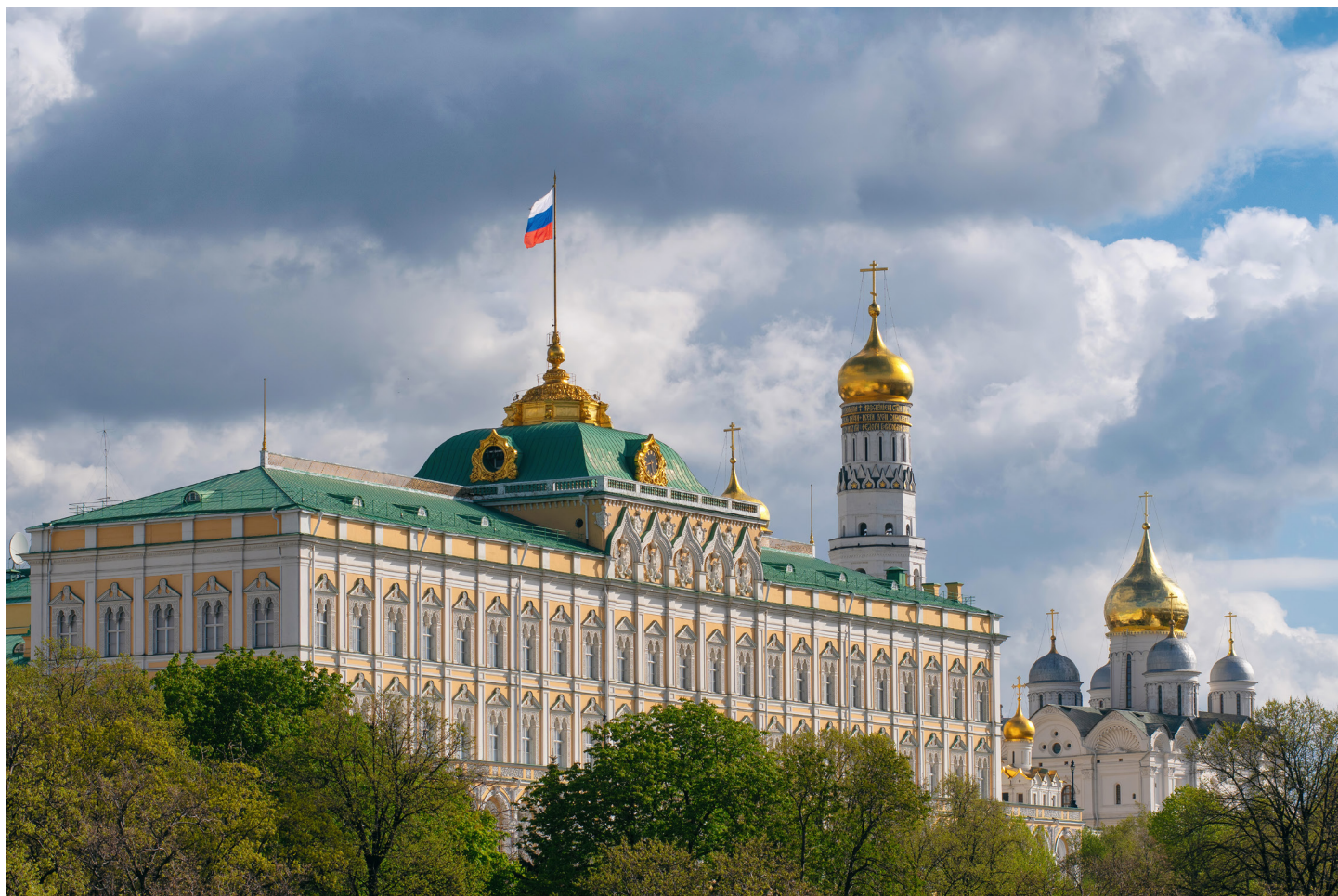




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Russia's Near-Term Power Projection Capacity: Constrained, but Opportunistic

Assessing the Nexus in Moscow's Posture in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe

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Key Takeaways

- **Russia's war against Ukraine is the primary factor shaping the Kremlin's military posture and power projection capacity over the next three to five years.** The conflict remains the principal driver of force allocation, force regeneration, industrial production, and readiness requirements, all of which reinforce Moscow's prioritization of national defense, the "near abroad," and deterrence requirements vis-à-vis NATO.
- **Russia's defining challenge is not a lack of global ambition, but growing constraints on its ability to translate strategic objectives into sustained military power in multiple theaters simultaneously.** Wartime pressures have exposed the limits of the country's expeditionary model and widened the gap between Russian ambition and available military capacity.
- **Russia's reduced footprint in Syria highlights the vulnerability of its power projection model.** The loss of Syria as a stable regional hub, combined with Black Sea contestation, restrictions on access through the Straits,¹ and uncertainty surrounding future basing arrangements, has reduced Russia's ability to sustain high-end military operations in the Mediterranean and wider MENA region.
- **Russia is unlikely to restore a substantial expeditionary military posture in MENA in the medium term.** It is instead likely to shift further toward asymmetric tools, selective access, and transactional partnerships while prioritizing force regeneration and requirements linked to Ukraine and NATO's northeastern flank.
- **Reduced conventional capacity does not necessarily translate into a reduced threat potential for Europe and the United States.** As Moscow adapts to a more constrained strategic environment, it is likely to rely increasingly on nuclear coercion, asymmetric tools, and selective military risk-taking, creating continued challenges for European and transatlantic security and increasing the risks of both vertical and horizontal escalation.

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Executive Summary

This is the third and final paper in a three-part series examining the relationship, over the next three to five years, between Russia's military posture in Europe and its reduced footprint in Syria, and by extension, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The first paper outlined the strategic connections among Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean, while the second explored Russia's evolving position in MENA and regional actors' hedging strategies in a more competitive and uncertain regional order. Building on these analyses, this paper assesses what recent developments reveal about Russia's military power projection capacity, strategic prioritization, and force allocation under wartime pressure and resource constraint. It uses the Europe–MENA nexus as a lens to evaluate broader trends in Russian military decision-making.

The paper's central finding is that Russia's war against Ukraine is the primary factor shaping the Kremlin's military posture and power projection capacity over the next three to five years. In an increasingly constrained strategic environment, Ukraine remains the principal driver of Russian force allocation and regeneration, industrial output, force and readiness requirements, compelling Moscow to prioritize national defense, the war effort, the “near abroad”, and deterrence requirements vis-à-vis NATO before sustained extra-regional military projection. Russia's doctrine and strategic culture continues to emphasize global reach, but wartime pressures have exposed the limits of the country's expeditionary model and widened the gap between Moscow's ambitions and its ability to sustain military power in multiple theaters simultaneously.

The collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria reinforced these constraints by degrading Russia's most important regional hub. This development, combined with a contested Black Sea environment, restrictions on access through the Straits, and uncertainty about future access, has reduced Russia's ability to sustain high-end military operations across the wider MENA region and highlighted Moscow's dependence on access, forward basing, and logistics for power projection.

Russia is consequently unlikely to restore a substantial expeditionary military posture in MENA in the medium term. Even in a frozen-conflict scenario in Ukraine, Moscow is more likely to prioritize force regeneration, military-industrial production, air and missile defense, drones, and force posture requirements linked to Ukraine and NATO's northeastern flank than reinvest heavily in southern deployments. Reduced military capacity, however, does not equate to strategic disengagement. Russia remains adaptive and continues to preserve access, partnerships, and strategic flexibility across MENA. While this paper focuses on military posture and power projection, Moscow is increasingly likely to rely on asymmetric tools, selective access arrangements, transactional partnerships, and other lower-cost mechanisms to maintain influence, leverage regional access and relationships, and challenge European and transatlantic security interests despite a reduced military footprint in MENA.

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Introduction

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024 and Russia's resulting loss of a key regional ally was an inflection point for Moscow's military reach and flexibility in the Middle East and Africa (MENA) and an indicator of its reduced capacity to project power globally. Prior to then, Syria served as Russia's key hub linking the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the wider MENA region, enabling its sustained military presence and influence. The Kremlin's Tartus and Hmeimim military bases in Syria long served as critical southern anchors, enabling Russian naval sustainment, air operations, logistics, and broader military operations.² Such forward basing and access to ports, repair facilities, and logistical nodes remain essential to Moscow's ability to conduct largescale maritime operations far from its territory. Today, Russia's regional military presence and operational flexibility across the MENA region have been substantially reduced, constraining its ability to project power and sustain military operations into Africa, the Levant, and the Mediterranean as a whole. Its reduced foothold disrupts force projection and sustainment, and highlights the structural constraints of Russia's expeditionary model.

This paper assesses what recent developments reveal about Russia's strategic prioritization under conditions of wartime pressure, resource constraints, and intensifying geopolitical competition. The Kremlin's reduced footprint in Syria is at least partially a symptom of Russia's prioritization of its operations supporting its full-scale war against Ukraine.

Building on key findings of two prior GMF research publications on Russian operations across the Black-Sea-Mediterranean nexus and the hedging strategies of Middle Eastern actors toward Moscow, this analysis offers a broader assessment of the country's military and hard power projection capacity over the next three to five years, focusing on its military posture in Europe while briefly accounting for specific economic constraints and connected gray-zone activities.

Drawing on Russian strategic documents and military writings, open source intelligence and literature, anonymized expert interviews, and stakeholder consultation,³ this analysis examines the effect of changes in Russia's military footprint in Syria and MENA on the Kremlin's posture in Europe and the extent to which Moscow's evolving force structure reveals broader trends in Russian strategic thinking.

Section I offers insights into Russia's ambitions and stresses the disconnect between doctrinal priorities and implementation realities. It also addresses Russia's strategic prioritization of theaters and approaches to achieving its objectives, highlighting how Moscow's increased focus on national defense, Ukraine, and its immediate neighborhood is limiting military capacity in other regions, while an evolving strategic environment and Russia's integrated deterrence approach increase the potential for horizontal escalation. Section II assesses key factors impacting Russia's future military power projection capacity to achieve its priorities. Section III provides a high-level assessment of Russia's future capacity and likely areas of focus over the next three to five years, and the conditions that will shape them.

I. Russian Ambition

Russia's strategy documents and official doctrine should be read primarily as statements of ambition, priorities, and signaling rather than as realistic assessments of the country's ability to achieve its goals under current conditions. Russia's grand strategy is grounded in the belief that it is a "hereditary Great Power" entitled to a sphere of influence⁴ that operates from a position of structural disadvantage vis-à-vis the West given a geography

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that compounds the country's vulnerability. Moscow seeks to offset this through its pursuit of "strategic depth" and "buffer zones".⁵ This logic is captured in the concept of "active defense," which combines defensive political intent with proactive and often preemptive operational approaches.⁶

As analysts highlight, post-Soviet Russia has struggled to translate strategy into defense planning and to fill the gap between ambition and implementation.⁷ This is particularly evident in the maritime domain, where doctrinal aspirations calling for a larger global presence contrast sharply with the unique challenges faced by the Russian navy since 2022. The challenges include reduced access abroad, constraints on critical shipbuilding components, and broad impacts from the war in Ukraine, including limits on transit through the closure of the Straits to warships entering the Black Sea during times of conflict.⁸ Critics have consistently noted that Russia structurally lacks the ability to achieve its stated goals.⁹

Moscow's strategic priorities and grand strategy

Russian doctrine and past activities reflect a hierarchy of priorities. Defensive capability and regime stability top the agenda, followed by the "near abroad".¹⁰ Russian military planners also focus attention on the country's economic modernization and industrial capacity.¹¹ Power projection beyond the immediate European theater remains important, but on more selective and constrained terms. That can be viewed as tertiary priority in this context.

Russia's latest National Security Strategy from 2021 reflects this hierarchy, identifying Western dominance, NATO's military posture near Russia's borders, and US-backed missile defense as principal threats, while integrating external engagement—including the protection of Russian "national interests and citizens" abroad—into a broader security framework.¹² Russian military writing, as of late 2024, reinforces these priorities, emphasizing that Moscow sees itself locked in a long-term confrontation with the West while focused on enhancing a comprehensive deterrence posture, hardening military infrastructure, adapting forces for precision strike warfare, and better positioning military assets to confront a perceived NATO threat.¹³

Russia portrays the West and NATO as a unified, aggressive, and expansionist power that seeks offensive positions on the country's western flank as "a springboard for deliberately projecting the potential for conflict against [Russia's] state and allies".¹⁴ Russian military analysts consequently argue that it is necessary to develop a "military security system [that] corresponds to the emerging military-political and strategic situation, currently defined by a crisis confrontation between the Russian Federation and Western countries".¹⁵ In actuality, Russia is manufacturing the crisis between it and NATO for its own ends, as it seeks to establish its own sphere of influence.¹⁶ These themes also reflect a consistent Russian concern that Western capabilities could degrade its forces and command structures early in a confrontation¹⁷ and point toward a state preparing for conflict with a peer adversary such as the United States or NATO.¹⁸

This perceived conventional vulnerability also shapes Russia's nuclear posture. Moscow's military doctrine embeds nuclear weapons within a broader concept of "strategic deterrence," which integrates nuclear, conventional, and non-military instruments across domains to deter adversaries and manage escalation across the conflict spectrum.¹⁹

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Within this framework, Russian doctrinal and analytical writing places sustained emphasis on counterforce vulnerability. Western integration of precision strike capabilities, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), missile defense, and nuclear systems is assessed as creating the potential for a disarming or degrading attack early in a conflict.²⁰ At the same time, improvements in theater-level air and missile defense, especially in Europe, raise doubts about the reliability of limited nuclear strikes as effective coercive instruments.²¹

Taken together, these dynamics complicate earlier Russian concepts of flexible or “dosed” nuclear use, as Sidharth Kaushal and Darya Dolzikova, senior research fellows at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) argue.²² Where escalation outcomes are uncertain and survivability is in doubt, calibrated escalation becomes more difficult to sustain and may incentivize earlier or less controlled use tied to preserving deterrent survivability.²³ The Kremlin’s nuclear doctrine updates demonstrate this shift. The 2020 “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence” codified conditions for nuclear use, including attacks on critical infrastructure and threats to the existence of the state, formalizing previously ambiguous thresholds.²⁴ The 2024 update further expanded these conditions to include aggression against Belarus within the Union State framework, attacks on Russian forces deployed outside national territory, and large-scale aerospace attacks.²⁵ Beyond this declarative policy, Russia has emphasized survivability through posture, including mobility, dispersal, and forward positioning, such as mobile systems and submarine deployments, to complicate adversary targeting and circumvent missile defense architecture.²⁶ These additions broaden both the geographic and operational scope of potential escalation scenarios while increasing uncertainty regarding thresholds for nuclear use.

Operational experience in Ukraine has largely reinforced, rather than altered, Russian threat perceptions.²⁷ Russian assessments continue to emphasize Western ISR and air defense superiority, confirming preexisting concerns about escalation control and conventional inferiority.²⁸ At the same time, constraints on Western weapons stocks—driven by operations in Ukraine and the Middle East—and the pace at which the United States, Europe, and Russia field air defenses and countervailing strike capabilities may shape this balance going forward.²⁹

Pro-Kremlin outlets have also intensified criticism and coercive rhetoric of what they describe as Western nuclear “expansion” toward Russia’s borders in the wake of UK and French decisions to extend their nuclear cooperation among them³⁰ and with other European allies.³¹ In response, Russian strategists have suggested expanding their countries’ missile deployments in Kaliningrad and Belarus while warning that states hosting nuclear-related capabilities could become “targets for a retaliatory strike.”³²

These developments underscore a growing tension in Russia’s nuclear posture. It continues to rely on an integrated deterrence framework while increasingly questioning the feasibility of escalation control. The result is a strategy that prioritizes survivability, forward posture, and coercive signaling, but reduces the plausibility of calibrated nuclear use—particularly in a regional conflict with NATO.

Geographically, the latest maritime doctrine from 2022 highlights ambitions in the Arctic, Mediterranean, and other strategic regions.³³ However, these ambitions exceed available capacity under wartime conditions. In practice, Russia’s engagement in more distant regions such as the Middle East and Africa is increasingly selective. It supports diplomatic leverage, access, and influence but remains subordinate to priorities involving NATO.³⁴ This pattern reflects a broader logic: Proximity drives priority. When forced to choose, Russia commits greater resources and accepts higher risk in theaters close to home, while relying on opportunistic engagement and lower-cost tools in more distant regions.³⁵

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Therefore, under current conditions, the primary focus remains on national defense, the war against Ukraine, and Russia's western flank. External engagements persist but are increasingly managed through selective access, partnerships, and limited military presence.³⁶ Ukraine remains the central priority in Russian military planning, shaping resource allocation, force structure, and strategic focus. The war absorbs most of Russian manpower, industrial output, and operational attention. It also frames its broader confrontation with NATO.³⁷ Ukraine, therefore, defines the limits of Russia's broader ambition.³⁸

While the preoccupation with operations in Ukraine limit Russia's focus on other theaters, the evolution of the conflict and dynamics that connect it to other regions reinforce the importance of a global lens and capacity. Russia generally views regions including the Black Sea and Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea and the Arctic as strategically connected.³⁹ Developments in the Middle East further underscore these linkages. Shocks such as the fall of the Assad regime and the 2025-2026 US-Israeli airstrikes on Iran have demonstrated the impact of Middle East dynamics on Russia's strategic calculus and adaptations to it.

Defense industrial links, and economic and security cooperation connect Russia and Ukraine to other actors and regions. In Russia's case, these links include economic and, in some cases, defense industrial and security cooperation with China, Iran, North Korea, and selective engagement with "hedging" actors, such as Egypt, India,⁴⁰ Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates.⁴¹ Critically, Russia's MENA engagement is transactional in nature, emphasizing energy partnerships, arms transfers, and sanctions-evasion networks. The deepening of Moscow-Tehran ties,⁴² encompassing defense-industrial cooperation, intelligence sharing, and military training, and Russia's alleged intelligence support for Iranian strikes across the Gulf⁴³, has negatively impacted the relationships between Moscow and other regional powers, making improved cooperation less likely. The war involving Iran has, therefore, crystallized for Gulf states the strategic linkage between developments in the Middle East and Russia's war in Ukraine, creating a window of opportunity for Kyiv. Beyond boosting its cooperation with NATO and EU countries, Ukraine is leveraging its rapid-innovation cycles to support and share its counter-unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) technological and operational expertise with the Gulf countries.⁴⁴

The spillover risk from regional conflicts in Ukraine and Iran is growing. This is demonstrated by targeting outside the immediate conflict zone, including Ukraine's strikes against Russia's shadow fleet in the Mediterranean Sea,⁴⁵ and NATO's interception of three ballistic missiles launched from Iran.⁴⁶ In addition, Russian nuclear posture and strategy, which is increasingly shaped by eroding arms control frameworks, integrated nuclear and conventional capabilities, and heightened signaling, could raise the potential for a more unpredictable vertical and horizontal escalation environment.⁴⁷

II. Russia's Capacity

Beyond ambition, strategic intent, and the will and skill to implement it operationally, Russian power projection capacity depends on three key factors: capabilities, force composition and posture, and access to overseas bases and key theaters. All these depend on economic factors and available financial resources.

As the war in Ukraine progresses, the Russian domestic economy faces mounting pressure, although these difficulties should not be mistaken for imminent collapse. Russia's economic growth has slowed, inflation remains high, and the federal budget has been running a deficit of roughly 2.6% of GDP for 2025, all of which pose challenges for the country's financial institutions managing the economy.⁴⁸ Much of Russia's economic activity is now tied to military expenditure. Total military spending reached almost 16 trillion rubles in 2025,

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equivalent to 7.5% of GDP and 38% of total planned government spending.⁴⁹ SIPRI Associate Senior Fellow Julian Cooper notes that, as of March 2026, most non-defense industrial sectors are contracting, while defense-related production continues to expand but at a slower pace than in 2024 and the first half of 2025.⁵⁰

Oil and gas revenue, which plays a significant role in bolstering the Russian economy, has also come under pressure, falling from 27% of total revenue in 2024 to 23% in 2025.⁵¹ Reuters assessed that approximately 40% of Russia's oil exports had been halted as of March due to external pressure, from a combination of Ukrainian kinetic attacks and Western sanctions.⁵²

The media organization also noted that the most significant pressure had fallen on the export process rather than on refinery operations themselves.⁵³ Even when revenues recovered, Moscow was forced to “significantly increase subsidies to Russian oil companies.”⁵⁴ Russia's ability to profit from higher oil prices stemming from the Iran conflict were constrained.⁵⁵ Russian oil profits remain resilient, but the infrastructure needed to support them has been increasingly costly to defend and repair.

Broadly, Russia faces a slew of economic issues, and as Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Senior Fellow Michael Kofman argues “will struggle to keep current economic policies, balance inflation, and maintain high levels of defense spending.”⁵⁶ Problems in the Russian economy are most evident in highly specialized civilian manufacturing, such as aviation, where Russia's civilian aircraft production has been significantly reduced from pre-war production levels of 11-12 aircraft per year in 2020 and 2021 to approximately four new aircraft annually between 2022 and 2025.⁵⁷ Yet Russia consistently expands its military production with minimal signs of significant struggle. Thus, as the Kremlin continues its operations against Ukraine, it has preserved the parts of the economy most essential to sustaining the war. The longer-term cost, however, is an increasingly strained civilian economy, less capable of generating tax revenue on which the state depends.

Defense-industrial adaptation and the limits of reconstitution

Russia's military industrial capacity is critically important to assess Russia's ability to continue fighting the war against Ukraine, reconstitute its forces, and project power abroad. Constraints on Russia's domestic arms industry have direct and highly consequential effects on its foreign policy. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has demonstrated a greater capacity for industrial production and adaptation than many Western analysts expected.

The debate about Russia's military-industrial production is highly contested, a dynamic shaped by the volatility of developments and variable innovation cycles. Many observers, such as RUSI Senior Research Fellow Jack Watling and Research Fellow Nick Reynolds, believe that “Russia faces significant limitations in the longevity and reliability of its industrial output.”⁵⁸ Max Bergman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies argues that “the quality of Russia's weapons continues to degrade.”⁵⁹ Eugene Rumer, Director of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Russia and Eurasia Program and Senior Fellow, paints a picture of Russia emerging “from its war with Ukraine weakened, with an exhausted general population, badly depleted conventional forces, and a stagnant economy.”⁶⁰

Other experts such as Anna Borshchevskaya of the Washington Institute disagree, citing the relevance of Russia's asymmetric capabilities and the resilience of the country's economy and industrial sectors. In June 2025, Borshchevskaya wrote that “Russia's entire economy is now geared towards military production. In private, Western officials acknowledge that Russia now produces more munitions than all NATO members combined.

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Over the last two years, the Russian defense industry has built entire new supply chains to overcome sanctions while in conflict”.⁶¹

The central issue surrounding Russia’s military-industrial capacity is not whether Russia’s defense industry has collapsed. It has not. The critical issues are the type of military capacity that Russia is regenerating, the reliability of that capacity, and its ability to support expeditionary power projection or merely sustain operations in Ukraine.

The Russian military budget for weapons and munitions alone increased from 1,879 billion rubles in 2022 to 3,744 billion rubles in 2024.⁶² Overall, the Russian military budget has increased year over year and reached nearly 16 trillion rubles as of 2025, a rate of expenditure that forces Moscow to assume significant national debt.⁶³ Russia has responded to this problem by aiming to decrease its military spending from its 2025 peak.⁶⁴

The budgetary expansion has led production in several critical categories to increase, especially munitions, missiles, UAS, and other systems directly relevant to the war in Ukraine.⁶⁵ In 2024, the overall output of weapons and munitions production rose to 157% of 2018 levels.⁶⁶ The production of aerospace goods also increased over the same period to 134% of 2018 levels in 2024.⁶⁷ Russian military-industrial production has a highly favorable cost-exchange ratio compared to Western munitions and defenses. On artillery munitions alone, Russia outperforms NATO by a factor of almost 4:1 on cost and at a minimum matches all Western production volume.⁶⁸ In addition, the cost to produce many of Russia’s attack drones falls far below the cost to take them down with advanced American or European-made interceptor missiles. Russia relies on trade and cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea to supplement its domestic arms production.⁶⁹ The Kremlin has also imported “between five and seven million shells from Iran and North Korea” between 2023 and 2026.⁷⁰ This materiel, in addition to an increasing use of drones, has allowed Russia to increase the tempo at which it can replenish depleted strategic munitions reserves.

Russian analysts have predicted that the early phases of any war would require significant expenditure from the country’s strategic reserve, which would then need to be replenished.⁷¹ A November 2022 estimate, based on Russian government documents, found that “the allocation of military equipment and other material resources to untouchable reserves requires at least one-third of the funds allocated for procurement under the state defense order.”⁷² The combination of Russia’s industrial production and imports has enabled the Kremlin to continue its war against Ukraine without significant concessions to its conventional deterrence posture.⁷³

Russia has generally adapted to the constraints imposed on it by Western sanctions and continued production in critical areas. The effectiveness of sanctions and export controls has decreased over time as Russia employs increasingly sophisticated techniques to evade them. Moscow still imports sanctioned goods that it cannot domestically produce.⁷⁴ As projects such as War & Sanctions have noted, Russia still receives a variety of Western and Chinese-made components for use in military supply chains, including components critical for missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) used against Ukraine.⁷⁵ Some Western components likely trace back to prewar deliveries, but others are enabled by unauthorized third-party transfers.

However, Russia’s resilience should not be overstated, as its defense industry faces some significant challenges. Supply-chain shortages still affect production and maintenance. These constraints are especially important for high-end naval and air assets needed for sustained operations far from Russia’s borders. Production quantity outpaces quality, and labor shortages, logistics, and the availability of complex machine tools, and electronic components limit the sophistication of Russian systems.⁷⁶

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As of June, Russian military-industrial production primarily supports engagement in Ukraine and deterrence requirements for Europe. Even a stronger-than-expected military-industrial capacity has not removed the need to prioritize Russian military expenditure. Under current conditions, the systems being produced are more suitable for supporting the war in Ukraine and reinforcing domestic readiness, than for supporting a broader return to an expeditionary posture in MENA.

This does not mean Russia will disappear as a defense-industrial actor in the region. Many analysts point to immediate decreases in Russian arms exports, but Borshchevskaya argues that Moscow is well-positioned for a regional resurgence in MENA. The Kremlin has continued to sign arms deals and has yet to cancel existing contracts. Furthermore, “Russia will be prepared, at least from a defense industry perspective, to become the largest seller of inexpensive precision strike munitions to countries barred from purchasing Western defense materiel”.⁷⁷ This points toward a more flexible, asymmetric, and lower-cost defense-industrial influence rather than traditional and costly hard power projection and a broad return to high-end expeditionary posture in MENA.⁷⁸

Forces

Russia’s force picture is mixed: Moscow is increasing the size of its wartime forces and can likely sustain a larger one than before 2022, but much of the growth reflects mass recruitment, mobilization, and the regeneration of units with lower-quality personnel and older equipment. The focus is not on restoration of prewar force quality. Russian sources (echoed in Western assessments) suggest that the Kremlin is rebuilding toward a force structure of roughly 1.5 million military personnel and another 900,000 support civilian personnel, although no target date for reaching that size has been published.⁷⁹ It is unclear if Russia can realize this goal, especially as it struggles significantly with retention. Most soldiers sign one-year contracts.⁸⁰ The country reportedly exceeded its recruitment goals in 2025⁸¹, but leading analysts, such as Kofman, indicate that losses due to deaths and injuries, approximated recruitment gains.⁸² Failure to adapt to battlefield realities has contributed to high casualties in 2026, even as recruitment numbers have fallen.⁸³ Overall, the war in Ukraine remains the principal claim on manpower, officers, logistics, and ready units.

The Kremlin’s attrition warfare has required reallocation of resources from other theaters. In MENA, Russia reduced parts of its Syria posture, removed materiel, and relied more heavily on contractors. Moscow uses an extensive airlift to maintain access in Libya and Africa.⁸⁴

Russia had to abandon all of its Forward Operating Bases (FOB) in Syria, reducing its footprint from a sizeable 114 military sites (21 bases and 93 military checkpoints) to three, then two by mid-2026.⁸⁵ Russian anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities at remaining bases there have also been severely degraded due to redeployments of its most advanced and valuable resources to Crimea or Libya.⁸⁶ Russian troop and aircraft deployments to Syria have also dramatically decreased. Before the outbreak of war in Ukraine, deployments were estimated to be around 10,000 soldiers.⁸⁷ As of April, there are far fewer, with estimates consistently between a few hundred to 1,000, mainly at the Hmeimim air base.⁸⁸ The evacuation of FOBs took place remarkably rapidly, in mere weeks after the fall of the Assad regime.⁸⁹ Forces and materiel from across the country were amassed at Tartus and Hmeimim, and subsequently withdrawn to Russia, Libya, and occupied Ukrainian territory. After an initial scramble to vacate smaller bases, troops and materiel were slowly transferred to other theaters.⁹⁰

Another noteworthy area from which Russia relocated its forces is the Arctic. The pattern is clearest in the land domain. Analysts point to the redeployment of Arctic-trained units, elements of specialized brigades, air-defense assets, and highly specialized logistics vehicles to the Ukrainian theater, underscoring Moscow’s priority to

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allocate troops there, while maintaining strategic assets in the Eurasian Arctic which the Kremlin deems vital for bastion defense and nuclear deterrence.⁹¹ The troop reallocations, especially in the war's earlier days, help explain Russia's continued ability to present a security challenge while still being constrained. In many regards Moscow has been able to sustain a relatively high operational tempo by accepting trade-offs in readiness and force quality outside Ukraine.

Assessments regarding the Russian military's ability to adapt and apply lessons from its operations at large scale is mixed. Combat experience in Ukraine has produced tactical adaptation, especially in the integration and operation of drones, electronic warfare (EW), dispersal, and strike-reconnaissance, but the broader institutional picture remains weaker.⁹² Kofman highlights a lack of adaptation on the battlefield leading to high losses in early 2026, which have turned the order of battle along the front lines in Ukraine's favor. Kyiv is projected to sustain this advantage for at least the remainder of the year.⁹³

Despite the shortfalls in Russia's operational capacity, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Senior Fellow Dara Massicot stresses the country's efforts to create more institutional mechanisms that could advance its ability to learn from operational experience and apply these lessons in the future.⁹⁴ It is also reasonable to expect that Russia is closely watching US and Israeli strikes on Iran and gathering intelligence on the performance of Iranian assets and techniques against American air defenses. Whether lessons learned across different theaters will be translated into longer term adaptation, especially in light of historical force modernization challenges, remains to be seen.⁹⁵

In the meantime, the operational capacity gaps persist. Analysts emphasize the challenges of enduring shortages of qualified low- and mid-level officers, a partially poorly educated officer corps, and a continued preference for centralized command structures and loyalty over delegation and initiative. The mass exodus of highly educated, military age professionals to neighboring countries, which has also reduced the available labor supply and removed the most vocal of the regime's dissenters from Russia, has exacerbated some of these challenges. Ultimately, Russia may field robust personnel numbers in the coming years, but scaling numbers is easier than rebuilding a more professional, better-educated force capable of simultaneous high-end networked operations across multiple theaters.

Access and Military Posture

Fundamentally, Russia's ability to project power beyond its immediate neighborhood⁹⁶ depends on sustained access to naval and air routes, overseas bases, and a capability to advance and leverage cross-domain (cyber, space, and information) enablers.

In the maritime domain, establishing and maintaining this access shapes Russia's logistics chain, including deployment, resupply, and sustainment of naval forces. This is particularly crucial given Russia's lack of a true blue water navy and dependence on proximate seas, chokepoints, and access agreements to sustain operations beyond its immediate neighborhood.⁹⁷

In parallel, Russia's ability to project air power over distance is structurally constrained by the country's focus on land-based forces, limited carrier aviation, and comparatively modest aerial refueling capacity. As a result, the range and payload limitations of most tactical and strategic aircraft—particularly when fully laden—require access to forward operating airbases to sustain strike, transport, and ISR missions at distance. Russia's expeditionary operations consequently face significant constraints.⁹⁸

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In this context, access to Hmeimim simplifies air logistics between Moscow and Libya, the Kremlin's foothold in Northern Africa, reducing flight distance from 1,800 to 1,400 miles. Russian military bloggers report that direct flights between military airports in Moscow and Libya are impossible for most fully laden Russian cargo aircraft.⁹⁹

These constraints also reinforce the extent to which Russian power projection is structured by interlinked theaters. In this context, Russian strategists unsurprisingly stress these connections – especially the strategic links between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and the Baltic and the Arctic. The Ukraine war, the fall of the Assad regime, and the Iran war highlight the ability of disruptions in one region to create cascading cross-theater effects impacting Russia's (and other actors') room to maneuver. Generally, reallocations from different theaters to Ukraine demonstrate Russia's ability to redistribute its force footprint in response to shifting priorities and opportunities.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly narrowed its ability to operate along important power projection routes, resulting in self-inflicted limits to the Kremlin's global reach. Key related factors that continue to impact its expeditionary posture include:

- Türkiye's invocation of the Montreux Convention and the resulting closure of the Straits to warships entering the Black Sea during times of conflict
- Türkiye's closure of its airspace to Russian overflights to Syria
- the loss of FOBs and increased uncertainty about permanent facilities in Syria
- Finland's and Sweden's NATO accession and the reinforcement of the alliance's northern flank, limiting Russian flexibility to operate across the Baltic Sea-Arctic nexus

Russia has long treated the Black Sea and the Mediterranean as an interconnected strategic theater and a launchpad to MENA.¹⁰¹ The Black Sea itself has become a critical war theater rather than a secure corridor for outward projection and commercial traffic. Ukrainian strikes in the area have degraded Russian naval assets, including in Crimea, increased the vulnerability of ports and logistics, and forced operational adaptation. As a result, the remaining Russian presence in the area faces higher operational risks and decreased freedom of maneuver for supporting Mediterranean operations. The closure of the Straits is the most important structural limit on Russia's power projection into the Mediterranean. The country's fleet movement has been reduced, as has its ability to rotate or reinforce naval assets. Consequently, its Mediterranean presence is more costly and less sustainable, creating a disconnect with Russia's maritime doctrine.¹⁰²

In April 2022, Türkiye closed its airspace to Russian military flights and civilian flights carrying troops to Syria.¹⁰³ This remains the Turkish government's official policy, but the implementation of the policy has been unclear.¹⁰⁴ Following the closure of the Straits and the end of the "Syrian express", Russia's air bridge has become critical for supplying its forces and allies operating in Africa. The country now depends on overflying Türkiye to resupply its forces in North Africa.¹⁰⁵

Syria functioned as a central pillar of Russian power projection into the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, Libya, and West Africa,¹⁰⁶ **which enabled a forward-operating posture that reduced reliance on the Black Sea for resupply and force rotation.** Today, however, the Russian base at Tartus no longer serves as a reliable hub for sustaining a major Mediterranean naval presence and maintenance capability. The base at Hmeimim, however, remains critical as a logistical and airlift node. Overall, Russia's posture is weaker and less able to sustain high-end regional operations now than under the Assad regime.¹⁰⁷

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Still, Russia has adapted effectively and maintains a nominal presence in Syria. The Kremlin has preserved some military access, retained economic and political ties, and continues to use Syria as a link to Libya and Africa more broadly when possible.¹⁰⁸ But Moscow's posture is more contingent, more exposed to regional bargaining, and less able to shape outcomes through direct military weight.¹⁰⁹ As a result, Russia must look beyond the region, including to Libya and Sudan for influence. But these secondary hubs cannot replicate Syria as an integrated naval, air, and logistics hub with power projection capability for the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa.¹¹⁰

Moscow, nonetheless, remains a spoiler and opportunistic enabler, relying on selective access, transactional partnerships, sanctions-resilient networks, private military actors, and diplomatic flexibility to retain a regional role. The Kremlin can still raise the costs of Western policy, but it is less able to act as a decisive regional military power.¹¹¹

Russia's diminished naval access to the Black Sea underscores a broader focus on maintaining open sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Practically, a weaker Russian southern posture gives even greater relevance and supports the growing focus on the Baltic-Arctic nexus, and on military posture in Kaliningrad, Belarus, and along NATO's northeastern flank.¹¹²

However, even within the interconnected Arctic-Baltic theater, Russia faces numerous constraints since NATO's Nordic enlargement in 2023 and 2024 as the alliance continues to scrutinize Russian regional activities, including its shadow fleet and submarine operations, via enhanced vigilance activities.¹¹³

Developments in the Black Sea and the closure of the Straits to warring parties have also heightened the importance of the Baltic Sea and the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for commercial and military activity. In November 2025, exports from Murmansk and Arkhangelsk rose 80%, while exports from Primorsk, Vysotsk, St. Petersburg, and Ust-Luga increased by 20.6% over a similar period, showing that Moscow could pivot toward other existing infrastructure when Black Sea nodes came under pressure.¹¹⁴

Russian military district revisions, moreover, have further strengthened links between the Baltic Sea and the Arctic, and the respective Baltic and Northern Fleets.¹¹⁵ Both regions are also critical to the Kremlin's nuclear posture. The important role of the Northern Fleet, which is homeported around the Kola Peninsula, where most of the Russian sea-based nuclear second-strike capability is based, and the growing reliance on nuclear signaling in Russia's integrated deterrence concept, reinforces connections to other regions, especially in a conflict scenario that may precipitate power projection into other theaters.

Concurrently, Moscow leverages the Kaliningrad exclave (which is part of the Russian Federation), as well as Belarus (which is part of the Union State), as forward-operating spaces for deterrence, A2/AD, and escalation signaling against NATO, also compensating for constraints in other theaters. Both host nuclear-capable delivery systems and related infrastructure for non-strategic nuclear forces, alongside other military capabilities, including those supporting EW.¹¹⁶

To exert pressure on European NATO allies without risking outright military confrontation, Russia continues to exploit ambiguity and employs subthreshold tactics, including EW, infrastructure disruption, information

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operations, coupled with nuclear coercion.¹¹⁷

III. Implications for European Security

As GMF's Ian Lesser, Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, and Pelham Hardie argue in a prior paper in this series, Russia's reduced footprint in Syria is unlikely to have a significant effect on the overall correlation of forces in Europe when NATO's eastern flank remains the principal zone of Russia-NATO tension.¹¹⁸ Russia will have "few opportunities to use its modest southern posture to threaten European security in existential ways."¹¹⁹ However, instability encouraged by Russian behavior in MENA could still present a challenge to European security looking south.

From a military posture standpoint, the central implication of Russia's weakened southern power projection capacity is its intensifying focus on core regions closer to home. The trajectory of the war against Ukraine will be the single most important factor shaping Russia's posture in this medium-term time frame. At the time of writing, there is no end to the conflict in sight.¹²⁰ While the hierarchy of priorities outlined in this paper would likely remain intact regardless of the conflict outcome, the degree to which Russia could focus on secondary and tertiary priorities would vary. In any scenario, Russia's military priorities over the next three to five years will most likely remain concentrated on key theaters along Russia's border with Ukraine and NATO's northeastern flank.¹²¹

If the conflict continues, a constrained Russia has little choice but to remain heavily concentrated on Ukraine and adjacent European theaters, with MENA managed as a tertiary arena characterized by selective access and opportunistic influence rather than substantial military investment.

Even in a frozen-conflict scenario, rather than rebuilding a large-scale expeditionary posture in the Mediterranean, Russia will likely use any operational pause first to prioritize regeneration, entrenchment, and preparation for future escalation¹²² by rebuilding its land forces, restoring elements of its Black Sea fleet, and strengthening its force posture along NATO's borders. This includes the Arctic and areas close to Finland where Russia is already bolstering its military infrastructure,¹²³ Kaliningrad and the Suwalki Gap, and the Kola Peninsula. This would be accompanied by continued investment in air defenses and offensive and defensive drones, and in capabilities designed to challenge Western air and missile defense systems.¹²⁴ Investments in nuclear and space capabilities will also likely remain a priority given the importance Russia places on them for future conflict.¹²⁵

Accordingly, Russia is unlikely to expand its forward presence in MENA in the medium term. It will instead seek to preserve its existing regional footprint and partnerships, leveraging access, instability, and transactional relationships to maintain influence at relatively low cost. As recent Center for a New American Security assessments of Russian engagement in Africa suggest, Moscow often seeks to generate influence and strategic effects disproportionate to its direct military or economic presence through transactional partnerships and selective engagement.¹²⁶ Moscow will remain a spoiler and opportunistic enabler, relying on sanctions-resilient networks, private military actors, and diplomatic flexibility to raise the costs of Western policy without acting as a decisive regional military power. Beyond the future trajectory of the Ukraine war, several cross-cutting, secondary factors will shape the extent to which Russia can translate its posture into broader strategic effect and project power in MENA over the next three to five years and beyond.¹²⁷

First, regional dynamics will determine the opportunities that Russia can exploit using its constrained

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military and economic capacity. As explored in greater depth in the second paper in this series by GMF's Kristina Kausch, the behavior of regional actors, their willingness to engage with Russia and Western partners, and the continually developing war in Iran and the Strait of Hormuz will continue to affect the partnerships and openings available to Moscow.¹²⁸ Russia maintains a foothold in the region, but it is contingent on regional actors. The Kremlin's political fortunes depend on their engagements. This includes the actions of countries historically close to Russia.

Second, growing linkages between regional conflicts and broader global interdependencies may alter Russian priorities. Security developments in one theater can affect Russian priorities elsewhere, forcing Moscow to adjust resource allocation, force posture, and strategic attention in competing regions. The expanding geographic reach of military operations, including actions directed at assets, infrastructure, or networks and enabling systems linked to a conflict but located beyond its immediate theater, can create new security requirements, complicate escalation management, and contribute to horizontal escalation. At the same time, disruptions affecting energy markets, trade routes, food supplies, migration patterns, and critical supply chains can alter regional stability, reshape economic and political dependencies, and create new constraints or opportunities for Russian influence. Together, these dynamics may affect how Moscow balances competing priorities across theaters.

Third, Russia's options will be shaped by external pressures and support. Continued American and European sanctions are likely to limit Russian manufacturing capacity in the civilian and military spheres. Moscow's ability to acquire advanced components and develop sophisticated military systems has been highly constrained, and any easing of sanctions could enable a notable increase of advanced manufacturing, allowing a more assertive Russian resurgence. But continued or enhanced Western support for Ukraine will necessitate higher defense expenditure for the conflict.

Fourth, Russia's ability to operate and maintain its production capacity will depend on its partnerships with other states, particularly China, Iran, and North Korea. Continued security cooperation and technology transfers could help Russia offset some of the most pressing domestic constraints. However, such support is unlikely to fully compensate for the negative ramifications of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Fifth, domestic conditions in Russia remain an important limiting factor. The current regime prioritizes its survival and has repeatedly acted to bolster its domestic position in recent years. Russian President Vladimir Putin has constructed strong institutions to support his regime, but its stability requires significant effort. Russia's civilian economy has been placed under severe strain, which may cause additional public dissatisfaction. The Kremlin's attrition war has also worsened long-standing demographic problems. Moscow's ability to recruit and retain military personnel, rebuild force quality, and improve military education all depend on a society facing complex challenges.

IV. Conclusion

Russia's engagement and power projection in MENA has become more constrained and fragmented. Syria remains relevant, but it no longer serves as the stable southern anchor it once did. The Black Sea–Mediterranean nexus has been weakened by the war in Ukraine, a contested Black Sea, the closure of the Straits, and greater uncertainty about regional basing, and logistics in Syria.¹²⁹ Together, these developments have reduced Russia's ability to sustain high-end military operations across the Mediterranean and wider MENA region.

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Russian doctrine, strategists' and military bloggers' discussions, and historical legacy suggest that the Kremlin seeks to maintain a position that enables global power projection. Moscow continues to view itself as a great power with interests that extend beyond its immediate neighborhood and seeks to retain the ability to shape developments in multiple regions. The central argument of this paper, however, is that Russia's war against Ukraine, rather than developments in MENA, is the primary factor shaping the Kremlin's military posture and power projection capacity over the next three to five years. While Moscow's ambitions remain global, Ukraine remains the central determinant of Russian military behavior, with the war's trajectory expected to shape force allocation, industrial output, reserve replenishment, and readiness for confrontation with NATO.

Wartime pressures have exposed the limits of Russia's expeditionary model and constrained its ability to sustain military presence, generate combat power, and allocate resources in multiple theaters simultaneously. The gap between Russian ambitions and available military capacity is therefore likely to remain a defining feature of Moscow's military planning in the foreseeable future.

Russia continues to prioritize national defense, the war in Ukraine, the "near abroad", and deterrence requirements vis-à-vis NATO, leaving fewer resources available for sustained military power projection elsewhere. MENA remains important, but increasingly as a theater of selective access and opportunistic influence.¹³⁰

Russia is consequently unlikely to restore a substantial expeditionary military posture in MENA in the medium term. Even under a frozen-conflict scenario in Ukraine, Moscow is more likely to prioritize force regeneration, reserve replenishment, military-industrial production, air and missile defense, drones, space capabilities, and force posture enhancements along Ukraine's and NATO's borders than reinvest heavily in southern deployments. As Rumer argues, Russia is likely to emerge from its war against Ukraine less secure but more threatening to Europe and NATO.¹³¹ That is not because Moscow will be able to restore broad conventional superiority in multiple theaters. Rather, even a constrained Russia may take advantage of windows of opportunity in periods of Western distraction, transatlantic uncertainty, or a frozen conflict in Ukraine to expedite force generation and to exploit vulnerabilities through nuclear coercion, sub-threshold pressure, and selective military risk-taking. At the same time, the combination of heightened confrontation with NATO, persistent reliance on coercive signaling, and greater uncertainty regarding Russia's conventional military position may contribute to escalation dynamics that are increasingly difficult to predict or control.

Considering these factors, Russia's future threat potential will depend on the absolute state of its military capabilities and on the relative balance between its adaptation and European and transatlantic cohesion, preparedness, and responsiveness.¹³² The Kremlin has a clear interest in widening and exploiting divisions in the transatlantic alliance over threat perceptions, burden sharing, and support for Ukraine to slow collective responses and create openings for coercion below the threshold of open war.¹³³ Moscow's room for maneuver expands when Western deterrence is delayed, politically fragmented, or lacks credibility.

Although the most consequential military developments are likely to occur along Russia's western flank, MENA continues to shape the wider strategic environment in which the country's confrontation with the West unfolds. Russia's reduced military footprint in MENA should not be mistaken for strategic disengagement. Moscow has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to adapt to adverse conditions, preserve access, and exploit opportunities through a combination of military, economic, political, and information tools. Russia's posture in MENA is becoming more selective and opportunistic, but not irrelevant. The Kremlin's capacity for sustained military

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power projection in the region has diminished, but developments in Syria, Libya, Iran, the Red Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean continue to affect Russian decision-making and strategic calculations. Moscow can use regional partnerships and commercial ties to ease sanctions pressure, preserve political access, sustain logistics and economic networks and maintain forms of military access and operational flexibility that would otherwise be narrowed under wartime conditions.¹³⁴

MENA's strategic relevance to the Kremlin therefore cannot be measured solely by the size of Russia's military footprint. Even if Russia lacks the capacity for major new military investments in the region, developments there may still contribute indirectly to the country's objectives by creating additional pressure points in its broader confrontation with the West. From Moscow's perspective, regional instability can create opportunities to divert Western attention and resources, complicate US and European strategic planning, and increase the demands placed on transatlantic policymakers at relatively low cost to Russia.¹³⁵

Ultimately, the central issue that this analysis explores is not whether Russia can recreate its pre-2022 military posture in MENA. It is whether Moscow can translate a more limited set of military resources, access arrangements, partnerships, and asymmetric tools into continued strategic influence in interconnected theaters. The evidence presented here suggests that while Russia's capacity for sustained military power projection has narrowed, its ability to adapt, reprioritize, and exploit opportunities in connected regions remains an enduring feature of its strategic behavior.

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The views expressed herein are those solely of the author(s). GMF as an institution does not take positions.

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Endnotes

¹ Within the framework of this analysis, “the Straits” refers to the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, which connect the Black Sea to the Mediterranean via the Sea of Marmara.

² Natalie Sabanadze and Galip Dalay, “Understanding Russia’s Black Sea strategy. How to strengthen Europe and NATO’s approach to the region”, Chatham House, July 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-07-28-russias-black-sea-strategy-sabanadze-dalay.pdf>

³ This paper incorporates observations and key takeaways from virtual roundtable discussions held on March 12 and June 25, 2026, as well as an in-person discussion held in Washington, DC, on June 17, 2026. The discussions were conducted under the Chatham House Rule and included over 20 participants, including public officials and leading experts on Russian foreign and security policy, European security, and Middle Eastern dynamics. The authors are grateful for the valuable contributions of the participants.

⁴ Michael Kofman, “Continuity and Change in Russian Grand Strategy”, in “Before and After the Fall: World Politics and the End of the Cold War”, 1st ed., Nuno P. Monteiro and Fritz Bartel, eds., 2021, p. 172. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108910194>

⁵ Eugene Rumer, “Belligerent and Beleaguered: Russia After the War with Ukraine”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 19, 2026. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/03/russia-ukraine-postwar-divided-european-security>

According to S. N. Mazhuga, Russian strategic thought also frames this competition in broader geopolitical and civilizational terms. Analysts argue that Russia must maintain an independent position between major power centers, while justifying intervention in the near abroad as essential to long-term stability. S.N. Mazhuga, “Development of Russia’s Geostrategy in the Interests of National Security”, *Military Thought* 33, nos. 002–003, 2024, pp. 44–47. <https://doi.org/10.21557/MTH.98437706>

⁶ This analysis draws on pre-2022 analysis in: Michael Kofman, “Continuity and Change in Russian Grand Strategy”; and Michael Kofman, Anya Fink, and Jeffrey Edmonds, “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management: Evolution of Key Concepts”, Center for Naval Analyses, April 13, 2020. <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2020/04/russian-strategy-for-escalation-management-key-concepts>

However, recent analysis suggests that this core perception of inferiority and need to manage escalation remains intact. See, for example, Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, “The Shooting Party: Russia’s Evolving Threat Perceptions Since 2022”, Center for Naval Analysis, 2025, pp. ii–iii.

⁷ See, for example, Kofman, “Continuity and Change”, p. 169.

⁸ Ian Lesser, Özgür Unluhisarcikli, and Pelham Hardie, “Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean. A European Security Perspective”, German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 2026. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russia-black-sea-and-mediterranean>; Elisabeth Gosselin-Malo, “NATO Sees Russian Naval Presence Wane in the Mediterranean”, *Defense News*, October 10, 2025. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/10/10/nato-sees-russian-naval-presence-wane-in-the-mediterranean/>

⁹ Nick Childs, “Russia’s New Maritime Doctrine: Adrift from Reality?”, International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 2, 2022. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2022/09/russias-new-maritime-doctrine-adrift-from-reality/>

¹⁰ “Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii O Strategii Natsional’noi Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation]”, Security Council of the Russian Federation, July 5, 2021. <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/docs/document133/>; “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, President of Russia, December 24, 2014. https://rusmilsec.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/mildoc_rf_2014_eng.pdf

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ A.K. Marin, “Features of Strategic Deterrence in Modern Conditions”, *Military Thought* 33, no. 004, 2024, pp. 43–50. <https://doi.org/10.21557/MTH.100842730>

¹⁴ V.B. Zarudnitsky, “Trends in the Transformation of Russia’s Military Security System in the Context of the New Geopolitical World Map”, *Military Thought* 33, nos. 002–003, 2024, pp. 50–58. <https://doi.org/10.21557/MTH.9843770>

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁶ Steven Pifer, “The Kremlin Paints Itself into a Corner”, Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation, February 14, 2022. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/kremlin-paints-itself-corner>

¹⁷ Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez, “The Shooting Party”, pp. ii–iii.

¹⁸ The Critical Threats Project, “Ukraine Invasion Updates, March 2024”. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/ukraine-invasion-updates-march-2024>

¹⁹ The concept emerged in the post-Soviet period and was explicitly codified in the 2014 nuclear doctrine. See, for example, Katarzyna Zysk, “Russia’s Nuclear Doctrine Amendments: Scare Tactics or Real Shift?”, *USIP Analysis*, 29 January 2025. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qTEdDP9gBHSYfWi27rbnLJRwvZ_7gXBG/view; Kofman et al., “Russian Strategy for Escalation Management”.

²⁰ Sidharth Kaushal and Darya Dolzikova, “The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine”, Royal United Services Institute, 2025, pp. 5–7. <https://static.rusi.org/the-evolution-of-russian-nuclear-doctrine.pdf>; Rosa-Hernandez, “The Shooting Party”, pp. ii–iii.

²¹ Ibid., p. 3.

²² Kaushal and Dolzikova, “The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine”, p. 1.

²³ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 23–24.

²⁵ “Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation”, December 3, 2024. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/

²⁶ Kaushal and Dolzikova, “The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine”, pp. 24–25.

²⁷ Rosa-Hernandez, “The Shooting Party”, pp. ii–iii.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kaushal and Dolzikova, “The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine”, p. 50.

Ukraine has been able to consistently intercept significant percentages of Russian drones and cruise missiles but struggles to intercept Russian ballistic missiles. Ukrainian forces have developed an extensive air defense network involving

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around 100,000 personnel. This has proved effective at intercepting drones and low-flying cruise missiles. However, Ukraine is still highly dependent on complex and costly American and European missile interceptors for its ballistic missile defenses.

Astrid Chevreuil et al., “How Europe Can Build Ukraine’s Future Force”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 27, 2026. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-europe-can-build-ukraines-future-force>

Recent shortages of Patriot missile interceptors, largely driven by the American conflict with Iran, have degraded Ukraine’s ability to protect itself from Russian ballistic missiles, causing a marked decrease in its missile interception rate. On the night of May 23-24, “Ukrainian forces intercepted 91.5% of all drones, 36.7% of Iskander-M and S-300 ballistic missiles, and 81.5% of cruise missiles”. Fiona Noonan et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 24, 2026”, Institute for the Study of War, May 25, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-24-2026/>

³⁰ Government of the United Kingdom, “Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France joint nuclear statement), July 10, 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>

³¹ In February, Izvestia, a pro-Kremlin media outlet, criticized the expansion of the United Kingdom’s nuclear umbrella to include Sweden and other European countries, framing the move and information being made public about it as “further [inflaming] military hysteria, inciting European countries (Sweden) to even more brazen and reckless anti-Russian policies.”

Kirill Fenin, “Britain Is Preparing Nuclear Guarantees for Europe. Downing Street’s Ambitions Are Forcing Moscow to Strengthen Its Grouping on the Western Borders”, Izvestia, February 17, 2026. <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/113005245>

This is consistent with the Kremlin’s 2024 nuclear doctrine which describes the main military risks as including the “establishment of new or expansion of existing military coalitions (blocs, alliances), leading to the advancement of their military infrastructure to the borders of the Russian Federation”.

“Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation”, December 3, 2024. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/.

³² In response, Russian strategists, who regularly use overt nuclear posturing to intimidate other countries, suggest Russia “increase the number of its own missile systems in the Kaliningrad region and Belarus,” while warning “countries that agree to deploy nuclear elements on their territory (for example, Poland or Sweden) that they are becoming targets for a retaliatory strike.” Fenin, “Britain Is Preparing Nuclear Guarantees for Europe”.

³³ Anna Davis and Ryan Vest (translators), “Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, Russia Maritime Studies Institute, US Naval War College, July 31, 2022. https://usnwc.edu/images/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia-Maritime-Studies-Institute/20220731_ENG_RUS_Maritime_Doctrine_FINALtxt7e1e.pdf

³⁴ Kristina Kausch, “Russia’s Fading Leverage in the Middle East Amid Geopolitical Realignment”, GMF, June 2026. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/russias-fading-leverage-middle-east>

³⁵ Paul M. Carter, Jr. “Understanding Russia’s Interest in Conflict Zones”, United States Institute of Peace, July 7, 2020. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/20200707-sr_469-understanding_russias_interest_in_conflict_zones-swr.pdf

³⁶ Kausch, “Russia’s Fading Leverage in the Middle East”; Lesser et al., “Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean”.

³⁷ Rumer, “Belligerent and Beleaguered”.

³⁸ Lesser et al., 2026, p. 13.

³⁹ Daria Isachenko and Göran Swistek, “The Black Sea as Mare Clausum. Turkey’s special role in the regional security architecture”, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, June 2023, p. 3. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C33_BlackSea_MareClausum.pdf

⁴⁰ See, for example, Tina Dolbaia, Vasabjit Banerjee, and Amanda Southfield, “Guns and Oil: Continuity and Change in Russia-India Relations”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 22, 2025. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/guns-and-oil-continuity-and-change-russia-india-relations>; Dmitry Gorenburg, et al., “Russia-India Relations: Multipolarity in Practice?”, CNA, July 2025. <https://www.cna.org/analyses/2025/08/russia-india-relations-multipolarity-in-practice>

⁴¹ For more details, see Kausch, “Russia’s Fading Leverage in the Middle East”.

⁴² Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation: “Foreign Ministry statement in connection with the entry into force of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran”, October 2, 2025. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2050909/; Hamidreza Azizi, “Strategic Transactionalism: The Iran–Russia Partnership”, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, June 5, 2025.

⁴³ Noah Robertson, Ellen Nakashima, and Warren P. Strobel, “Russia is providing Iran intelligence to target U.S. forces, officials say”, The Washington Post, March 6, 2026. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/03/06/russia-iran-intelligence-us-targets/>

⁴⁴ Giorgio Cafiero, “Ukraine’s strategic leap into Gulf security”, GIS Reports, June 23, 2026. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/ukraine-gulf-security/>

⁴⁵ The Maritime Executive, “Ukraine Strikes Sanctioned Tanker in the Black Sea”, June 17, 2026. <https://maritime-executive.com/article/ukraine-strikes-sanctioned-tanker-in-the-black-sea>; The Maritime Executive, “Video: Ukraine Claims First Strike in the Mediterranean on Shadow Tanker”, December 19, 2025. <https://maritime-executive.com/article/video-ukraine-claims-first-strike-in-the-mediterranean-on-shadow-tanker>

⁴⁶ Reuters, “Turkey says NATO defences down missile from Iran”, May 30, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkey-says-nato-defences-downed-fourth-inbound-iranian-missile-2026-03-30/>

⁴⁷ While outside the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that Russia’s coordinated employment of cyber, space, and emerging technologies serves as a critical enabler for achieving cross-domain operational and strategic effects.

⁴⁸ Julian Cooper, “A Budget for a Fifth Year of War: Military Spending in Russia’s Budget for 2026”, SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security No. 2026/01, pp. 2, 7. <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2026/sipri-insights-peace-and-security/budget-fifth-year-war-military-spending-russias-budget-2026>

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 2, 7, 11–12.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

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⁵¹ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵² Reuters, “At least 40% of Russia’s oil export capacity halted, Reuters calculations show”, March 25, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/least-40-russias-oil-export-capacity-halted-reuters-calculations-show-2026-03-25/>

⁵³ Ibid.; Stefaniia Bern, “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 26, 2026”, Institute for the Study of War, March 26, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-26-2026/>

⁵⁴ Anna Thacker, et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 6, 2026”, Institute for the Study of War, May 6, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-6-2026/>

⁵⁵ Borys Dodonov, et al., “Russian Oil Tracker”, Kyiv School of Economics, May 2026. <https://kse.ua/about-the-school/news/russian-oil-tracker-may-2026-us-sanctioned-rosneft-and-lukoil-regain-control-over-exports-as-their-share-rises-to-57/>

⁵⁶ Michael Kofman, “The Next Russia Threat: Moscow’s Military Power After Ukraine”, Foreign Affairs, June 21, 2026. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/next-russia-threat-michael-kofman>

⁵⁷ Pavel Aksenov, “Kakimi Poluchaiutsia Importozameshchennye Rossiiskie Samolety? [What Are Import-Substituted Russian Aircraft Turning Out Like?]”, BBC Russian Service, November 20, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c04gk366w6go>; Katherina Popilnichenko, “Russia Delays Domestic Aircraft Program to 2035 as Production Targets Slashed”, UNITED24 Media, April 14, 2026. <https://united24media.com/latest-news/russia-delays-domestic-aircraft-program-to-2035-as-production-targets-slashed-17913>; Pavel Luzin, “Russian Civil Aircraft Manufacturing in 2030”, Riddle Russia, April 18, 2022. <https://ridl.io/russian-civil-aircraft-manufacturing-in-2030/>

⁵⁸ Jack Watling and Nick Reynolds, “Russian Military Objectives and Capacity in Ukraine Through 2024”, Royal United Services Institute, February, 13 2024. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russian-military-objectives-and-capacity-ukraine-through-2024>

⁵⁹ Max Bergmann et al., “Out of Stock? Assessing the Impact of Sanctions on Russia’s Defense Industry”, April 14, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/out-stock-assessing-impact-sanctions-russias-defense-industry>

⁶⁰ Rumer, “Belligerent and Beleaguered”.

⁶¹ Anna Borshchevskaya and Matthew Tavares, “Russia’s Defense Ties in the Middle East Poised to Rebound”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-defense-ties-middle-east-poised-rebound>

⁶² Julian Cooper, “Military Production in Russian Official Statistics of Industrial Output”, BOFIT Policy Brief no. 6/2025, Bank of Finland Institute for Emerging Economies, 2025, p 9. <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/314415/1/1920400435.pdf>

⁶³ Cooper, “A Budget for a Fifth Year of War”, p.14.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Cooper, “Military Production”, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Cosimo Meneguzzo and Fabrizio Minniti, “The Industrial Window of War: How to Measure Russia’s Munitions Throughput—and How to Disrupt It”, Modern War Institute at West Point, March 20, 2026. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-industrial-window-of-war-how-to-measure-russias-munitions-throughput-and-how-to-disrupt-it/>

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Samuel Shafiro et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 15, 2026”, Institute for the Study of War, May 15, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-15-2026/>; A.A. Zaytsev, et al., “Rol’ i Mesto Neprikosnovennykh Zapasov Material’nykh Sredstv v Sisteme Vooruzheniia Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii [The Role and Place of Emergency Logistic Stocks in the Armament System of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation]”, p. 139. [https://viek.ru/vie_22_3\(61\).pdf](https://viek.ru/vie_22_3(61).pdf)

⁷² Ibid., p. 140.

⁷³ Samuel Shafiro et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 15, 2026”, Institute for the Study of War, May 15, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-15-2026/>; A.A. Zaytsev, et al., “Rol’ i Mesto Neprikosnovennykh Zapasov Material’nykh Sredstv”, p. 139.

⁷⁴ Borshchevskaya and Tavares, “After Ukraine”, p. 19.

⁷⁵ David Hayes, “Tracking the Components of Missiles and UAVs Used by Russia in Ukraine: What Lessons for Control Regimes?”, Missile Dialogue Initiative, September 2025. <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2025/09/pub25-094-tracking-the-components-of-missiles-and-uavs-used-by-russia-in-ukraine.pdf>

⁷⁶ Mathieu Boulègue, “Russia’s struggle to modernize its military industry. How sanctions, war and ‘innovation stagnation’ are weakening Moscow’s capabilities”, Chatham House, July 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025-07-21-russia-struggle-modernize-military-industry-boulegue.pdf>

⁷⁷ Borshchevskaya and Tavares, “After Ukraine”, p. 11.

⁷⁸ Lesser, et al., “Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean”.

⁷⁹ “Executive Order on Authorised Strength of Russian Armed Forces”, Office of the President of Russia, June 12, 2026. <http://en.kremlin.ru/acts/news/80019>

⁸⁰ Michael Kofman, “The Future of Russian Power: Threat Perceptions, Military Reconstitution, and Economic Constraints” (event), Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, April 15, 2026. <https://carnegieendowment.org/events/2026/04/future-of-russian-power-event>. Moreover, Russian tactics and limited training of new personnel continue to lead to high losses. Jake Sullivan and Jon Finer, “Is Ukraine Now Winning the War Against Russia? (w/Michael Kofman)”, in The Long Game with Jake Sullivan and Jon Finer, Apple Podcasts, June 4, 2026.

⁸¹ Russia reportedly met its 2025 recruitment goal in early December. Total recruitment was 103% of the goal. Katerina Tishchenko, “Budanov: Rossiya Khochet V 2026 Godu Zakhvatit Donbass I Zaporozhskuyu Oblast [Budanov: Russia Wants To Capture Donbas And Zaporizhzhia Oblast In 2026]”, Ukrainian Pravda, December 27, 2025. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/>

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[news/2025/12/27/8013642/](https://www.criticalthreats.org/news/2025/12/27/8013642/)

⁸² Sullivan and Finer, “Is Ukraine Now Winning the War Against Russia?”

⁸³ Ibid.

Russian casualties have remained high for the duration of the conflict. There were 106,720 casualties in 2022; 253,290 casualties in 2023; 430,790 casualties in 2024; and 416,570 casualties in 2025.

Grace Mappes et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 31, 2025”, Critical Threats Project, December 31, 2025. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-31-2025>; Grace Mappes, et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 12, 2025”, Critical Threats Project, June 12, 2025. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-12-2025>

As of June, Russian recruitment, even for elite drone units, has struggled to keep pace with larger battlefield losses. From January to June, “Ukrainian forces killed or wounded about 35,000 Russian soldiers per month, while Russian forces recruited about 27,000 soldiers per month.” Kateryna Shymkiv, et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, June 11, 2026”, Critical Threats Project, June 11, 2026. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-11-2026>

⁸⁴ Beau Chapman et al., “Libya: Russia Develops Air Base Infrastructure Likely to Secure Military Foothold in North Africa and Sahel”, Tearline, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, June 3, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.63836/7vj1-jadx>; Liam Karr and Kathryn Tyson, “Africa File, December 12, 2024: Kremlin Pivot to Libya or Sudan Post-Syria; Turkey Mediates Ethiopia-Somalia Deal”, Critical Threats Project, December 12, 2024. <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-december-12-2024-kremlin-pivot-to-libya-or-sudan-post-syria-turkey-mediates-ethiopia-somalia-deal>; Africa Defense Forum, “Russia’s Shadowy ‘Air Wagner’ Uses African Air Bases to Skirt Sanctions”, June 2, 2026. <https://adf-magazine.com/2026/06/russias-shadowy-air-wagner-uses-african-air-bases-to-skirt-sanctions/>

⁸⁵ Hogir Abdo, “Russian Forces Pulling out of Northeast Syria Area under SDF Control”, AP News, January 27, 2026. <https://apnews.com/article/syria-russia-sdf-qamishli-bd34938a4ce46b48b669b43b3247184f>; Anas Shawakh, “Map of Foreign Forces in Syria, Mid-2024”, Jusoor For Studies, June 2, 2024. <https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-foreign-forces-in-syria-mid-2024>

⁸⁶ Thomas Newdick, “Future Of Russia’s Bases In Syria Remains In Flux, Libya Possible Alternative”, The War Zone, December 16, 2024. <https://www.twz.com/news-features/future-of-russias-bases-in-syria-remains-in-flux-libya-possible-alternative>; Michał Woźniak, “Russia Redeploying Advanced Air Def Systems from Syria to Libya”, TVP World, December 25, 2024. <https://tvpworld.com/84215790/russia-redeploying-advanced-air-def-systems-from-syria-to-libya>

⁸⁷ Tal Beeri, “Russia’s Military Deployment in Syria and the Israeli Challenge”, Alma Research and Education Center, May 8, 2022. <https://israel-alma.org/russias-military-deployment-in-syria-and-the-israeli-challenge/>

⁸⁸ Ilya Volzhsky, “Siriiskii Tsugtsvang. Rossiiskie Voennye Pokidaiut Aviabazu v Kamyshevo, Kliuchevoi Ob’ekt Na Severo-Vostoke Sirii. Pochemu Moskva Spustia Piat’ Let Svorachivaet Svoe Prisutstvie? [Syrian Zugzwang: Russian Military Personnel Leave the Airbase in Qamishli, a Key Facility in Northeastern Syria. Why Is Moscow Winding Down Its Presence After Five Years?], Novaya Gazeta Europa, January 28, 2026. <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2026/01/28/siriiskii-tsugtsvang>

⁸⁹ Ivan Khomenko, “Syria Moves to Reclaim Russian Bases—Turning Them Into Army Training Hubs”, UNITED24 Media, UNITED24 Media, April 1, 2026. <https://united24media.com/latest-news/syria-moves-to-reclaim-russian-bases-turning-them-into-army-training-hubs-17476>

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ The Eurasian Arctic remains critical for bastion defense, strategic deterrence, and northern approaches even as the demands of Ukraine have constrained conventional posture there. RAND’s 2026 analysis states that the war has prevented Russia from fully realizing its intended military posture goals in the High North and that the movement of conventional forces from the Arctic to Ukraine suggests Moscow views the latter as the more urgent military priority. Michelle Grisé et al., “Russia in the High North. Russian Strategy and Escalation Risks in the High North After the Russia-Ukraine War”, RAND Corporation, February 17, 2026. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3446-1.html; Johan Schalin and Sophie Arts, “Bracing for a cold front: Assessing Russian and Chinese strategic objectives and hybrid threat capabilities in the Arctic”, European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, January 2026. <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/publications/bracing-for-a-cold-front-assessing-russian-and-chinese-strategic-objectives-and-hybrid-threat-capabilities-in-the-arctic/>

Nonetheless, Russia has continued to invest in civil and military capabilities and test novel weapons in the region. It has also increased its cooperation with China much beyond analysts’ expectations, although limits remain. For more on this, see for example, Heather A. Conley, et al., “A New Era of Arctic Geopolitics: Russia-PRC Strategic Alignment Is Driving Unprecedented Regional Collaboration”, GMF, May 2024. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/new-era-arctic-geopolitics>

⁹² Dara Massicot, “How Russia Recovered: What the Kremlin Is Learning From the War in Ukraine”, Foreign Affairs, October 8, 2025. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/how-russia-recovered?check_logged_in=1; Michael Kofman, “Ukraine’s War of Endurance: The Fight for Advantage in the Conflict’s Fifth Year”, Foreign Affairs, February 16, 2026. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/ukraines-war-endurance>

⁹³ Sullivan and Finer, “Is Ukraine Now Winning the War Against Russia?”

⁹⁴ Massicot, “How Russia Recovered”.

⁹⁵ Prior failures of the “new look” reforms following the 2008 Russo-Georgia war demonstrate the challenges of modernizing forces, and building a smaller, more professional military and a highly responsive and well-integrated command and control (C2) structure. These reforms broadly failed, despite Russia’s increasing military interventionism abroad. Joseph Kyle, “Russia’s ‘New Look’ Military Reforms and Their Impact on Russian Foreign Policy”, The International Affairs Review, George Washington University, February 22, 2018. <https://www.iar-gwu.org/blog/2018/02/22/russias-new-look-military-reforms-and-their-impact-on-russian-foreign-policy>

⁹⁶ Russia’s power projection tied to its presence and influence across the South Caucasus and Central Asia goes beyond the scope of this analysis. To see more about Russia’s diminishing role in the South Caucasus see for instance Elene Kintsurashvili and Laurențiu Pleșca, “Armenia Chose Continuity Over Ties to Russia”, GMF, June 8, 2026. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/armenia-chose-continuity-over-ties-russia>

⁹⁷ Maintaining a blue-water navy is much more expensive than smaller frigates and corvettes. The proliferation of a standardized Vertical Launch System (VLS) for the Kalibr platform across the Russian navy has greatly enhanced the capabilities of smaller ships. As such, the force has pivoted from relying on large

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and costly ships to a smaller, much more capable, fleet of smaller vessels. While this strategy broadly forfeits endurance, it represents a notable adaptation to economic constraints while allowing the conventional Russian navy to fulfill its primary goals of defense and deterrence.

⁹⁸ Private military companies (PMCs) have historically played a large role in supporting Russia's security interests abroad, but their activities vary regionally. Since the dissolution of the Wagner Group in 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense has constrained PMC operations in Europe, but the companies remain present in several theaters of interest and have a well consolidated presence in Africa. For more on this, see for example Hanna Notte, "Putin's New Frontier: The Prospects and Limitations of Africa Corps", James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey, no. 67, September 2025. https://nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/OP67-RSI-Report_Notte_Russia-Africa-Corps_CNS-OP_Sept2025.pdf

⁹⁹ "O Logisticheskikh Trudnostiakh Dlia VS RF v Sluchae Poteri Baz v Sirii [On Logistical Challenges for the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the Event of Losing Bases in Syria]", Telegram, Rybar, December 9, 2024. <https://t.me/rybar/66186>

¹⁰⁰ Paul Schwartz, et al., "Russian Military Logistics in the Ukraine War: Recent Reforms and Wartime Operations", CNA, 2023. <https://www.cna.org/reports/2023/10/Russian-Military-Logistics-in-the-Ukraine-War.pdf>, p. i.

¹⁰¹ Sabanadze and Dalay, "Understanding Russia's Black Sea Strategy".

¹⁰² Lesser, et al., "Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean"; Sabanadze and Dalay, "Understanding Russia's Black Sea Strategy".

¹⁰³ "Turtsiia Zakryla Vozdushnoe Prostranstvo Dlia Rossiiskikh Samoletov, Napravliaiushchikhsia v Siriiu [Turkey Closed Its Airspace to Russian Aircraft Bound for Syria]", TASS, April 23, 2022. <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14456627>

¹⁰⁴ The Moscow Times, "Russia Resumes Military Flights to Syria as Post-Assad Ties Thaw – Bloomberg", October 30, 2025. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/10/30/syria-russia-resumes-military-flights-to-syria-as-post-assad-ties-thaw-bloomberg-a90998>

¹⁰⁵ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia's Interests in the Black Sea and Mediterranean", CNA and Harvard University, March 2025, p. 8. <https://www.transatlantic.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/TLN-RSI-Mediterranean-Policy-Paper-Gorenburg.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Sabanadze and Dalay, "Understanding Russia's Black Sea Strategy", p. 23.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Black and Sidarth Kaushal, "Russia's Options for Naval Basing in the Mediterranean After Syria's Tartus", Royal United Services Institute, February 18, 2026. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russias-options-naval-basing-mediterranean-after-syrias-tartus>

¹⁰⁸ Hanna Notte, "Russia Isn't Done With Syria", Foreign Affairs, October 3, 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/russia-isnt-done-syria>

¹⁰⁹ Kausch, "Russia's Fading Leverage", p. 2.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹² Lesser et al., "Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean".

¹¹³ Samu Paukkunen and James Black, "Deterring Russia Beneath the Waves: Securing NATO's Critical Undersea Infrastructure", War on the Rocks, June 1, 2026. <https://warontherocks.com/deterring-russia-beneath-the-waves-securing-natos-critical-undersea-infrastructure/>; Jill Lawless, "UK and Norway led a military operation to deter Russian submarines in the North Atlantic", AP News, April 9, 2026. <https://apnews.com/article/britain-norway-russian-submarines-atlantic-7aa163bc29266504dd1d4c9949aeafde>

¹¹⁴ Russia has nevertheless shown significant capacity to reroute oil exports and maintain profits from them. In late 2025, repeated Ukrainian drone strikes against Black Sea oil terminals reduced exports through them by 30.2%. Terminals in other regions, however, increased exports enough to limit the total hit to Russian exports to only 0.8%. "Russia's Seaborne Fuel Exports Fall Slightly in November, Data Shows", Reuters, December 12, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-seaborne-fuel-exports-fall-slightly-november-data-shows-2025-12-12/>

¹¹⁵ Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii Ot 26.02.2024 No. 141 "Ofitsial'noe Opublikovanie Pravovykh Aktov" [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 141 of February 26, 2024 "On the Military-Administrative Division of the Russian Federation"], President of the Russian Federation, February 26, 2024. <https://web.archive.org/web/20240228222336/https://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202402260031>.

¹¹⁶ Hans M. Kristensen, et al., "Russian nuclear weapons, 2026", Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, May 14, 2026. <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2026-05/russian-nuclear-weapons-2026/>; Linus Höller, "Researchers home in on origins of Russia's Baltic GPS jamming", Defense News, July 2, 2025. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/07/02/researchers-home-in-on-origins-of-russias-baltic-gps-jamming/>

¹¹⁷ Larissa Doroshenko, Sophie Arts, and Jana Ondrášková, "Sabre-Rattling in the Baltic Sea", GMF, August 8, 2025. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/sabre-rattling-baltic-sea>.

¹¹⁸ Lesser et al., "Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean".

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

¹²⁰ Although the situation remains highly dynamic, analysts assess that Ukraine is currently maintaining a relative military advantage expected to persist through the remainder of 2026 – albeit with growing vulnerabilities linked to energy constraints and infrastructure degradation, particularly in the winter months. As Ukraine continues to achieve incremental tactical gains on the battlefield, Russia is likely to increase its air campaign. These conditions make a near-term ceasefire unlikely. Sullivan and Finer, "Is Ukraine Now Winning the War Against Russia?"

¹²¹ Rumer, "Belligerent and Beleaguered".

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Russia is already adapting its northwestern posture. In 2024, following Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO, Moscow re-established the Leningrad Military District, enhancing C2 capacity oriented to a potential land-based contingency in the region. But large-scale offensive ambitions in this theater remain unlikely within the next three to five years. At the same time, reports suggest a gradual expansion of military infrastructure near the Finnish and Norwegian borders, including new barracks and ammunition depots, potentially enabling a significant increase in troop presence from the current 20,000-80,000 and 7,000-17,000, respectively. Plans to form additional force structures, such as a new army corps in Karelia, are also afoot.

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“Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii Ot 26.02.2024 No. 141 [Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 141 of February 26, 2024, No. 141]”, President of the Russian Federation, 2024. <https://web.archive.org/web/20240228222336/https://publication.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202402260031>

Rihards Plūme, “Russia is building military infrastructure along its borders with Northern Europe, Baltics”, Latvian Radio, June 12, 2026. <https://www.lrt.lv/en/news-in-english/19/2958257/russia-is-building-military-infrastructure-along-its-borders-with-northern-europe-baltics?srltid=AfmBOoqPLgVZvUTeo3vYc63x7AYw7nd5munPK05BWW96BZkLawOVvG9L>; “Finnish Military Intelligence Review 2025”, The Finnish Defense Forces, January 16, 2025, p. 12. https://puolustusvoimat.fi/documents/1948673/2014902/PV_sotilastiedustelu_raportti_EN_2025_web.pdf/c0125ed9-1467-23e7-e7b6-a7891c4fb5fe/PV_sotilastiedustelu_raportti_EN_2025_web.pdf

¹²⁴ Andrew Raynus, et al., “Russian Force Generation and Technological Adaptations”, Institute for the Study of War, August 23, 2025. <https://understandingwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/0825202520Tech20Adaptations20Update2028PDF29.pdf>; Anna Thacker, et al., “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 6, 2026”, Institute for the Study of War, May 6, 2026. <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-6-2026/>

¹²⁵ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “2026 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community”, March 2026, p. 18. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2026-Unclassified-Report.pdf>; Marc J. Berkowitz, “Strategic Lessons from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict”, National Institute for Public Policy, Information Series, Issue No. 549, March 6, 2023, p. 4. https://nipp.org/information_series/marc-j-berkowitz-strategic-lessons-from-the-russia-ukraine-conflict-no-549-march-6-2023/

¹²⁶ Kate Johnston, Valeria Allende, and Isabel Dlabach, “Beyond the Sahel: Russia’s Toolbox for Influence in Africa”, Center for a New American Security, May 2026, pp. 4–6, 22–26. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/beyond-the-sahel>

¹²⁷ It is beyond the scope of this report to assess these secondary factors and to explore them in depth. They are included here to give a better sense of possible long-term outcomes resulting from Russia’s war against Ukraine and the increasingly dynamic global political order. Ultimately, these factors are likely to affect the scope and scale of Russia’s action abroad.

¹²⁸ Kausch, “Russia’s Fading Leverage in the Middle East”.

¹²⁹ Ibid., Lesser et al., “Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean”.

¹³⁰ Lesser et al., “Russia, the Black Sea, and the Mediterranean”; Carter, “Understanding Russia’s Interest in Conflict Zones”.

¹³¹ Rumer, “Belligerent and Beleaguered”.

¹³² Kaushal and Dolzikova, “The Evolution of Russian Nuclear Doctrine”, p. 50.

¹³³ Rumer, “Belligerent and Beleaguered”.

¹³⁴ Nikolay Kozhanov, “Russia is weakened, but its influence in the Middle East should not be underestimated”, Chatham House, December 11, 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/12/russia-weakened-its-influence-middle-east-should-not-be-underestimated>

¹³⁵ Ibid.