



# Peace Meal - Food for Thought

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## 20 years after US invasion, Iraq is far from 'liberal democracy'

An Iraqi police officer keeps watch as Shiite pilgrims walk towards the shrine of Imam Musa al-Kadhim, in the Kadhimiya district of Baghdad, Iraq, February 15, 2023. Iraqi security forces imposed tight security for the protection of Shiite worshippers who gather at Imam Musa al-Kadhim shrine to mark the anniversary of his death. Imam Musa ibn Ja'far al-Kadhim was the 7th of Shiism's 12 principle saints.

Twenty years after the US-led invasion of Iraq toppled Saddam Hussein, the oil-rich country remains deeply scarred by the conflict and, while closer to the United States, far from the liberal democracy Washington had envisioned.

President George W. Bush's war, launched in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, is seared in memory for its "shock and awe" strikes, the toppling of a giant Saddam statue, and the years of bloody sectarian turmoil that followed.

The decision after the March 20, 2003 ground invasion to dismantle Iraq's state, party and military apparatus deepened the chaos that fueled years of bloodletting, from which the jihadist Islamic State group later emerged.

The US forces, backed mainly by British troops, never found the weapons of mass destruction that had been the justification for the war, and eventually left Iraq, liberated from a dictator but marred by instability and also under the sway of Washington's arch-enemy Iran.

"The US simply did not understand the nature of Iraqi society, the nature of the regime they were overthrowing," said Samuel Helfont, assistant professor of strategy at the Naval Postgraduate School in California.

Bush — whose father had gone to war with Iraq in 1990-91 after Saddam's attack on Kuwait — declared he wanted to impose "liberal democracy", but that drive petered out even if Saddam was overthrown quickly, Helfont said.

"Building democracy takes time and building a democracy doesn't create a utopia overnight," said Hamzeh Haddad, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Instead of discovering nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, the assault by the US-led international coalition opened a Pandora's box, traumatised Iraqis, and alienated some traditional US allies.

Major violence flared again in Iraq after the deadly February 2006 bombing of a Muslim Shiite shrine in Samarra north of Baghdad, which sparked a civil war that lasted two years.

By the time the US withdrew under Barack Obama in 2011, more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians had been killed, says the Iraq Body Count group. The United States claimed nearly 4,500 deaths on their side.

More horrors came to Iraq when the IS group declared its "caliphate" and in 2014 swept across nearly a third of the country — a savage reign that only ended in Iraq in 2017 after a grueling

military campaign.

Today some 2,500 US forces are based in Iraq — not as occupiers, but in an advisory, non-combat role in the international coalition against IS, whose remnant cells continue to launch sporadic bombings and other attacks.

The years of violence have deeply altered society in Iraq, long home to a diverse mix of ethnic and religious groups. The minority Yazidis were targeted in what the UN called a genocidal campaign, and much of the once vibrant Christian community has been driven out.

Tensions also simmer between the Baghdad federal government and the autonomous Kurdish authority of northern Iraq, especially over oil exports.

In October 2019, young Iraqis led a nationwide protest movement that vented frustration at inept governance, endemic corruption and interference by Iran, sparking a bloody crackdown that left hundreds dead.

Despite Iraq's immense oil and gas reserves, about one third of the population of 42 million lives in poverty, while some 35% of young people are unemployed, says the UN.

Politics remain chaotic, and parliament took a year, marred by post-election infighting, before it swore in a new government last October.

Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has vowed to fight graft in Iraq, which ranks near the bottom of Transparency International's corruption perceptions index, at 157 out of 180 countries. "Every Iraqi can tell you that corruption began to thrive ... in the 1990s" when Iraq was under international sanctions, said Haddad, adding that graft is more in focus now "because Iraq is open to the world".

Iraq is battered by other challenges, from its devastated infrastructure and daily power outages to water scarcity and the ravages of climate change. And yet, said Haddad, today's Iraq is a "democratizing state" which needs time to mature because "democracy is messy".

A major unintended consequence of the US invasion has been a huge rise in the influence its arch foe Iran now wields in Iraq. Iran and Iraq fought a protracted war in the 1980s, but the neighbours also have close cultural and religious ties as majority Shiite countries.

Iraq became a key economic lifeline for the Islamic republic as it was hit by sanctions over its contested nuclear program, while Iran provides Iraq with gas and electricity as well as consumer goods.

Politically, Iraq's Shiite parties, freed from the yoke of Sunni dictator Saddam, have become "the most powerful players", says Hamdi Malik, associate fellow at the Washington Institute. Iran-backed groups have managed to maintain a certain "cohesion" despite infighting after the last elections, — *continued on p.8*

# The US has a new nuclear proliferation problem: South Korea

In January, Seoul officially put its nuclear option on the table, for the first time since 1991. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol declared the country would consider building its own arsenal of nuclear weapons if the threat it faces from nuclear-armed North Korea continues to grow, which it will.

North Korea launched over 90 missiles in 2022. Those tests accompanied a major revision in North Korea's nuclear strategy, which now allows the preemptive use of nuclear weapons in the early stages of a crisis. Experts expect North Korea's ramped-up nuclear aggression will continue into the new year. Many even expect Pyongyang to conduct a new nuclear test, which would be the country's first since 2017 and a watershed event against a backdrop of global turmoil.

South Korea faces strong strategic reasons to continue developing its own nuclear arsenal. While the United States has tried to keep a lid on South Korea's nuclear ambitions, few traditional nonproliferation or counterproliferation policies are well-poised to reverse the current nuclearization of the North. It's time for a new approach.

South Korea faces an increasingly capable nuclear adversary in its northern neighbor. North Korea's nuclear arsenal, first tested in 2006, has grown rapidly. The country now hosts dozens of nuclear weapons and continues to diversify its arsenal, building more sophisticated delivery capabilities, which include intercontinental missiles capable of reaching the United States. North Korea makes dozens of threats (usually against the United States) every month, many of them nuclear in nature. North Korea has been exceptionally belligerent lately, testing more nuclear-capable missiles in the past year than it did in the previous five years combined.

South Korea has a complicated relationship with its western neighbor, too. South Korea relies heavily on China for trade, but Seoul's strong military alliance with the United States contributes to Chinese views of encirclement. So far, South Korea has walked a tightrope between its biggest military partner and biggest trade partner. But that won't last. Most South Koreans consider that China will be their country's biggest threat in the next 10 years.

South Korea has a troubled security environment, and the US security guarantee to South Korea is intended to make sure those threats don't materialize. The guarantee offers reassurance that Seoul will be protected against any adversary. The guarantee is one of the United States' strongest. The two countries boast significant military cooperation. The US military currently stations approximately 28,500 servicemembers in South Korea, regularly participates in large-scale military exercises with South Korean forces, and, under current policy, would fight under joint command with South Korean forces if a war were to break out.

But even with all this, the security guarantee doesn't seem to be enough to keep down the bubble of proliferation advocates. Policymakers in South Korea have long called for a return of US tactical nuclear weapons, and a handful of more conservative politicians have occasionally suggested that the state would be better off with its own nuclear arsenal. Increasingly, this conversation has gone mainstream. The debate was even a key talking point and part of the conservative party platform in the last South Korean presidential election.

For years now, most South Koreans have supported the idea of the country building its own nuclear weapons. By 2022, such

support had grown to over 70 percent. Russia's continued use of nuclear threats in the Ukraine war may bring that number even higher as nuclear anxiety grows. South Koreans are keenly aware that the United States and its allies have been effectively deterred by Russia's nuclear arsenal, and they worry that a similar situation could repeat itself in Asia. Public support for South Korea building its own nuclear weapons has no doubt contributed to the policy's rise out of the fringe and into the spotlight.

If South Korea is so concerned about nuclear threats from North Korea, a solution is to get reassurance that the United States will come to its aid in a fight against Pyongyang — or so the logic goes. But it isn't that simple.

The United States and South Korea already have a tight-knit relationship, and faith in the US security guarantee is already high. At least 6 in 10 South Koreans are confident that the United States will fight with them against North Korea, if need be.

US politicians have regularly emphasized the criticality of the US-South Korean relationship, and the recent Biden administration's Nuclear Posture Review made some usually heavy-handed promises in South Korea's defense, even stating that "any nuclear attack by North Korea against the United States or its Allies and partners is unacceptable and will result in the end of that regime. There is no scenario in which the Kim regime could employ nuclear weapons and survive."

But perhaps, a very credible security guarantee is just not enough — or perhaps it is even part of the problem. Even when South Koreans have faith in the US alliance, many still don't see it as a reliable solution to their perceived nuclear risks. In surveys, the more South Koreans believe the United States would use its nuclear weapons to defend them, the more they shy away from the US alliance and prefer that their own government build independent nuclear weapon capabilities.

Although counterintuitive at first sight, the rationale is simple: Why would South Koreans trust the United States to be adequately cautious with its nuclear weapons — refraining from using them unless absolutely necessary? After all, the previous US president promised to rain down "fire and fury" on the Peninsula.

South Koreans have significantly higher levels of trust in their own government's ability to make responsible nuclear choices than they do in an ally. Moreover, most South Koreans believe that their continued alliance with the United States will end up dragging Seoul into a nuclear war it otherwise could have avoided. And understandably, South Koreans don't want a nuclear war.

Any nuclear use on the Korean Peninsula — even if only North Korea were targeted — would likely have devastating environmental and health effects throughout the Peninsula. And Seoul is less than 124 miles from Pyongyang. Even in the event that North Korea invaded South Korea, most South Koreans still say in polls that they would prefer not to use nuclear weapons unless North Korea had already used them first.

Logically, South Koreans can't take it for granted that this preference will be reflected in US policy. The US nuclear doctrine makes it clear that the United States carves out the right to "nuclear first use," a tactic that involves launching nuclear weapons at an opponent before they have the chance to launch their own. Given that North Korea's missiles can now reach the US homeland, any war fighting strategy for the United States is likely to prioritize destroying these assets — and a first strike

would be the easiest way to accomplish that goal. For this reason, a credible US nuclear security guarantee alone won't alleviate South Korea's nuclear anxieties.

President Yoon was quick to note that, even now, South Korea has options other than building its own nuclear arsenal. One of these is to request that the United States re-deploy some of its tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. The United States withdrew its South Korea-based arsenal of approximately 100 nuclear weapons in 1991 to move past the Cold War. No US nuclear weapons have been stationed in the country since.

The redeployment of these weapons, however, would do little to resolve the core issues of the current crisis — and maybe quite the opposite. Deployed US nuclear weapons in South Korea would heighten North Korea's fears that the United States is preparing for the decapitation strategy it so boldly announced in its recent National Defense Strategy. There is also a moral hazard. Having nearby US nuclear weapons may embolden some in South Korea to push back harder against North Korea's threats, making tensions even worse.

Moreover, unless these weapons were operated under South Korean command — a contingency that is extremely unlikely — issues around transparency, cooperation and trust in US nuclear planning would still remain.

Redeploying nuclear weapons would certainly be a signal of US interest in defending South Korea, but what's needed now is a combination of commitment and caution. Fortright communication about when and why nuclear weapons would be used, combined with clear indicators about how nuclear use will be avoided is more important for the United States than simply showing it has the muscles. Those have been on display for decades already.

Redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons would also leave South Korea vulnerable to many of the same risks as they would incur by building their own arsenal. In this sense, even opting for US redeployment over nuclear proliferation — although it may put less strain on the alliance in the short term — remains dangerous.

The redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons would not resolve the domestic political pressures at play in South Korea. Polling from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs finds that two-thirds of South Koreans would prefer that their government build its own nuclear weapons than accept the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons, while below 10 percent prefer US weapons over South Korean ones. Outright opposition to US tactical nuclear weapons is also strong — at 40 percent, compared to just 26 percent opposed to South Korea building its own nuclear weapons. These figures suggest that a different strategy is called for, one that recognizes the need for more South Korean agency in the nuclear planning process.

If neither cementing the guarantee nor redeploying tactical nuclear weapons is the answer, what can the United States do instead? One option can be to fight back against South Korea's urge to build nuclear weapons with tried-and-tested nonproliferation policies. Nonproliferation leverages both carrots — security guarantees intended to protect a vulnerable country from nuclear threats — and sticks — sanctions and other punishments intended to dissuade this country from building nuclear weapons. Understandably, the US approach with its allies generally prioritizes carrots, but that may not continue to work with South Korea.

Could, therefore, counterproliferation strategies succeed?

Well, they did in the 1970s. When former South Korean President Park Chung-Hee embarked on a covert nuclear weapons acquisition program, the United States responded by threatening to scale back its support for South Korea and to reduce its military presence there. The pressure from Washington was a key component of Park's decision to end the program — although domestic politics and concerns about the country's international reputation also contributed to that decision.

But what worked in the past may not work today. In the 1970s, South Korea didn't face nuclear threats as obvious as those it faces today. The withdrawal now of US forces would be much more likely to convince Seoul that the only way to stop North Korea is to deter Pyongyang on its own.

Other counterproliferation policies have had mixed results. Experts argue that the threat of sanctions can often dissuade countries not to pursue nuclear weapons. However, once sanctions are imposed, they do little to reverse existing programs. South Korea may already be past the point at which sanctions would be useful. Multiple studies have found that South Koreans who support nuclear proliferation are not deterred by the threat of sanctions. Instead, South Koreans already anticipate that proliferation would result in significant sanctions — yet they would support the policy anyway.

A South Korean nuclear weapons program would almost certainly violate the obligations to nuclear nonproliferation and the peaceful, civilian use of transferred nuclear technologies that Seoul agreed to when it signed a nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States. This agreement, which remains in force until 2040, currently bans uranium enrichment in South Korea, at least without prior approval, as well as some types of plutonium reprocessing. Those capabilities would be needed for a robust nuclear weapons program. Violating its nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States could therefore trigger sanctions against Seoul. It would even legally enable the United States to demand that technology transferred under the agreement be returned. This is unlikely to be sufficient to stop a South Korean nuclear program if Seoul committed to one, but it does emphasize that the United States could levy very heavy costs.

The United States can also advance nonproliferation through leading by example. Making it clear to South Korea that the global nonproliferation regime is critical — and that a South Korean withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty would be unacceptable — could help dissuade Seoul. After all, the country is highly concerned with its hard-earned international reputation, and unilaterally leaving a major international treaty would be no small step.

The United States can also commit itself to policies that prioritize restraint and arms control. Demonstrating its ability to embrace a more cautious attitude towards the use of nuclear weapons may diminish some of the concerns about Washington's willingness to escalate to nuclear use, and it would model valuable norms in the nuclear space — norms that could perhaps even help balance against the behavior of other nuclear countries.

— *edited from Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 19, 2023*

**“Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation are not utopian ideals. They are critical to global peace and security.”**

*~ Ban Ki-moon, South Korean Secretary-General  
of the United Nations, 2007-2016*

# All START: a proposal for moving beyond US-Russia arms control

Amy J. Nelson & Michael O'Hanlon

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, March 16, 2023

Vladimir Putin's decision to suspend Russia's ongoing participation in the New START nuclear arms control agreement is hardly good news. Not only does it represent one more step in the deterioration of broader U.S.-Russia relations, it also undoes the solitary remaining link between the countries in the modern network of arms control treaties that has kept some constraints on their military competition in strategic domains in recent decades. With that said, and although he certainly meant it as no favor to the United States, President Putin's decision in February to suspend (but not annul) Russia's participation in New START may serve a higher purpose, nonetheless.

The arms control void created by a recent pattern of treaty violations, withdrawals, and suspensions creates opportunities for creative thought about what, if anything, should replace New START when it definitively expires in 2026, including especially the particularly thorny issue of bringing China's nuclear arsenal into an arms control regime. China has an arsenal that is currently dwarfed in size by the United States' and Russia's but seems likely, according to many Western projections, to grow significantly in the next decade. Numerous efforts to "include" China and its arsenal in legally binding arms control treaties have cropped up in recent years, ranging from the dramatic charade of awaiting a Chinese delegation that had not accepted an invitation to US-Russia arms control negotiations in Vienna, Austria to quieter efforts to build capacity for onsite inspections that would necessarily accompany China's participation in any treaty.

As an alternative to bringing China into existing bilateral treaties, we propose a new strategic framework that would broaden participation in arms control and provide mechanisms to include all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (the P-5), with China, Britain, and France joining the United States and Russia in a future accord. Let the brainstorming about the best name for such an accord begin, but one starting point might be to call it "All START" to underscore that it would include all states that legitimately possess nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Indeed, it could eventually even include Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea, countries that have refrained from or withdrawn from the NPT, which codifies the division between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states. Additionally, even though bilateral strategic nuclear arms limitation treaties have traditionally been of finite (and relatively short) durations, this should be an accord of unlimited duration to avoid the requirement to renegotiate at regular intervals when geopolitics may not be conducive.

To achieve its inclusive purpose, All START would de-emphasize quantitative arms limits without jettisoning them entirely. Limits on nuclear warheads and delivery devices, like those obtained under New START, would remain in place for Russia and the United States. The remaining countries would submit information on their own plans for nuclear arsenal modernization and nuclear force deployments. But in the new format, the main obligations of China, the UK and France would be to accept the transparency and monitoring provisions that are at the heart of modern strategic arms control — and that remain useful even in an era when numerical limitations may now make less sense for many reasons.

An All START accord would continue to emphasize the traditional goals of arms control as first underscored by Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin in 1961 — to reduce the chances of war, to reduce the damage of war should it occur anyway, and to reduce the costs of preparing for possible war. But it would do this through transparency that lowers uncertainty about capabilities and intentions. As such, it would emphasize managing uncertainty as a central purpose of modern arms control, with less devotion to the cause of numerical decline in the size of arsenals.

The New START accord, signed by US President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010 — a successor to the SALT agreements under US Presidents Nixon, Ford and Carter of the Cold War and the START treaties under President George H.W. Bush — has been useful since its entry into force in 2011. New START limits long-range nuclear warheads that can be mounted on land- and submarine-based missiles and heavy bombers to 1,550 for each side — still several times what would be needed to destroy Russian and American society. But those numbers are 80 percent lower than Cold War levels. Not only has New START reduced the risk of a nuclear accident simply by reducing the number of devices in which such an accident could occur, it has also meant that Russia and the United States saved a lot of money compared to what they might otherwise spend on an unconstrained nuclear arms race. Additionally, through on-site inspections and data exchanges, New START has also fostered transparency and confidence-building, easing fears that either side might be planning a surprise buildup or even nuclear first strike against the other.

But even without the latest shenanigans from Moscow, New START had become dated. Though it is a much-evolved version of earlier bilateral nuclear limitation agreements, it adheres too closely to the original formula to maintain long-term relevance in an increasingly complex strategic environment. Specifically, limitations on shorter-range or tactical nuclear weapons, where Russia has had a lead, were left for a successor agreement. Likewise, long-range precision-strike conventional weapons, where the United States generally sets the pace, were left for a future negotiation. Same for Putin's Dr. No-like dream weapons, including silly contraptions without an obvious mission like intercontinental nuclear-armed torpedoes.

Most of all, New START leaves out China — a country that, after decades of being content to marshal nuclear forces less than a tenth the size of the US arsenal, now appears bent on owning 1,500 of its own nuclear warheads by 2035, according to the Pentagon's latest assessments. The existing treaty also offers no sufficient incentive for Beijing to join. Now is a particularly opportune time for new ideas for bringing China into an arms control agreement. Even though China's arsenal would likely remain no more than a third of our own arsenal's size, in a world where Moscow and Beijing increasingly collaborate strategically, such a force level could no longer be considered negligible.

Early approaches to China's nuclear arsenal and its challenge for arms control consisted of repeatedly asking China to join an existing or future arms treaty to, for example, cap its buildup at 1,000 to 1,500 warheads. That number would be several times the size of China's arsenal today, but remain far below US levels, so, from the Western point of view, it seems reasonable. But unfortunately such a prospect never proved sufficiently enticing to

Beijing. Additionally, Putin has called for a return to something like Cold War blocs by requesting that British/French nuclear strength of about 500 warheads be factored in alongside US strategic forces. Combined with US warheads, the British and French contributions could sustain a rough parity between the Western alliance system and the China-Russia “axis.”

There are several problems with this approach. Not only is China uninterested in this or any other kind of formal arms control at present, Beijing may also feel it may need to grow its arsenal in the near future. If, for example, the United States tries to invoke nuclear superiority in a future Taiwan crisis upon deciding it can no longer count on just conventional military forces to protect the island, China may wish to checkmate that capacity by growing its arsenal to a size that approaches nuclear parity with the United States. Second, and in fairness to Beijing, China is probably tired of getting harangued for its supposedly aggressive nuclear behavior after more than half a century of considerable restraint. If entering arms control talks would subject China to more criticism of this ilk, China may understandably have little interest.

Third comes a problem for the United States: Even if this kind of accord maintained a certain parity between “East” and “West” today, it would favor Chinese and Russian forces numerically in the long run (since Britain and France have no intentions of building up their own forces). Such an agreement could place the US at a numerical disadvantage and override potential US benefits from the treaty. Finally, such an approach risks pushing Beijing and Moscow even further together through the structure of future arms control accords, when the real US strategic goal should be the Nixonian one of eventually driving them apart.

The right approach taken for a future arms treaty must not to leave China out, yet not bring it in as part of the same bloc as Russia, either. A more creative third way is the approach needed.

Such an approach has many benefits. First, it reduces the uncertainty that drives aggressive behaviors like arms buildups. Should China, along with Britain and France, join the United States and Russia in a formal treaty that mandates verification measures, data exchanges, and consultations, it would foster transparency and reduce uncertainty. This could be a potentially more enticing and feasible negotiation agenda than imposing limits on the new participants.

This new approach would include treaty-based mechanisms to discourage big nuclear buildups — but without formal numerical constraints on China, France or Britain. The three new participants would be asked to declare, as with the Paris climate-change convention, their nuclear goals for the future. Such declarations would be non-binding, in the sense that they could be modified. But all participants would be subject to inspection and assessments of compliance. They would also be expected to explain and defend their plans for nuclear modernization or expansion. These would be the new and unequivocal requirements for being a “responsible nuclear power.”

All START would not by itself make the world a calm and safe place. No arms control treaty can do this. That is not, nor was it ever, the purpose of arms control. We know enough about the proper aspirations for any arms control regimen by this point to know full well that no technocratic arms control regimen can override or supersede the fundamental problems of international security and global order. The better part of arms-control wisdom is to keep goals in line with political reality.

So, the treaty we propose would neither attempt to curtail all

nuclear competition, nor ban some degree of Chinese expansion of its arsenal, nor curb whatever plans the French and British may devise for the future of their arsenals. To attempt as much would be to run at crosscurrents with the prevailing forces and dynamics of today’s great-power relations. Arms control will still be useful under this new architecture, it will just look a little different. Or at least begin a little differently, inverting the process by seeking transparency en route to reductions, rather than transparency for the purpose of verifying reductions.

This approach is less of a departure from “traditional” arms control treaties than it may seem. Arms control is increasingly valuable for the information it provides, and treaties have grown in breadth to include multiple methods of providing information even since SALT I, which relied on national technical means (spy satellites) exclusively.

The treaty we propose could clearly state that by 2030, the onus would be on any country considering a nuclear buildup to justify to the other parties and the world why such an expansion is necessary. Such moral suasion is admittedly not always an adequate tool for limiting the assertive behaviors of nations. But if it did not suffice to limit nuclear arms racing, the other parties would retain the right to withdraw from the treaty framework. Moreover, any willingness by Moscow and Washington to agree, in this or a future accord, to further nuclear cuts would naturally depend in large part on the nuclear expansion efforts of China. That understanding would create at least some implicit leverage to employ with Beijing as well as Moscow.

Furthermore, rather than a numerical limitation treaty of limited duration, this agreement ought to be one of unlimited duration, with provisions for flexibility and adaptation, including a consultative body and a mechanism for including additional members. The flexibility should afford consideration of novel technologies of relevance in the future, as needed. Since these technologies would not necessarily have to be limited or banned, the new treaty framework could aim for the more realistic and still desirable goal of ensuring transparency, such that new technologies do not generate fears of disarming first strikes or other paths toward greater crisis instability in the relations among the world’s nuclear powers. The hope is that, at a more conducive time, reductions and possibly even a missile defense-related declarations could follow.

This arms control framework would be a long-term means of managing uncertainty and enhancing transparency in the nuclear competition, while also keeping at least some lid on the cost of any multi-party nuclear arms race. We know information about nuclear arsenals has high value. The proposed approach simply leverages what had become self-evident.

Given the state of great-power relations today, this kind of accord may well not prove negotiable for some time. However, in light of the current eroded state of the international arms control architecture, we are already overdue for a conceptual debate about how to think about the future of arms control once that is again possible. Perhaps Putin has just reminded us to get on with it.

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# How the Kremlin has co-opted its critics and militarized the home front

Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

In late September, following devastating Russian setbacks in Ukraine and Russian President Vladimir Putin's controversial "partial mobilization" of the Russian population, the Kremlin faced an explosion of popular discontent on social media. Notably, some of the most vocal criticism came from the government's core supporters: ultranationalists and military hard-liners who felt that Russia was not fighting as well as it should. By the beginning of October, the recriminations were coming close to Putin's own circle, with Ramzan Kadyrov, the notoriously brutal head of Chechnya, issuing a long diatribe on Telegram, the messaging app. According to Kadyrov, a Russian general who had lost a crucial town in Donetsk was "being shielded from above by the leadership in the General Staff." Other leading figures close to Putin, including Yevgeny Prigozhin who runs Wagner Group, the military contractor with close ties to the Kremlin, echoed similar complaints.

But just as the situation appeared to be getting out of control, the criticisms died down. By November, most of the hard-liners had been brought in line and were no longer assailing Russia's war strategy. Meanwhile, the military itself has quietly been handed control over many parts of the Russian economy, giving the government and the Ministry of Defense broad new powers, even in the private sector. Taken together, these developments highlight the growing influence of the military and those close to it, in the way that Putin wields power at home. Rather than making the regime more vulnerable, as some Western observers have suggested, the setbacks in the war in Ukraine over the past few months have offered Putin an opportunity to expand his hold over Russian society, and even over his military critics.

Almost since the invasion began last February, Russian hard-liners have been criticizing the Kremlin's war strategy. Many hawks were dismayed by the chaotic invasion and Russia's serial failures during the first months of the war, and they were not buying the Ministry of Defense's narrative that it was acceptable to lose so many Russian troops to a supposedly inferior enemy. Nor were they happy when Ukraine began to regain ground, first around Kyiv and then farther east. What was more striking, however, was how this pushback was made public.

By the time of the invasion, any debates about the army in the Russian media and the Duma had long been suppressed, and after February 24, the Kremlin also introduced more sweeping censorship of any discussion about the war. But the Internet was still available, and Telegram quickly became the go-to alternative for military commentators. Owned by a Russian company and used primarily as a messaging app, Telegram has long had an unusually significant role in Russia, particularly through its network of channels on which prominent users can broadcast to large numbers of subscribers. It was also one of the very few social media platforms that was not immediately blocked by the government when the war started.

As a result, when it became clear that the invasion wasn't going according to plan, interest in Telegram skyrocketed. Ultranationalists and other hard-liners, always distrustful of the media, flocked to military commentators on the platform to learn what was really happening. On these channels, they could find a relatively honest and open debate about the problems the army was facing in Ukraine, as well as grassroots efforts to help Russian

troops. These channels brought together a large constituency that supported the war but was dismayed at how it was being fought. One of the most prominent channels was run by Igor Girkin (known as Igor Strelkov), a hardcore nationalist and Federal Security Service veteran who became defense minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic in 2014. (In November, Strelkov was convicted in absentia by a Dutch court for his role in shooting down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17.) Strelkov had long been pushing for an all-out war with Ukraine, and when the invasion faltered, he launched a vicious attack on Russia's generals. And although he has long been considered an outcast by the military establishment, Strelkov was able to maintain close knowledge about the situation on the ground because military rank and file respected and trusted him. Drawing on his own sources, he posted regular battlefield updates and openly reported Russian military failures, mistakes and retreats that sharply contradicted the Kremlin's heroic narrative about the "special operation."

Even more radical was Strelkov's associate Vladimir Kvachkov, a 74-year-old former colonel in the Soviet special forces with a long record of right-wing violence, who joined Strelkov in blasting Russia's military command. Soon, Strelkov and Kvachkov could be found on YouTube and Telegram presenting their analysis of Russia's disastrous war and challenging the official accounts of the Russian retreat. Still, for much of the spring and summer, Moscow didn't take them seriously. That changed in September, after Ukraine launched its dramatic counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region. Strelkov's Telegram channel grew to more than 600,000 subscribers, and he was now joined by a growing chorus of other critical voices.

First were the so-called voenkors, Russian journalists who were embedded with the army. Traditionally, voenkors have been fiercely loyal to the Kremlin, but in this war they developed an even stronger rapport with soldiers on the frontlines. Most of them have their own Telegram channels, where their unalloyed reports have gained huge followings. A channel maintained by Alexander Kots, a correspondent for the tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, now boasts 680,000 subscribers; another, called *WarGonzo*, run by veteran war journalist Semen Pegov, now has 1.3 million subscribers. For many Russians, channels like these are the true voice of the army, which has made their discussion of Russia's military setbacks all the more potent.

By fall, the voenkors were joined by an even more influential strain of criticism from people close to the Kremlin itself. Take Kadyrov, who has long enjoyed close ties to Putin. In a series of posts on his Telegram channel, the Chechen leader issued blistering assessments of the war, although he refrained from criticizing Putin personally. It was in this vein that he issued his October 1 tirade. When Lyman, a crucial railway hub in the Donetsk region, was taken back by the Ukrainians, Kadyrov singled out the Russian commander who had been responsible for the town's defense. "I cannot stay silent about what happened in Lyman," he wrote, placing the blame squarely on the military's top leadership.

Coming from a longtime Putin ally, these comments posed an unusual challenge to the official military narrative. And other insiders supported him. Most notable was Prigozhin, Putin's chief, a former Soviet-era convict, and for the past decade the leader of

the notorious Wagner Group, whose fighters have also played an important role in Ukraine. By this point, Kadyrov's comments were being amplified by voenkors and other ultranationalists, who added stark new reports from the frontline. Meanwhile, as Putin's mobilization got underway, Russian social media was filled with videos from around the country showing angry and crying people who had no interest in joining a deadly war. Caught between the Telegram critics, who wanted Russia to fight harder, and many ordinary Russians, who were increasingly concerned about a war that was a debacle, the Kremlin looked as if it might be losing its grip on Russian opinion.

On October 8, Putin finally acted. In a major shift, he reorganized Russia's chain of command, appointing Sergei Surovikin as the overall head of Russian forces in Ukraine. On paper, Surovikin is an unlikely choice: his thuggish record includes seven months in prison for his involvement in the failed coup d'état of 1991 and criminal charges for weapons smuggling, as well as accusations that he beat up a colleague. But Surovikin has one thing in his favor: the Telegram warriors approve of him. As soon as the announcement was made, veterans and military correspondents praised his appointment; Kadyrov and Prigozhin also supported him. Only Strelkov kept his critical stance, reminding his subscribers of Surovikin's checkered career. Such was the change of tone on Telegram that when Ukrainian forces humiliated Russia by bombing the bridge to Crimea, a vital Russian supply route, the voenkors were largely silent and Strelkov accused them of turning into Kremlin propagandists.

Even as the voenkors pulled back on their criticism, however, the Kremlin took further steps to end dissent. On October 14, it became known on Telegram that Russia's General Staff had asked prosecutors to investigate nine military critics, including Pegov and Strelkov, for violating a new law against spreading "knowingly false information" about the army. (This is a law that the Kremlin has used frequently to silence critics since the start of the invasion. In the spring of 2022, one of the authors of this article was put on Russia's wanted list on similar charges.) The investigation was meant to send a warning to others on Telegram, and it did. Correspondents immediately gave up criticism of the military leadership, reporting instead on generally positive news about the mobilization and "improvements" in logistics, training, and other matters.

The Kremlin has also begun to reward voices that toe the party line. On November 17, having given up his criticism of the war, Kots was appointed to Russia's Human Rights Council, a body that enjoys some access to the Kremlin and which Putin has recently filled with loyalists. A week later, the Kremlin awarded Pegov, who has also curbed his harsh reporting, the Order of Courage. And the regime has even managed to tamp down on Strelkov. After reports surfaced of the investigation against Strelkov and others, Strelkov seems to have reached some kind of accommodation with the Kremlin. The Kremlin allowed him to leave Moscow to help form his own "volunteer battalion" and join the fighting. In return, he stopped commenting on the war. By November, his Telegram channel had gone silent.

The Kremlin has not stopped bringing its military critics into line. In an effort to give the military more clout in Russian society, it has also taken significant steps to militarize the economy. On October 19, Putin established the Coordination Council for Material Support of the Russian Federation Armed Forces, a body charged with organizing federal and local authorities' activities, as

well as the "healthcare system, industry, construction, transport, and other sectors," in support of the war in Ukraine. Behind its bureaucratic-sounding name lies a clear purpose: all federal ministries and regional governments must now prioritize providing the army with supplies, military equipment, and other resources. Denis Manturov, Russia's industry and trade minister, has been put in charge of arms and military equipment deliveries for the council according to the "specific orders of the Ministry of Defense."

In fact, Russian officials have talked about militarizing the economy since the early stages of the war. In June, First Deputy Prime Minister Andrey Belousov, a hard-liner who was trained as an economist, explained what this "mobilization economy" would look like: Russian society would be focused on "specific targets" and the private sector would be required to meet those goals. Most important, he said, an elite body would be assembled to restructure the economy for this purpose. According to Belousov, in a militarization economy, the most critical Russian industries would be assisted and supplied by many others.

But it was not until July that the Kremlin began to put these ideas into practice. Under a law adopted by the Russian parliament, the government acquired expansive controls over the wartime economy, including the power to implement "special economic measures" to appropriate the production of private companies as needed. As a result, private companies can now be required to fulfill military contracts on demand, and their employees must work overtime to meet production targets. The effect of these measures seems likely only to grow in the coming months. In late November, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said that the government plans to increase defense purchasing by 50 percent in 2023.

Unsurprisingly, the business sector has not entirely welcomed the law. In theory, it could help businesses by giving them lucrative military contracts. In reality, however, it has added to the Defense Ministry's growing influence over civilian life. Already, the call-up of hundreds of thousands of men and the new laws giving the military control of domestic industries have had far-reaching effects. The generals now have a decisive say in the economy. They can also mobilize any number of employees in any corporation, which makes them more powerful than ever. Along with the silencing of military critics and regaining control of the narrative, these steps have given the Kremlin an effective way to close ranks.

And here may be a stark reality that the West needs to acknowledge. Just because Putin is losing on the battlefield in Ukraine doesn't mean that he is losing control at home. If anything, the most recent stages of the conflict have allowed the Kremlin to extend its reach over public opinion and the civilian economy. The chances that domestic pressure could force Putin to seek to end the war are slimmer than the military situation suggests.

– edited from *Foreign Affairs*, December 6, 2022

**"A state of war only serves as an excuse for domestic tyranny."**

~ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008),  
Russian author, activist and Nobel laureate

## **Iraq, 20 years after invasion** – *continued from p. 1*

he said, adding that “Iran is playing a crucial role” in making sure the cohesion lasts. By contrast, Iraq’s minority “Kurds and Sunnis are not strong players, mainly because they suffer from serious internal schisms”, said Malik.

Pro-Iran parties dominate Iraq’s parliament, and more than 150,000 fighters of the former Iran-backed Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary forces have been integrated into the state military.

Baghdad must now manage relations with both Washington and Tehran, says a Western diplomat in Iraq speaking on condition of anonymity. “It is trying to strike a balance in its relations with Iran, its Sunni neighbours and the West,” the diplomat said. “It’s a very delicate exercise.”

– *EURACTIV.com with Agence France-Presse, March 9, 2023*

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