan conflict and to reassert a measure of Russian influence over Libya, influence that had been completely lost in 2011. As Moscow developed its leadership role in the conflict, Russian leaders continued to engage with and to influence both sides of the Libyan conflict and their foreign backers, notably including Turkey, which became the Government of National Accord’s primary patron in late-2019. Although Russian leaders claimed to be acting on altruistic motives, their public statements did not match their private purposes. The Kremlin did not just want peace in Libya, the Kremlin also wanted to prevent the West from monopolizing Libya’s lucrative oil sector; to secure Russian oil and security interests in Libya; to obtain advantage for Russia’s preferred partners in international negotiations; to disrupt any international peace processes that did not respect Russia’s great power interests, such as the mid-January 2020 Berlin Conference and the subsequent UN Security Council resolution that endorsed the conference outcomes; and to pit member states against each other in the United Nations and NATO when their interests diverged.
Russian leaders’ application in Libya of Vladislav Surkov’s ideas about sovereign democracy would not have required—and did not indicate—that Surkov personally managed the Kremlin’s intervention in Libya. However, the manifestation of these ideas in the Kremlin’s Libya strategy does indicate that Russian leaders applied familiar practices from their domestic governance to an international situation: Libya. It is important to note that many Russian leaders have credited these centralized, authoritarian practices with Moscow’s success in pulling Russia out of the perceived Western-imposed chaos of the 1990s.

Moscow’s application of sovereign democracy in an international context is not surprising. Domestic political culture has influenced how states wage war for at least the last 100 years, particularly during the post-Cold War era. For example, US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq during the multi-decade global war on terrorism exhibited important aspects of US political culture, such as attempts to build democratic governance, safeguards against human rights violations, and relatively transparent military operations. Although both US campaigns exhibited their own shortcomings, a topic that is beyond the scope of this work, the United States sought during the multi-year military campaigns to work with local leaders in Afghanistan and Iraq to build democratic governments, attempted to conduct military operations within internationally-recognized rules of engagement to protect civilian populations from unnecessary suffering, sought to provide enemy combatants rights in accordance with the Geneva Conventions,
and also attempted to be transparent with the global community about the purpose, nature, and impact of US global counterterrorism operations.

The Kremlin’s application of sovereign democracy in international affairs also provided Moscow an opportunity to refine abroad a concept that it developed and is implementing at home. As the Kremlin intervenes in more conflict zones around the world, it will have new opportunities to test and refine related concepts. This refinement process will enable the Kremlin to increase its ability to manipulate Russia’s domestic political system while also generating lessons learned for future interventions around the globe.

**Information Operations & Gibridnaya Voyna**

Russian overt and covert information operations during the Libyan civil war strongly reflected prevailing views in contemporary Russian military thought about *gibridnaya voyna*. These characteristics included an emphasis on the use of subversion to change Libya’s geostrategic orientation; information as the central element of national power in the Kremlin’s campaign in Libya; a diverse range of belligerents, including state actors, non-state actors, militant groups, and private military companies; blurring between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of warfare in Libya; and an emphasis on simultaneous, distributed, and continuous operations throughout all dimensions of the Libyan conflict, including in remote theaters of operation, such as the virtual information space and the numerous international peace conferences in Europe.
The primary aim of the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war was to change Libya’s geostrategic orientation. Moscow wanted to pull Libya out of the West’s sphere of influence and back toward Russia. The Kremlin sought to achieve this turnabout in Libya’s geostrategic orientation through a strategy of subversion that focused on establishing external Russian control over Libya’s domestic political system and the international peace process; manipulating Libya’s electoral system to replace key Libyan government officials, such as Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, with other leaders that would be loyal to Russian interests, such as either Khalifa Haftar or Saif al-Islam Gaddafi; and perpetuating Libya’s instability through covert military support to Haftar’s Libya National Army.

Information was the central element in Moscow’s strategy. The Kremlin used its information campaign as the primary way to influence audiences both in Libya and throughout the world that Libya should shift its geostrategic orientation away from the West and toward Russia. As described in chapter four, Russia’s overt media campaign focused on communicating narratives that promoted Moscow’s image as a neutral, peace-loving great power that was working diligently with the international community to bring peace to Libya, an image that the Russian media contrasted with the West’s depiction as being solely responsible for the violence and instability that has plagued Libya since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising ousted Muamar Gaddafi.

The Kremlin based its overt information campaign on Moscow’s global diplomatic engagements to construct a metanarrative that only Russia could fix what the West had broken. As described in chapter four, Russian state-owned
media outlets RT, Sputnik, and TASS drew heavily on the Kremlin’s engagements with the leaders of at least 36 different international actors. The Russian outlets sought to convince global audiences that Russia was working for the good of Libya, while also denying any Western accusations that the Kremlin was destabilizing Libya with covert support to the Libyan National Army.

The Kremlin’s covert disinformation campaigns sought to support the overt media narratives about Russia’s positive role in Libya. As discussed in chapter four, the Kremlin used its various disinformation campaigns to spread narratives that Moscow could not have communicated via its overt mass media without tarnishing Russia’s manufactured public image as a neutral, great power that was dedicated to restoring peace in Libya through diplomatic means. The covert disinformation campaign narratives promoted Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, while denigrating the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Turkish and Qatari support for the Libyan government, and the UN-backed peace process. The covert disinformation campaigns also helped to amplify Russian state-owned media narratives across the Libyan information space about Moscow’s positive role in the war and served to further erode Libya’s already broken socio-cultural cohesion.

The Kremlin’s covert support for Haftar’s Libyan National Army also functioned as an information operation directly targeting Haftar. As described in chapter three, when Haftar initiated his offensive against Tripoli in early-2019, he attempted to instrumentalize Russian support to enable his ambitions in Libya. Although the Kremlin did not want Haftar’s offensive to occur, and when it did, did
not want the offensive to succeed, the Kremlin found a way to manipulate the ill-fated offensive to achieve Moscow’s objectives in Libya. Moscow supported Haftar’s offensive with a minimal amount of deniable, covert support. Not because the Kremlin was relying on a strategy of plausible deniability to strengthen Haftar, but because the Kremlin wanted to instrumentalize Haftar’s ambition, his poorly conceived operational plan, and his need for ground combat personnel and combat enablers.

The Kremlin succeeded in using its covert military support as a sort of propaganda of the deed to signal to Haftar that he had Moscow’s backing. Haftar accepted the covert support at face value and took on the role of a useful idiot in Moscow’s theatre of managed conflict. This allowed the Kremlin to increase its military footprint in Libya at Haftar’s request. When Haftar’s offensive began to collapse in early-2020, the Kremlin quickly redeployed its mercenary personnel to secure control of key airfields and oil facilities under Libyan National Army control. Moscow openly flouted the poorly kept secret that the Kremlin was backing Haftar as Russian combat aircraft flew to Libya from Russia in May and June 2020. After Haftar’s offensive collapsed, the Kremlin increased the number of its mercenaries in Libya and nearly doubled the number aircraft flights that were bringing supplies into the country. These increases enabled Wagner to establish formidable defenses at key locations in Libya that served to ensure that the Libyan National Army maintained control of eastern Libya. But, more

“An idea gets its credibility when its owner supports it with military, political, social, diplomatic, [and] economic achievements.”
- Evgeny Messner, 1960
importantly, Wagner’s expanding footprint enabled the Kremlin to seize control of key oil infrastructure and airfields throughout the country.

The Kremlin’s poorly concealed covert support for Haftar also served as an information operation that targeted the international community and bolstered Moscow’s role in the international peace process. Moscow’s support for Haftar signaled to the other global powers involved in the Libyan reconciliation process that peace could not be achieved without Russia’s presence and consent at the negotiating table. Despite Moscow’s public protestations to the contrary, the international community knew that the Kremlin was supporting Haftar and that the road to negotiations over the Tripoli offensive ran through Moscow.

As for the remaining key characteristics of *gibridnaya voyna*, the Libyan civil war was clearly a multi-sided conflict. Russia and the West both supported Haftar’s counterterrorism operations in eastern Libya and his efforts to secure and ensure the continued operation of oilfields throughout Libya. But Russia and the West simultaneously fell on opposite sides of Haftar’s Tripoli offensive. The Libyan civil war featured a diverse range of participants, including state actors, such as the UN-recognized Government of National Accord and the Turkish military’s intervention on Tripoli’s behalf; non-state actors such as the Libyan National Army; militant groups such as those that rallied behind the Government of National Accord to defend Tripoli in early-2019; and private military companies such as the Wagner Group. The civil war also featured simultaneous, distributed, and continuous diplomatic, informational, and military operations as highlighted throughout the preceding analysis. These included Moscow’s widespread
diplomatic campaigns throughout North Africa and Europe, Russia’s overt media campaigns that targeted audiences in the global information space, the Kremlin’s covert disinformation campaigns that targeted Libyan audiences, and military operations to obtain positions of advantage for Russian in Libya.

Additional Implications for Information Warfare

The Kremlin’s relative success in Libya has at least four additional important implications regarding Russian use of information in modern warfare. First, Moscow wants global audiences to perceive Russia as a benevolent and diplomatically active great power that is committed to playing a peaceful and constructive role in the UN world order. Moscow generally used overt media sources to portray Russia positively, while using its covert assets to support Russian proxies and to attack their opponents. Counter-messaging from the West would benefit from more emphasis on the extent to which Russian engagements around the world undermine peace and the existing global order.

Second, Moscow leverages information warfare to influence global perceptions on issues across the spectrum of Russian national security interests, rather than focusing solely on core security interests in eastern Europe. Although the Kremlin’s approach toward Libya was rudimentary and somewhat limited in scope, the relatively successful employment of overt and covert assets in Libya suggests that Russia could use similar tactics in other parts of the world as the Kremlin spreads its global military footprint. In response, US strategies to counter Russian advances in regions that are not of existential or vital concern for US
interests would benefit from similar information resource allocations. US information campaigns in these peripheral locations would benefit from not just countering Russian narratives, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to communicate positive narratives about US engagement in ways that resonate with local populations, lest Moscow gain the murky high ground in the great power struggle over the global information domain.

Third, Russia military operations can also function as information operations. From the outside, Haftar appeared to have Moscow’s backing as the Kremlin increased its covert military support to Haftar in the latter half of 2019. However, a behind-the-scenes look at the Kremlin’s perspective of Haftar, as described in chapter two, revealed a strained relationship. Russian leaders directed Haftar not to attack Tripoli and denied his initial requests for military support because they were unaware of his plans for the offensive. The Kremlin later chose to increase its covert support for Haftar, but not with the expectation that he would seize Tripoli. The Kremlin instead wanted to use that covert support to deepen Haftar’s reliance on Moscow and to increase Russian control over important oilfields and airfields under Haftar’s control.

The Kremlin’s poorly concealed covert support for Haftar also signaled to Western powers that Russia had become a key player in the conflict and was determined to protect its interests in Libya. Wagner’s presence on the ground in Libya became a stumbling block in the peace process. Western leaders became painfully aware that if they wanted to achieve peace in Libya, then they would
have to give Russia a seat at the table, negotiate with Russian leaders, and respect their interests.

The Kremlin’s other military operations since 2007 have also been used as information operations to send unmistakable messages to the West about Russia’s perceived areas of influence. Russian interventions in Georgia, Chechnya, Syria, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine all served to demonstrate to the West that Moscow has the capacity and willingness to conduct military operations in pursuit of its interests. In a similar manner, the Kremlin’s large-scale 2022 invasion of Ukraine seeks to send an unmistakable message to the world that Ukraine belongs to Russia. Although the West has committed billions of dollars of assistance to Ukraine, the West’s decision not to deploy its own military force to Ukraine communicates an ambiguous message in return. Information operations targeting the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine would benefit from communicating the West’s resolve to intervene militarily if required to prevent the success of Moscow’s invasion.

The idea that armed violence can be used as an information operation—rather than information operations simply being used to support armed violence—is not a new idea. Terrorism operates on this principle, often using high-profile attacks against targets with political symbolism to communicate messages to target audiences. This is a technique that international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State have used. In response, counterterrorism analysis has become very attuned to the idea that terrorists use armed violence as a tool of information warfare to influence domestic and
international audiences. In a similar manner, contemporary analysis of Russian warfare could benefit from approaching the Kremlin’s military operations with a similar perspective, looking beyond the immediate military value of an operation and considering the potential value that the armed violence has an information operation, the nature of any potential messages, and the likely audiences. This sort of analysis has immediate relevance to the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine that began in 2022, particularly to high profile conflicts such as the Battle for Bakhmut that took on importance as information operations that far exceeded their operational or tactical value.

*Exposing Russian Intervention May Work Toward Russia’s Favor*

Exposing Russian covert intervention may work in the Kremlin’s favor. As described in chapters two and three, Moscow had a difficult relationship with Libyan National Army commander Khalifa Haftar. Although the Kremlin began to support Haftar in 2015, it was overly simplistic to think of Haftar as little more than a Russian proxy by 2019. Russian leaders did not approve of Haftar’s Tripoli offensive, and Haftar conducted his own rudimentary information operations on several occasions to create the impression that Russia was more supportive of Haftar than was the case.

Western media and government sources exposed the Kremlin’s covert support for the Libyan National Army in 2019 and 2020 under the assumption that Russian leaders did not want the covert support to become public knowledge. Yet Russian leaders easily dismissed the reports as fake news and
even in-depth investigations, like those from the United Nations, that provided abundant evidence of Russia’s duplicity did not compel Russia to change its approach in Libya. The exposure instead reinforced the Kremlin’s message to Haftar that he had Moscow’s support and reinforced Haftar’s message to his opponents that they were fighting against the full weight of Russia’s foreign policy aims in Libya.

Exposing Russian covert support for Haftar also bolstered the Wagner Group’s reputation as a mysterious and potent arm of the Kremlin’s foreign policy, a reputation that is unraveling on the battlefields of eastern Ukraine. It is undeniable that Wagner contributed important combat enablers to the Libyan National Army’s Tripoli offensive. But Wagner’s ability to make contributions in a military campaign that was waged on both sides largely by unprofessional and poorly trained militias is not surprising.

Future Western attempts to undermine Russian covert support for its proxies in locations like Libya would benefit from sowing mistrust between the Kremlin and its partners, rather than conducting information operations that enhance the appearance of their relationship. There was already sufficient mistrust between the Kremlin and Haftar in Libya. Western information operations would have benefitted greatly from leveraging this mistrust to weaken and potentially break the relationship. This could be achieved by leaking and amplifying information about their mistrust, their mutual attempts to instrumentalize the other, and their self-seeking and disloyal behavior.
Western information operations targeting Russia and China would likewise benefit from greater effort to undermine, weaken, and sow mistrust between Moscow and Beijing. Russia and China have a complex and often tense relationship that contributes to strategic mistrust between the two countries’ leadership.\textsuperscript{522} However, prominent entities of the US Agency for Global Media— the US government agency tasked to conduct information operations in support of US foreign policy—tend to publish news articles that reinforce the strength of the Russia-China relationship. For example, a late-February 2023 *Voice of America* update about the war in Ukraine highlighted Beijing’s “no limits friendship” with Moscow.\textsuperscript{523} *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* similarly emphasized in a late-February 2023 article that China continued to maintain an “unholy alliance” with Russia.\textsuperscript{524} Finally, *Radio Free Asia* reported that Chinese and Russian joint patrols in the Sea of Japan, East China Sea, and the west Pacific ocean in early-December 2022 indicated the depth of China and Russia’s growing defense ties.\textsuperscript{525} Although these types of stories help to keep readers

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informed about an important part of the Russia-China relationship, they do not
tell the full story, nor do they help to undermine that relationship.

**Military Force, The Strategy of Limited Actions, & Non-Linear Warfare**

The Russian intervention in the Libyan civil war—particularly the military
campaign—strongly reflected Gerasimov’s strategy of limited actions and
provides important implications about the strategy of limited actions in practice.
As introduced in chapter one, the aim of the strategy limited actions, as
Gerasimov described, is to protect and to promote Russia’s national interests
beyond its borders using a self-sufficient task force based on the military branch
best suited for the mission.\(^\text{526}\) The strategy of limited actions relies on gaining
and maintaining information superiority, using capable command and control
systems, covertly deploying the necessary military and non-military forces,
providing comprehensive support to the deployed force, and coordinating all
military and non-military operations with partner forces at the deployed location.
Dmitry Rogozin’s dictionary of national security and military terms adds to
Gerasimov’s description, stating that limited action uses only the amount of
military force that is required to achieve Russian objectives while avoiding large-
scale confrontation with the enemy.\(^\text{527}\)

The Kremlin’s military campaign in Libya exhibited each of these
characteristics of the strategy of limited actions. Both the Russian military

\(^{526}\) Gerasimov, “Vectors of Military Strategy Development.”

contingent and the Wagner Group personnel were deployed to promote Russia interests in North Africa generally and Libya specifically. The Kremlin exerted effective command and control of the deployed Russian military personnel and the Wagner mercenaries, which was evident by the military’s refusal to provide assets for Haftar’s offensive that the Kremlin had not approved and also by Wagner’s rapid redeployment from the Tripoli battlefields when the Kremlin ordered. Both the Russian military contingent and the Wagner Group personnel in Libya were self-sufficient in terms of their deployed capabilities. Although Wagner repeatedly requested additional assets and equipment, the lack of those assets did not prohibit Wagner from accomplishing what the Kremlin wanted Wagner to accomplish. The Kremlin used an expansive air-bridge to provide the necessary logistic support to the deployed forces. Finally, the Russian military and mercenary personnel were well-integrated into the Libyan National Army offensive by late-2019.

*Non-Linear Warfare & Libya: Losing To Win*

The Kremlin’s intervention in the Libya civil war—particularly Moscow’s military campaign—also displayed all the key characteristics of Vladislav Surkov’s 2014 description of non-linear warfare. As introduced in chapter one, the distinctive characteristic of Surkov’s concept of non-liner warfare is that war is part of a larger process in which battlefield military victories are not necessarily the most important part. Additional important characteristics include the importance of information operations, fighting between coalitions comprised of
members with shifting allegiances, and the predominance of unmanned airpower in military operations.

First, Russia’s strategy used military power in a way that was not intended to achieve victory on the battlefields of Tripoli but instead was part of a larger process to secure the Kremlin’s strategic interests in Libya. As described in chapter three, the Kremlin’s covert support for the Libyan National Army during the Tripoli offensive was not intended to enable Haftar to seize Tripoli but rather was intended to increase Moscow’s power over Haftar and to enhance the Kremlin’s access to strategic airfields, oilfields, and ports under Libyan National Army control. The Kremlin’s strategy of losing to win was apparent when Russia increased its manpower, combat aircraft, and materiel in Libya during the months after Haftar’s offensive, rather than before.

Second, the Kremlin’s information campaign featured overt and covert information operations. As described in chapter four, the overt Russian information campaign aimed to promote Moscow’s image as a neutral, peace-loving great power that was working with the international community to bring peace to Libya, while denying the deployment of Russian covert support to Libya. The Russian media also regularly contrasted Russia with the West, which was regularly depicted as being solely responsible for the violence and instability in Libya since 2011. The Kremlin’s covert disinformation campaign simultaneously promoted Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, while denigrating the UN-recognized Government of National Accord, Turkish and Qatari support for the Libyan government, and the UN-backed peace process.
Third, Russia’s diplomatic campaign depended upon the Kremlin’s ability to shift its partnerships to whichever Libyan leader and international actors the Kremlin needed to cooperate to protect Russian interests. The Kremlin was simultaneously fighting alongside and posturing itself against Haftar; openly fighting against Turkish troops, while secretly negotiating with Ankara to divide the spoils of war; and participating in bilateral and multilateral peace processes while systematically working to undermine the same. The United States also oscillated between its support for the rebel Libyan National Army—due to its ability to counter terrorist threats from Islamic State and al-Qaeda—and the UN-recognized Government of National Accord.

Fourth, the Kremlin’s military campaign made extensive use of unmanned airpower during combat operations. As described in chapter two, the Kremlin covertly deployed relatively few ground troops to Libya in the form of mercenaries from the Russia private military company known as the Wagner Group. Although these mercenaries supported a larger contingent of Libyan National Army fighters on the Tripoli battlefields, the war was noteworthy for its heavily reliance on airpower, particularly unmanned aircraft that conducted nearly 1,000 airstrikes during the Tripoli offensive. The use of unmanned aircraft was so prolific during the fighting that UN Special Representative to Libya Ghassan Salame called the conflict “the largest drone war in the world.”

528 Interview with UN Special Representative for Libya Ghassan Salamé.
The Nature of Military Victory

The Kremlin’s counterintuitive use of military support for the Libyan National Army during the Tripoli offensive challenges Western viewpoints on the nature of military victory in battle. Whereas the dominant paradigm in contemporary Western warfare conceives of military victory in Clausewitzian terms, i.e., military victory in battle is required to achieve a war’s political objectives, the Kremlin used its military force in Libya quite differently. The Kremlin used its military campaign as an information operation targeting Haftar and a diplomatic tool against the international community. Even though Haftar’s Russian-enabled offensive against Tripoli failed, Moscow was still able to bolster its great power image, to pull Libya away from the West and back toward Russia, to strengthen Moscow’s military presence and diplomatic relationships in North Africa, to gain Russia a prominent role in the international peace process, to exacerbate tensions between NATO allies such as France and Turkey, to draw renewed attention to the migrant crisis that the 2011-NATO backed operation in Libya enabled, and to gained access to strategic oil infrastructure and airfields in Libya. It appears that the only part of the overall Libya campaign that Russia lost was the military battle.

Surkov’s observation is not new, but it is an idea that generally has challenged Western strategic thinking for decades. The US military defeated communist forces in most battles during the Vietnam War from 1954-1975, but the American government still did not achieve its political objective to prevent South Vietnam from falling to communism. The 1968 North Vietnamese Tet
Offensive was particularly noteworthy for the contrast between its operational-level military failure and its strategic-level political success. The US military likewise defeated Taliban forces in most battles during the Afghanistan War from 2001-2021, but the Afghan government eventually fell into Taliban hands when US forces departed the country in 2021. The Taliban’s willingness to continue fighting led to countless tactical defeats, but served to substantiate a key narrative of their information campaign that while “You [the Americans] have the watches. We [the Taliban] have the time.”

Combined Arms Warfare Remains Essential to Battlefield Victory

At the operational military level, the Kremlin’s intervention in the Libyan civil war demonstrated that even in a relatively rudimentary military conflict, fought mainly by unprofessional militia forces, combined arms warfare remains essential to achieve battlefield victory. Even though the Tripoli offensive featured widespread use of unmanned aircraft to strike ground targets, these aircraft were insufficient to enable either side to achieve a decisive victory. Each side’s growing air defense capability throughout the course of the Tripoli offensive eventually neutralized the benefits that the airpower provided.

The real breakthrough in the battle for Tripoli came from the electronic warfare systems that Turkey deployed in support of the Government of National Accord. Turkey’s deployment of the land-based KORAL electronic warfare

system enabled government-affiliated militias to deceive and jam the Libyan National Army’s Russian-made Pantsir-S1 air defense systesm, as discussed in chapter three. This left the Pantsirs vulnerable to airstrikes, often conducted with Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones, the same unmanned aircraft that the Pantsirs earlier shot down with ease before Turkey deployed the KORAL systems.

Russian air defense loses in Libya prompted the Russian military to improve the resilience of the Pantsir air defenses systems and the military’s overall approach to deploying air defense systems into combat. Russian state-owned corporation Rostec told TASS news in late-November 2021 that Rostec had successfully upgraded the Pantsir-S1’s ability to attack and defend against all types of unmanned aircraft, including strike drones, such as the Turkish Bayraktar TB2. The new Pantsir-S1M received new hypersonic surface-to-air missiles that increased the Pantsir’s range and other upgrades to improve the system’s jamming resistance, stealth, and rate of fire. A Rostec official told TASS that “we can confidently say that the Pantsir-S1M is the world’s least expensive counter-drone system.” The Kremlin has successfully used the upgraded Pantsir in Ukraine and has also deployed upgraded systems to Moscow in early-2023 to defend government buildings from possible Ukrainian attacks.

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532 “Russia’s Upgraded Pantsyr Anti-Aircraft Missile/Gun System Can Fight Any Strike Drones.”
The Future Of Russian Expeditionary Operations

The Kremlin successfully used its expeditionary intervention in the Libyan civil war—a conflict at the periphery of both US and Russian security interests—to advance Russia’s larger geopolitical competition with the United States. The relative success in Libya could embolden Russian efforts in other parts of the world, provided the Kremlin’s strategic focus on Ukraine does not drain the energy out of Russia’s expeditionary operations. As discussed in chapter two, Moscow wants to reestablish Russia’s great power status and is attempting to regain Russian influence in areas that Moscow abandoned at the end of the Cold War. As Russia returns to these areas, any lessons learned from the success of the Kremlin’s strategy in Libya could inform efforts elsewhere.

Moscow’s application in Libya of abstract concepts related to sovereign democracy, *gibridnaya voyna*, non-linear warfare, and the strategy of limited actions indicates the Kremlin’s ability to successfully adapt these concepts—whether deliberately or otherwise—to contexts outside of eastern Europe and the Levant. The Kremlin’s successful implementation of these concepts in Libya, in contrast to Moscow’s conventional use of military force that has occurred since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, suggests that the Kremlin is more likely to achieve success in peripheral conflicts if it pursues less overtly aggressive foreign policies that are in-line with its strategy of limited actions, rather than those that are associated with the large-scale deployment of conventional forces.
The Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine has other important implications for Russia’s ability to continue conducting expeditionary military operations in support of its peripheral interests around the globe. First, the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine will limit Russia’s ability to use arms transfers as a tool of international military diplomacy, something that has historically been a key component of Moscow’s strategy to expand its influence in peripheral areas. The Kremlin is struggling to continue arming its war effort in Ukraine and has begun to redirect resources away from international arms exports and towards supplying arms for the Russian military’s use in Ukraine. Although Russia remained the world’s second largest arm exporter during the five-year period from 2018 to 2022, Russia’s share of global arms exports declined by thirty-one percent as compared to the previous five-year period between 2013 and 2017. Russia also has a relatively low number of pending deliveries beyond 2022 for major arms such as combat aircraft, major warships, surface-to-air missile systems, tanks, artillery, and armored vehicles. Finally, Western sanctions are disrupting Russia’s ability to produce and export major arms.534

Second, the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine is reducing some countries’ willingness to conduct joint training exercises with Russian forces. Kyrgyzstan unilaterally cancelled the Collective Security Treaty Organization’s joint military exercise known as “Indestructible Brotherhood-2022” in early-October 2022.535

Although Algeria conducted at least a portion of exercise Desert Shield-2022 with Russian forces in a sparsely populated area of Algeria in mid-November 2022, Algerian government leaders later denied that the exercise occurred, likely in response to international criticism about Algeria’s relationship with Russia.536

Finally, the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine could reduce the ability of the Wagner Group private military company to engage in future peripheral conflicts. As introduced in chapter two, Wagner and its affiliates have enabled Russian foreign policy objectives in countries around the world for about a decade. These countries include the Central Africa Republic, Chad, Cuba, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Syria, and Venezuela.537 Other countries where Wagner may have operated, but evidence is inconclusive, include Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Yemen, and Zimbabwe.538 However, Wagner’s ability to continue enabling Russian foreign policy objectives throughout the world could decline due to the high casualties that Wagner has sustained in Ukraine and the growing tension between Wagner owner Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Kremlin.

Wagner’s high casualties in Ukraine could limit the group’s near-term ability to maintain its footprint in Libya and other locations. The US government

537 Sutherland, “Wagner Group Global Activities 2022.”
538 Sutherland, “Putin’s Mercenaries on Tour: Mapping the Wagner Group’s Global Activities.”
reported in mid-February 2023 that Wagner had suffered more than 30,000 casualties—including 9,000 dead—during the first year of fighting in Ukraine.\(^{539}\) Half of the deaths occurred in just two months between mid-December 2022 and mid-February 2023 because of intensified fighting for the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut. As a result of the war in Ukraine, Wagner redeployed several hundred mercenaries from Libya to Ukraine in early-2022, leaving between 2,000 and 5,000 Wagner mercenaries and about a dozen combat aircraft in Libya as of early 2023.\(^{540}\) However, up-to-date information about the extent to which the war in Ukraine has changed Wagner’s footprint in Libya or elsewhere is lacking. Furthermore, continued fighting in Ukraine—such as the long-awaited Ukrainian counteroffensive to retake portions of Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine—could prompt Wagner to redeploy even more forces from abroad and back to Ukraine than has already occurred.

Separately, recurrent tension between Wagner owner Yevgeny Prigozhin and Kremlin leaders—including Russian President Vladimir Putin—could decrease or terminate the Kremlin’s use of Wagner to achieve Moscow’s foreign policy objectives in peripheral locations like Libya. Tension between Prigozhin and the Kremlin over the war in Ukraine began at least as early as November 2022 when Prigozhin began publicly criticizing the Russian military’s failures in Ukraine while extolling Wagner for its successes. Prigozhin also began trying


\(^{540}\) Al-Atrush and Pitel, “Russia Reduces Number of Syrian and Wagner Troops in Libya”; Erteima, ”1,300 Wagner Mercenaries Sent from Libya to Help Russian Forces in Ukraine”; Kovalenko, “Four Risk Groups PMC ‘Wagner.’”
around the same time to increase his political profile in Russia—particularly amongst pro-war Russian nationalists—and began seeking control of a Russian political party in early-2023.\textsuperscript{541} Prigozhin’s political aspirations and his criticism of the Russian military in Ukraine caused a falling out between him and the Kremlin between late-2022 and early-2023.\textsuperscript{542} Although the Russian military’s failed winter offensive in Ukraine allowed Prigozhin to begin rebuilding his relationship with the Kremlin in mid-April 2023, there is no guarantee that the rocky relationship between Prigozhin and the Kremlin will continue to improve as the war in Ukraine drags on.\textsuperscript{543}

Further deterioration in the Kremlin’s relationship with Wagner could prompt Moscow to use a different Russian private military company to achieve Russian foreign policy objectives in peripheral locations like Libya. Although Wagner has become the most well-known Russian private military company, there are others that could take Wagner’s place over time, including several that the Russian government has allowed to form over the last year in response to the


Kremlin’s military requirements in Ukraine. These private military companies include Convoy, numerous organizations like the Sudoplatov Volunteer Battalion, and an organization created by oil giant Gazprom Neft, which would be ideally suited to guard oil infrastructure in places like Libya.544

Replacing Wagner’s expeditionary deployments in peripheral locations with a different private military company could cause turmoil that would be detrimental to Russian interests and beneficial to US interests if properly leveraged. For example, US information operations could highlight the transition and the introduction of a new company with less-trained personnel as a security threat to the governments that Wagner is currently supporting. US efforts to counter Russian influence also would benefit from ensuring that any new private military companies that replace Wagner receive similar sanctions that already apply to Wagner.

In countries where Russian expeditionary operations remain Wagner-led, US and Western strategies to counter Russian influence would benefit from increased information operations communicating information about the rift between Prigozhin and the Kremlin, as well as information emphasizing the Kremlin’s desire to replace Wagner. Such information operations could provide regular updates on Prigozhin’s criticisms of the Kremlin—particularly any

individuals that Prigozhin mentions by name—Prigozhin’s growing political ambitions, and potential threats that his ambitions pose to the security of Putin’s regime. US officials and their partners could regularly include discussions about these issues in their talking points when discussing the war in Ukraine. Finally, US and Western engagements will Russian leaders, although severely restrained as of early-2023, could also include these issues as regular talking points to keep the tension at the forefront of the Kremlin’s concerns. The bottom line is that US information operations would benefit from heaping coal on this fire as long as possible, not only to degrade the Kremlin’s relationship with Wagner in Ukraine, but also to degrade the Kremlin’s support for Wagner’s expeditionary operations in peripheral locations. Otherwise, Wagner could remain the Kremlin’s tool of choice for future Russian interventions.
Appendix 1 – Kremlin Denials Of Russian Presence In Libya

Russian state news agencies RT, Sputnik, and TASS amplified statements from Kremlin officials that Russia had not deployed military force to Libya. Furthermore, the news agencies may have coordinated their efforts in an attempt to bolster the denials’ plausibility. These agencies collectively published at least 24 articles with either near identical or similar wording covering senior Russian officials’ denials at key points during the war. These officials included President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Boghadnov, and Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Talking points from these officials claimed that Russia was not supporting either side of the Libyan civil war; that reports of Russian mercenaries in Libya were fake news based on unsubstantiated rumors to discredit the Kremlin’s positive policy toward Libya; that any Russian mercenaries in Libya did not represent the Russian state nor receive financial support from Moscow; that any Russian equipment in Libya was left-over from the Cold War; and that Russia was working with both sides of the conflict to bring peace to Libya, in contrast to NATO’s role in bringing war to Libya.

Side-by-side comparisons of the similar RT, Sputnik, and TASS news articles are shown below. Each excerpt begins with the report’s title in italics. The excerpts are color-coded to show the similarities between the paired reports; any wording in black was not shared between the paired reports. Note the strong similarities in the titles, content selection, and word choice.
Putin Denial 1: Sputnik and TASS published very similar reports of Putin telling Italian leaders in Rome on 4 July 2019 that Russia did not want to get involved in the Libyan civil war.

Sputnik - Russia Should Not Be Key Contributor To Libyan Crisis Settlement. Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday that he believes Russia is not a country that should make a key contribution to peaceful settlement in Libya, but Moscow will not steer clear of participation in the process. “I don’t think that Russia is obliged to make a decisive contribution to the settlement... We are not trying to stay away, but we do not want to dive deep into this problem,” Putin said at a news conference following talks with the Italian leadership in Rome...545

TASS - Russia Is Not Obliged To Make Decisive Contribution Into Libyan Settlement. Russia is not obliged to make a decisive contribution to the settlement of the situation in Libya...Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday after talks with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte..."I don’t think Russia must make any decisive contribution to the settlement..." adding that Moscow is not seeking to dodge participation in the normalization process. "We are not seeking to dodge it but we don’t want to dive into this problem," he noted.546

Putin Denial 2: Sputnik and TASS published near identical reports of a 11 January 2020 press conference in which Putin claimed that any mercenaries in Libya did not represent Russia.

Sputnik – Putin Says If Russian Mercenaries Fight in Libya They Do Not Represent Moscow. President Vladimir Putin said on Saturday that even if Russian citizens are currently fighting there, they do not represent Moscow. "If there are Russian citizens there, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state and do not receive money from the Russian state," Putin said at a press conference, following his meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.547

TASS – Possible Russian Mercenaries In Libya Do Not Represent Interests Of Moscow. President Vladimir Putin has said that in case Russian nationals are present in Libya as mercenaries, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state. "If there are Russian citizens there, they do not represent the interests of the Russian state and do not receive any money from the Russian state," Putin said at a news conference after the Russian-German talks.548

545 “Russia Should Not Be Key Contributor to Libyan Crisis Settlement,” Sputnik, July 4, 2019, Nexis Uni.
546 “Russia Is Not Obliged to Make Decisive Contribution into Libyan Settlement - Putin,”
547 “Putin Says If Russian Mercenaries Fight in Libya They Do Not Represent Moscow,” Sputnik, January 11, 2020, Nexis Uni.
548 “Possible Russian Mercenaries in Libya Do Not Represent Interests of Moscow – Putin.”
Lavrov Denial 1: Sputnik and TASS published near identical reports of Lavrov’s claims during a 6 April 2019 press conference that Russia was not supporting either side of the Libyan war.

*Sputnik* – *Russia Opposes Attempts To Pin Blame On Any Party To Conflict In Libya.* Russia is against appointing those responsible for the crisis in Libya...Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Saturday. "We advocate that there should be no attempts to unilaterally appoint those responsible. The reason for the Libyan crisis is what NATO members did to this country in 2011. It’s been since then that it has become a ruined state, let’s call things by their proper names, and into the black hole through which terrorists and illegal smuggling of weapons go to the south, and the illegal migration flow to the north..." Russia has never put and does not put bets on any particular side of the conflict in Libya, Lavrov stressed. "We never tried to bet on someone. And I am convinced that this is exactly the way to act in the present case," he said. According to Lavrov, Moscow is in contact with all Libyan political forces, supports them all and sends them the same signals. "We, like Egypt, want the Libyans themselves to determine their fate and begin an inclusive, businesslike dialogue without any artificial deadlines imposed on them from outside and without attempts to rush Libyans against their will."

*TASS - Russia Opposed To Assigning Blame In Libyan Crisis.* Russia is opposed to unilaterally apportioning blame in the Libyan crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Saturday..."We are opposed to attempts to apportion blame unilaterally." According to Russia’s top diplomat, the cause of the Libyan crisis lies in NATO’s actions in 2011. He stressed that, since then, Libya has become a destroyed state and a ‘black hole’ for terrorists, arms trafficking and illegal migrant flows. "It is very difficult to move forward without understanding the underlying causes," he went on to say. "Just like Egypt, we would like Libyans themselves to determine their fate and begin an inclusive, businesslike dialogue without any artificial deadlines imposed on them from outside and without attempts to rush Libyans against their will." According to Lavrov, Russia maintains contacts with all Libyan parties. "We welcomed contacts between Libyan National Army Commander Khalifa Haftar and head of the Government of National Accord Fayez al-Sarraj," he said. "During our contacts with all Libyan political forces, we send them the same signals, and we have never tried to bank on anyone. I am certain this is the way one should act in this case."

549 “Russia Opposes Attempts to Pin Blame on Any Party to Conflict in Libya,” *Sputnik*, April 6, 2019, Nexis Uni.

550 “Russia Opposed to Assigning Blame in Libyan Crisis.”
Lavrov Denial 2: Sputnik and TASS published very similar reports on 6 December 2019 about Lavrov dismissing western claims of Russian mercenaries in Libya as rumors. Sputnik published an additional corresponding report on the same day in which Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov repeated the same talking points, rejecting claims of Russian private military companies in Libya as bogus stories.

Sputnik - Lavrov Dismisses Rumors of Alleged Presence of "Russian Mercenaries" in Libya. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Friday dismissed media reports of alleged presence of "Russian mercenaries" in Libya as rumors…"As for the rumors that are being spread by our American colleagues, I wonder why when soldiers that officially serve in NATO countries' armies appear in different parts of the world, including in the Mediterranean and Syria, despite the fact that no one invited them, why does no one ask questions about them? However, whenever something happens, Bellingcat or some other non-government structures immediately start publishing materials saying that Russia is doing something wrong," the minister concluded.551

TASS – Lavrov Slams Allegations About "Russian Mercenaries" In Libya As Rumors. Allegations about Russian military presence in Libya are nothing else but rumors, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Friday…"As for the rumors spread by our American counterparts, [they] for some reason appear somehow around the world, elsewhere. If we speak about the Mediterranean, let us take Syria. How many are there service members from NATO countries' armies who have not been invited there?" Lavrov said at the Mediterranean Dialogues international conference. "However, as soon as something happens somewhere, some sort of Bellingcat or any other non-governmental organization would provide materials that Russia is doing something wrong somewhere."552

552 “Lavrov Slams Allegations about ‘Russian Mercenaries’ in Libya as Rumors,” TASS, December 6, 2019, Nexis Uni.
**Bogdanov Denial 1:** Sputnik and TASS published very similar reports of Bogdanov’s comments to reporters on 15 February 2020 that the Kremlin was not involved in the Libyan civil war.

*Sputnik – Moscow Rebuts Erdogan’s Claims About Russian Private Military Companies Operating In Libya.*

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s allegations that Moscow at an official level facilitates the Libyan war through Russian private military companies operating in the North African country are not true, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said on Saturday. “This does not correspond to reality and the real state of affairs…”

**TASS - Erdogan’s Words About Russia’s Alleged "Command" Over Libya Conflict Untrue.**

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s claims that Russia’s top brass allegedly rule the Libya conflict are far from reality, Russian Presidential Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov told reporters on Saturday. "It is far from the real state of affairs.”

**Bogdanov Denial 2:** Bogdanov countered on 9 June 2020 claims that Russia had sent military equipment to Libya, according to Sputnik and TASS.

*Sputnik – Arms Long in Use in Libya Are Misrepresented as Recent Deliveries From Russia- Bogdanov.*

Military equipment that has long been in use in Libya is passed off as recent deliveries from Russia, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov has said... "We see many invalid data and intended falsifications regarding military products. For example, the equipment that has been long in use in Libya, is misrepresented as recent deliveries from Russia," Bogdanov said in an interview with Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram.

**TASS – Russian Diplomat Refutes Reports Of Military Supplies To Libya.**

Some sources seek to make it look like the military equipment that Libya has had for a long time is part of recent shipments, Russian Special Presidential Envoy for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov said in an interview with Egypt’s Al-Ahram newspaper on Tuesday. "There is a large amount of false information and fabricated reports about military goods. In particular, the equipment that has been in use in Libya for a long time is being passed off as part of new Russian shipments.”

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554 “Erdogan’s Words about Russia’s Alleged ‘Command’ over Libya Conflict Untrue,” TASS, February 15, 2020, Nexis Uni.
555 “Arms Long in Use in Libya Are Misrepresented as Recent Deliveries From Russia,” Sputnik, June 9, 2020, Nexis Uni.
556 “Russian Diplomat Refutes Reports of Military Supplies to Libya,” TASS, June 9, 2020, Nexis Uni.
Bogdanov Denial 3: Sputnik and TASS published nearly identical reports of Bogdanov’s comments to reporters on 9 June 2020 that information about Wagner’s presence in Libya was based on fake data and dubious sources to discredit Russia’s Libya policy.

Sputnik – Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Refutes Claims of Wagner Group’s Presence in Libya. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov has refuted claims of Wagner Group's presence in Libya and participation in fighting on the side of the Libyan National Army, stressing that these claims are largely based on fabricated data and are aimed at discrediting Russia. "The information about Wagner Group staffers’ presence in Libya and participation in military operations on the side of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army — which is spread by a range of foreign sources, including the US Department of the State — is mostly based on fabricated data and is aimed at discrediting Russia’s policy on Libya. Such claims are based on dubious sources, which are directly interested in supporting Haftar's opponents," Bogdanov said. "The authenticity of a whole range of 'facts' cannot be proven. Many claims, especially those related to the mentioned Russian citizens, are just unfounded. People allegedly fighting in Libya have not in fact left our country. It should be noted that the lists have been copied from Ukraine's notorious Myrotvorets database…"

TASS – Claims On Wagner Group’s Presence In Libya Based On Fabricated Facts – Russian Diplomat. The claims that members of the Wagner Group private military company are present in Libya are based on fabricated data, Russian...Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said.... "Information spread by some foreign sources, including the US State Department, that the Wagner Group’s members are present in Libya and participate in combat actions on the side of the Libyan National Army of Khalifa Haftar, largely relies on fabricated data and is aimed at discrediting Russia’s policy on Libya," Bogdanov said. "Such claims are often based on doubtful sources, which have direct interest in supporting Haftar's opponents. It's impossible to prove the credibility of a whole number of facts," Bogdanov said. "A lot of data, especially concerning the above mentioned Russian citizens, are simply unfounded. In fact, people, who are allegedly fighting in Libya, did not leave our country. It’s noteworthy that the lists were copied from the odious Ukrainian database Mirotvorets," the high-ranking diplomat said. 558

557 “Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Refutes Claims of Wagner Group’s Presence in Libya,” Sputnik, June 8, 2020, Nexis Uni.
Peskov Denial 1: Sputnik and TASS published nearly identical reports of Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov’s claim from a 5 April 2019 press conference during which he said that Moscow was not participating in Libya’s civil war.

Sputnik – Kremlin Says Closely Following Situation In Libya, Warns Against New Bloodshed. The Kremlin is monitoring the situation in Libya and believes that it is of paramount importance to prevent a new bloodshed in the country, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Friday. "We are closely monitoring the situation in Libya. Of course, we believe that the main thing is that no actions lead to a renewed bloodshed. We also consider it necessary to further continue all possible efforts to resolve the situation by peaceful political means," the spokesman said. The spokesman also reaffirmed that Russia was not involved in the situation in any way. "Moscow does not participate in it in any way," Peskov added, answering to the question whether Moscow would support Khalifa Haftar, the chief of the Libyan National Army, currently advancing upon Tripoli. Al-Arabiya television reported on Thursday that Haftar had ordered his troops to launch an offensive on Tripoli… Following these reports, the head of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, Fayez Sarraj, in turn, has ordered that force should be used if necessary.559

TASS – Kremlin Keeping A Close Eye On Events In Libya, Calls For Peaceful Solution To Crisis. Moscow is closely watching the developments unfolding in Libya and believes that a peaceful, political settlement is the sole way to resolve the situation, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday. "We are watching the developments in Libya very closely," Peskov stressed. "Without a doubt, we believe that it is essential that any actions must not lead to renewed bloodshed. We also deem it necessary to continue all possible efforts to fully settle the situation through peaceful, political means," the Kremlin spokesman said. Commenting on the actions by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the Kremlin spokesman said: "Moscow is not participating in this in any way…" On April 4, Haftar announced the launch of an offensive on Tripoli. Meanwhile, Sarraj ordered all military units subordinate to him to brace for a defensive operation.560

559 "Kremlin Says Closely Following Situation in Libya, Warns Against New Bloodshed," Sputnik, April 5, 2019, Nexis Uni.
Peskov Denial 2: Sputnik and TASS published nearly identical reports of Peskov's 27 November 2019 claim that reports about Russia using the Wagner Group in Libya were fake news. RT published a corresponding article the same day that expanded on Peskov’s narrative.

Sputnik – Kremlin Rejects Claims That Private Military Companies Destabilize Situation In Libya. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has rejected claims of destabilization of the situation in Libya by private military companies as bogus stories. US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker has recently said that Russia’s alleged "military inference" threatens "Libya's peace, security and stability." He has also called on Europe to impose sanctions on Russia's Wagner Group private military company. "You know, we hear all the time accusations that some military companies are operating across the world and nearly deciding fates of different countries or destabilizing the situation. The same statement claims that some military companies destabilize the situation in Libya. In this case, we can just say that very many countries do not have a moral right to discuss destabilization of the situation in Libya, after they have in fact destroyed the country through their steps violating the international law," Peskov told reporters when asked whether the Kremlin will provide any reaction. "These are all bogus stories, and we are calling for taking it as such," Peskov stressed.

TASS – Kremlin Bashes US Claims Of Russia’s Destabilizing Role In Libya As Fake News. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov has slammed Washington’s accusations that Russia is "destabilizing" Libya by its alleged "military presence" as fake news. "All this is definitely fake news and here we urge [everyone] to treat it this way," Peskov told reporters, commenting on a statement made by David Schenker, the State Department's Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern affairs. "They keep throwing around accusations that some sort of military companies are operating around the world and deciding the fate of different countries or destabilizing the situation there," Peskov said. "There are many countries that have no right at all to talk about the destabilized state of Libya after what they have done, because in actual fact, they destroyed this country through their actions, which violated international law," he stressed. Schenker claimed on Tuesday that Russia’s alleged military presence is "incredibly destabilizing" the situation in the North African country. The State Department top official said Washington had urged countries to slap sanctions on the Wagner Group.

562 “Kremlin Bashes US Claims of Russia's Destabilizing Role in Libya as Fake News.”
Peskov Denial 3: Sputnik and TASS published very similar reports of Peskov’s claim on 26 December 2019 that Russia wanted to find a peaceful settlement to the war. He also criticized the Turkish president’s plan to deploy troops in support of the Libyan government as foreign interference that would not help to end the conflict.

Sputnik – Foreign Interference Will Not Contribute to Libya Crisis Settlement. Moscow believes that third nations' interference in the situation in Libya will not promote crisis settlement, but welcomes any effort to contribute to easing tensions, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday... "As for the situation in Libya, it obviously raises common concerns, including in our country. We have repeatedly made Russia’s stand clear. Russia is interested in the quickest settlement of the conflict in Libya, in putting end to the bloodshed there. We believe that any interference by a third nation in the situation there is unlikely to promote settlement, but any attempt by a third nation to assist problem solution and help conflicting parties to achieve a solution is always welcomed. The Russian Federation welcomes international effort toward settlement," Peskov told reporters, when asked whether Erdogan’s statement could aggravate the situation in the North African nation. The spokesman added that mercenaries from different countries were acting on Libyan territory as a result of destructive actions by "certain nations", aimed at undermining Libya’s nationhood.563

TASS – Kremlin Opposes Foreign Interference In Libya’s Affairs, Welcomes Efforts To Resolve Crisis. Foreign interference won’t help resolve the situation in Libya but efforts to facilitate the search for a solution are welcome, Russian Presidential Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters. "As for the situation in Libya, it definitely causes much concern, and we, too, are concerned. We have repeatedly reiterated that Russia is interested in finding a peaceful solution to the Libyan crisis as soon as possible in order to end the bloodshed," the Kremlin spokesman pointed out. When commenting on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s plans to send troops to Libya, Peskov said: "We believe that foreign interference will hardly help settle the situation but any activities to facilitate efforts to resolve the conflict and help the parties to find a solution are always welcome. Russia can only welcome international efforts," he emphasized...Peskov noted that "in fact, Libya has turned into a shelter for mercenaries from a number of countries, as well as for terrorists." "All this is the result of the well-known actions of some well-known countries, which were aimed at destroying Libya’s statehood," the Kremlin spokesman emphasized.564

564 “Kremlin Opposes Foreign Interference in Libya’s Affairs, Welcomes Efforts to Resolve Crisis,” TASS, December 26, 2019, Nexis Uni.
**Peskov Denial 4**: Sputnik and TASS published near identical reports covering Peskov’s claim on 17 February 2020 that Putin had not ordered or deployed Russian troops to Libya.

*Sputnik – Putin Did Not Send Russian Troops To Libya. Russian President Vladimir Putin did not send any troops to Libya, there have been no decrees about that, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday. Journalists asked the Kremlin spokesman if Putin had sent troops to Libya because of reports about a recent burial of a Russian soldier who allegedly died in Libya. "No, Vladimir Putin, as the commander-in-chief of the Russian Armed Forces, did not send troops to Libya, did not issue any decrees about that," Peskov told reporters. When asked for explanation of fatalities, Peskov said, "There are no Russian troops in Libya."*565  

*TASS – Russian President Vladimir Putin Neither Sent Russian Troops To Libya Nor Issued Any Orders On That Score. Russian President Vladimir Putin neither sent Russian troops to Libya nor issued any orders on that score, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Monday. "Vladimir Putin, the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, has neither deployed forces to Libya nor issued any orders on that score," Peskov said.*566

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566 “Kremlin Stresses Russia Has No Forces in Libya.”
References for US & Russian military training exercises with North African partners between 2013 and 2022 that included at least 100 personnel are listed below. The references are grouped according to the exercise and listed in chronological order.


**African Lion**


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2021: “African Lion 21 exercise begins with 7,800 troops in Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal,” US Africa Command, 7 June 2021,

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**Bright Star**

2013: Steve Holland and Jeff Mason, “Obama cancels military exercises, condemns violence in Egypt,” Reuters, 15 August 2013,


**Phoenix Express**

2013: “Mediterranean Countries, US Set Out Phoenix Express Exercise’s Agenda,” Naval Today, 14 February 2013,


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Arrow of Friendship


Bridge of Friendship


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Desert Shield (2021 Iteration In North Ossetia Was Unnamed)


Vostok


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