

BICOM Strategic Assessment

Russia in the Middle East

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## Key points

- For Moscow, the Middle East is a strategic opportunity: to extend its military and naval footprint to the Mediterranean; cultivate markets especially for arms and nuclear power; control gas sources; expand its global influence; and offset the power of the West.
- Russia is taking advantage of the vacuum created by US retrenchment which began under Obama, and a chaotic and unpredictable Trump administration, by offering arms supplies and strategic cooperation to potential clients across the region. Russia plans to be a military actor in the Middle East for the long term, securing a 49-year lease on a Syrian airbase.
- Whilst Russia is cultivating relations across the region, Iran is the primary beneficiary. With Russian acquiescence, Iran is building a corridor of territorial control through Iraq and Syria to its powerful proxy Hezbollah on Israel's border in South Lebanon. However, following their military and diplomatic achievement, Russia and Iran's distinct agendas for Syria now come into play, and it remains to be seen if those agendas will clash.
- Though Israel has respectful working relations with Moscow, Russia's cooperation with Iran is a major concern. A new and uncharted strategic situation is evolving in Syria around the Russian backed de-escalation deals which legitimise Iran's role, and a recent US-Russia agreement relating to Southern Syria adjacent to Israel's border.
- Israeli policy makers must develop new policies and determine how far they can go to assert the country's interests and limit the threat posed by Iran and its allies in Syria, whilst avoiding a confrontation with Russia.
- The UK and other Western powers should remain cognisant of the long term threats to regional stability beyond ISIS, and the capacity of Russian policy to empower an Iranian led Shia-axis that will fill the void, harm Britain's regional allies and sow the seeds for future regional challenges.

## What is Russia's Agenda in the Middle East?

- *Build Russia's position as an alternative pole of global power:* Russia's sense of national pride and specialness is shaped by immense geographic size, which imbues a sense of innate global role and significance. This is coupled with a sense of insecurity enhanced by structural problems including a weak economy over-dependent on energy and an aging population. Maintaining its position in the Middle East, and achieving a favourable outcome in Syria, is therefore not only a question of preserving Russian interests, but its identity and pride. To advance its own status, Russia seeks to exploit conflicts to undermine US and Western interests and strengths, and to fill vacuums left by the US.
- *Cultivate markets for Russia's politically and economically important arms industry:* Russia is the only state to rival the US arms industry for combining diversity and scale with high technological sophistication. Russia accounts for 25 per cent of the world's arms exports – thus providing Russia with an invaluable foreign policy tool. The industry is also very important domestically, employing 2.5m Russians, around 3 per cent of its workforce, and accounting for a significant proportion of Russia's manufactured exports. Russia must cultivate foreign markets to sustain the industry, which Russian state demands cannot do alone.
- *Expand its military and geopolitical footprint, including to the Mediterranean:* Russia operates the valued Tartus naval facility on Syria's Mediterranean coast, where ships from the Russian Black Sea fleet can resupply, giving the Russian military a strategic foothold in the Mediterranean. This reflects a historic geopolitical aspiration for a military presence in the Mediterranean, with its warm water ports. Russia has also leased an airbase at Hmeimim near Latakia from Syria for 49 years in a January 2017 deal.
- *Expand into Mediterranean energy markets:* The Eastern Mediterranean is increasing in potential significance as a source of gas, and Russian energy companies have explored opportunities to extract gas with several players, including Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Authority. As well as providing a commercial opportunity, Russia seeks a stake in the energy projects of its rivals, and has a history of using energy as a political tool, by cutting off supplies during tensions with neighbours.



- **Gain leverage over the West and prevent isolation and sanctions:** Russia's economy has been harmed by international sanctions targeting individuals, and sectors including energy, finance and arms, imposed after its intervention in Crimea and Ukraine. Russia seeks to avoid Western orchestrated isolation by positioning itself as a central player in a key arena for Western security. However, though some have argued that Russia might "trade" concessions in Syria for Western concessions in Europe, recent Russian orchestrated de-escalation agreements suggest no such "grand bargain" is on the table.

## How is Putin pursuing his agenda?

### Syria: Russia's winning hand

- **Demonstrate dependability as an ally:** Russia is keen to demonstrate that it is a great power ally that does not betray its partners, in contrast to the US whose credibility in the Middle East waned under Obama and whose reliability is questioned under Trump.
- **Combat Sunni Jihadist extremism:** Russia's estimated 14m Muslims account for around 10 per cent of its population. Several thousand have participated as foreign fighters in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, posing a potential risk to Russian security on their return. Major Russian cities have suffered regular attacks by Jihadists originating in the North Caucasus, who have increasingly pledged loyalty to ISIS, and a Russian airliner crashed over the Sinai in 2016 with ISIS claiming responsibility. Russian agents have reportedly facilitated the movement of Jihadists from Russia to Syria, where the Russian air force targeted them. Whilst Putin cites fighting Jihadists as his main motivation in Syria, the focus of his military on preserving Assad rather than destroying ISIS reveals his wider agenda.
- **Preserve Putin's regime stability:** An assertive foreign policy is part of Putin's strategy to maintain legitimacy in his authoritarian power within Russia's nationalistic society. This became all the more important after internal protests in 2011-12. Putin looks with great unease on internal dissent and tends to view revolutions as Western-orchestrated. Putin also uses hostile relations with the West to defer blame for economic and social problems, and to justify limits on freedom, an approach sometimes amorphously referred to as "sovereign democracy". Regime legitimacy is particularly important in the run up to Russia's March 2018 presidential election.
- **In recent months Russia has capitalised on military successes it helped Assad attain by brokering de-escalation agreements** with Turkey and Iran, and subsequently with the United States. The Astana agreement signed in May 2017 with Russia, Turkey and Iran as signatories, creates de-escalation zones to stop fighting between Assad forces and moderate opposition not affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (comprised of a number of jihadi groups, the largest of which is Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, which was formerly known as Al Nusra) or with ISIS. The guarantor states are to deploy military forces to checkpoints and observation posts around the safe zones.
- **Separate understandings were reached with the United States and Jordan in July 2017.** This latter agreement, of direct relevance to Israel, establishes US-Russian-Jordanian cooperation to supervise de-escalation in southwest Syria which borders Jordan and Israel. Russian military police have already deployed in this area. The legitimacy the Astana arrangements give to Iran's military presence in Syria – as one of the parties whose forces will be deployed as guarantors – is opposed by Israel (see below). It also marks an apparent US concession to Russia's goal that Syria should remain united under Assad's control for now.
- **These diplomatic moves follow a carefully calibrated Russian military intervention** which began in September 2015. Putin has defied warnings from President Obama that he would drown in Syria. His strategy has secured maximum impact for minimum investment and risk. Russia has managed to

swing the war in Assad's favour, steer the diplomatic process and secure US acceptance of its dominant role, having deployed little more than 50 planes, along with helicopters and a small number of ground personnel in support of Assad and his allies. *Russia's airstrikes have primarily focussed on rebel groups which threaten the Assad regime* and which are favoured by Western powers (as opposed to focussing on ISIS). They have also targeted civilians in rebel areas. This has enabled Assad to recapture Syria's territory, notably Aleppo, where the Russian backed assault created a humanitarian disaster, and triggered mass migration to other Middle Eastern states and Europe. Though they have suffered some military losses and a civilian aircraft was blown up over Sinai, the achievements have been considerable.

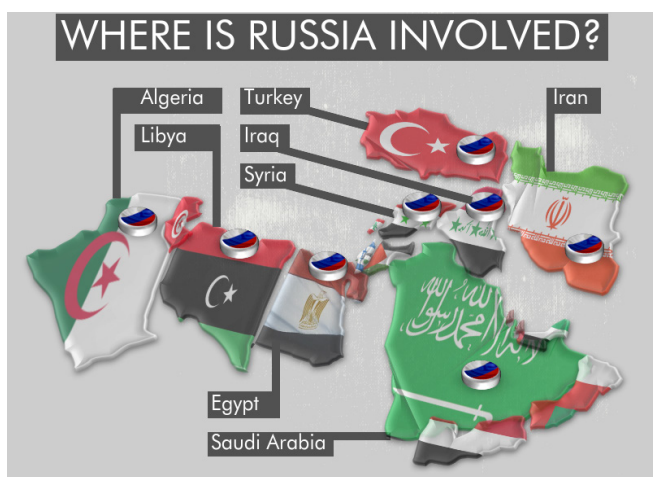
- *Russia's has cooperated closely with Iran and Hezbollah.* Russia's successful intervention on Assad's behalf has depended on Iranian led Shia forces on the ground. Russia has also used Iranian bases for Russian air missions and reportedly provided heavy weapons direct to Hezbollah.
- *Russia has provided diplomatic cover for Assad* by blocking UN sanctions resolutions and coordinating diplomatic approaches that favour Assad and side-line the US and EU. It is also accused by Western states of a propaganda and disinformation, for example denying the Syrian use of Chemical weapons.

#### *Iran: Russia's partner and rival*

- *Following their military and diplomatic achievement, Russia and Iran's distinct agendas for Syria now come into play.* Russia's priority is a compliant and stable Syrian regime which will host Russian forces, purchase Russian arms, and repel Western influence. Iran also seeks

a permanent military presence, establishing a land corridor through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah in South Lebanon, and seeking to establish Hezbollah military infrastructure to threaten Israel over the Golan Heights, potentially turning the Lebanese and Syrian border areas into a single front. Each will want to dominate the Syrian regime and promote its economic interests, creating the potential for rivalry. Iran has invested financially and suffered considerable military losses to keep Assad in power, and may resist Russian attempts to dominate. It remains to be seen how Russia will respond to Iran using Syria as a base for itself and its proxies. This may concern Russia if it limits the Assad regime's central authority and creates a potential source of instability through conflict with Israel. Though Russia agreed with the US to keep Iranian forces away from the borders of Israel and Jordan, the extent of the commitment and how hard Russia will try to stop Iranian-Hezbollah infiltration is unclear. This situation creates new strategic puzzles for Israel (see below).

- *Russia has an ambivalent relationship with Iran's nuclear program.* Russia built Iran's Bushehr nuclear power station and has a contract to build two more. Whilst Russia does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, it worked to dilute sanctions and other pressure on Iran over its nuclear program, seeking to open up Iran as a market for Russian arms, energy and civil nuclear technology and to build a counterweight to US regional power.
- *Welcoming President Rouhani on an official visit to Russia in March 2017, Putin spoke of developing a "strategic partnership" between the countries.* He mentioned economic cooperation, cooperation in oil, gas, and nuclear power, as well as the "joint efforts" to achieve a "cessation of hostilities" in Syria. Their joint statement reflected their underlying shared interest to reduce US and Western influence regionally and globally.



#### *Libya: Expanding Russia's footprint*

- *Russia has expanded its influence in Libya through military support for Gen. Khalifa Haftar* who controls the oil-rich eastern part of the country with Egyptian backing, and opposes the UN backed Government of National Accord headed by Fayeز Mustafa al-Sarraj in Tripoli. As in Syria, Russia justifies its support on the basis that Haftar is fighting Islamist extremists, but it is widely interpreted as being motivated by the desire to cultivate

leaders dependent on Russian arms sales, able to offer ports for the Russian Navy, and open to Russian energy companies. This is another example of Russia gaining significant leverage with a small commitment.

### Sunni Arab states: Russia “hedging its bets”

- *Russian-Saudi relations have recently warmed but remain affected by deep differences over regional issues.* The world’s two largest oil exporters have recently taken steps together to cut oil production in order raise prices which are suppressed by shale oil output from the United States. They have also discussed a potential arms deal.
- *Yet the Saudis regard with deep concern Russia’s regional agenda,* including its partnership with Iran, which Saudi Arabia regards as its overwhelming threat. The two have also been backing opposing sides in Syria, with the Saudis backing opponents of the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia has a long and deep economic and strategic partnership with the US, included cooperating to contain Iran.
- *Both Russia and Saudi Arabia see benefits in a stronger relationship.* The Russians are happy to be in a position to broker between competing powers in the region, to open up another potential arms market, and to fill a vacuum created by Gulf States, waning confidence in the US. The Saudis are interested to reduce dependency on an increasingly unreliable Washington, and to gain potential leverage over Russia and its dealings with Iran.
- *Russia also has an evolving relationship with Egypt,* which has been firmly in the US orbit since the late 1970s. This includes arms sales and a deal to build a nuclear power plant. Again, the context is declining confidence in the US. The Obama administration withdrew support for Mubarak during the Arab Spring and temporarily suspended arms sales following the military led counter revolution in 2013, while the Trump administration trimmed and delayed aid over human rights concerns in August 2017.

### Turkey: strengthening ties

- *Russia’s relations with Turkey – historically a rival – are also improving* as Turkish tensions with the US and other NATO “allies” including EU members increase.

- *Relations have recovered from a low point after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter* on its Syrian border in November 2015. This was illustrated by their cooperation in the Astana process.
- *Reports in July of a Turkish plan to acquire from Russia the sophisticated S400 air defence missile system* in a \$2.5bn deal have caused concerns in NATO.

### Arms sales

- *The Syrian conflict has provided a shop window for Russian arms,* showing the effectiveness of Russian weaponry, the reliability of Russia as a supplier and the value of Russian strategic support.
- *Iran has been discussing with Russia acquiring Sukoi 30 advanced fighter aircraft and T-90 tanks,* with sanctions on sales of offensive weaponry to Iran due to be lifted in 2020. Israel lobbied to try and prevent delivery of the S300 missile defence system to Iran, seen as a potential barrier in any future Israeli airstrikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. Delivery reportedly went ahead in 2016.
- *Syria, Iraq and Algeria are Russia’s other principle customers for Russian arms including advanced air defence systems* such as the S300, with Turkey also close to acquiring the more advanced S400 from Russia, according to reports.
- *Reports that Hezbollah is receiving heavy weapons direct from Russia are of deep concern to Israel.*

## RUSSIAN ARM SALES

Russia has been able to use the Syria conflict as a shop window for its arms, demonstrating its reliability as a supplier and the effectiveness of its weapons

<b>Iran</b>  Discussing purchasing T-90 tanks and Sukoi advanced aircraft. Reportedly received the S300 air defence system in 2016.	<b>Syria</b>  One of Russia's primary customers for arms including air defence systems, such as the S300.	<b>Hezbollah</b>  Reports of Hezbollah receiving advanced weaponry from Russia are a deep concern for Israel.	<b>Turkey</b>  Close to acquiring the more advanced S400 air defence system.
<b>Algeria</b>  One of Russia's primary customer for air defence systems and other arms.	<b>Iraq</b>  One of Russia's primary customer for air defence systems and other arms.	<b>Egypt</b>  In addition to attack helicopters, in discussions over MiG 29/35 fighters.	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>  Hopes to gain leverage over Russian relations with Iran through an arms deal.

- *Russia is by no means limiting its supplies to the Iranian-led regional axis.* Egypt is acquiring Russian attack helicopters and discussing the possible acquisition of MiG 29/35 fighters. Russia is even negotiating with Saudi Arabia over a potential arms deal, with the Saudis possibly hoping to use massive buying power to gain leverage over Russia in its relations with Iran.

## How is Russia's regional role seen from Israel?

### *A background of wary respect*

- *Israel-Russian ties have gone through a process of normalisation since the end of the Cold War but remain complex and delicate.* At the core of Israeli foreign policy is its relationship with the US, and Israel has traditionally seen itself as part of the Western political orbit with very close economic and cultural ties to the EU. By contrast, the Soviet Union backed Israel's Arab enemies and the PLO during the Cold War and Russia only restored relations with Israel in 1991. Russia continues to give diplomatic support to the Palestinians, e.g. voting for a recent UNESCO resolution that obscures Jewish attachment to Jerusalem, and Russia maintains contacts with Hamas, contrary to Israeli and Western efforts to isolate the group.
- *Russia's military engagement in Syria has pushed Israeli leaders to develop close working relations with Putin.* Netanyahu's visit to Sochi in August 2017 was his fourth visit to meet with Putin in three years and Israeli officials report a personal relationship of mutual respect and Russian acknowledgement of Israel's interests and capabilities.
- *Israel successfully established with Russia a military channel for deconfliction,* enabling Israeli aircraft to continue operating over Syria to enforce its declared red lines, including repeated air strikes to stop advanced weapons convoys reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon. Russia has accepted Israel's red lines in Syria and not prevented Israel from carrying out airstrikes, though the presence of Russian aircraft and missile defence has made the situation much more delicate. An interview given by recently retired Israeli Air Force commander Amir Eshel reveals the care Israel has taken to avoid a situation similar to that

in which Turkey shot down a Russian jet in November 2015. Israel is treading a fine line. In March 2017, Russia issued a rebuke after Israel publicly acknowledged an airstrike in Syria, after a Syrian anti-aircraft missile was intercepted by Israeli missile defences.

- *The potential for Israel to become a gas exporter is another dimension to relations with Russia.* Though Israel's reserves are puny compared to Russia, its proposed partnership with Greece, Cyprus and Italy – as well as potentially with Turkey – offers a potential rival source of supply for a European market that is keen to diversify. Russian state owned Gas giant Gazprom has expressed interest in becoming a partner to develop Israel's Leviathan gas field, filling an Israeli need for partners with the money and expertise to get the gas onto the market, but could intend to use that position to impede the potential of it becoming a rival.
- *In the background, the presence in Israel of close to 1m immigrants* from the former Soviet Union, some of them in very senior political positions, creates the basis for significant people to people and economic ties. Israel is a significant destination for Russian tourists, and Israel has even provided defence equipment to Russia in the form of drones.

### *New dilemmas for Israel over Russia's Syria and Iran policies*

- *Russia's agenda which helps Iran strengthen as an alternative regional pole to US power, and to establish itself in Syria, is opposed to Israel's interests.* Whilst the Assad regime is a long-time adversary, and all Jihadist actors are problematic for Israel, Israel fears Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah filling the vacuum. Israelis are concerned about Assad remaining dependent on Iran and Hezbollah. Iran is already establishing a land corridor through Iraq and Syria to Hezbollah's heartland in south Lebanon (on Israel's border), and is trying to establish military infrastructure in Syria, including on the Golan which threatens Israel and Jordan. PM Netanyahu has made clear [his opposition](#) to the Russian-Iranian-Turkish de-escalation plan agreed in Astana, which appears to legitimise Iran's presence.
- *Netanyahu also sharply criticised the US-Russia-Jordan agreement relating to Southern Syria* (on which Israel was consulted) for not adequately addressing Israeli concerns. According to [reports](#), Israel requested Iran and its proxies be

kept 60-80km from its borders, but Russia only committed to terms that keep them 5km from the border. Israel tried to persuade the US to toughen the agreement against Iranian activities but apparently found the administration unwilling to jeopardise a rare diplomatic success with Russia. Netanyahu also tried to persuade Putin, no doubt making the case that Iranian-Hezbollah presence will ultimately undermine Russian attempts to stabilise the country and Assad's regime. Russia still needs its Iranian partner on the ground. Israel therefore finds itself in an unusual position of having the US and Russia in agreement on a policy which is unsatisfactory for Israel.

- *The situation is now fluid, with Israeli policy makers weighing how far they can go* to assert the country's interests and limit the threat posed by Iran and its allies in Syria, whilst avoiding a confrontation with Russia. Israel's policy for the last few years has been one of non-interference in Syria save for protecting its "red lines": stopping advanced arms transfers to Hezbollah; preventing Iran/Hezbollah establishing itself in the Golan, and deterring any side from firing on Israel. It has also provided some humanitarian assistance and medical care for Syrians in the border area. Now Russian ground forces may complicate Israel's ability to act against threats in the border area, and Israel's freedom to act against Iran's expanding presence elsewhere in Syria is in question.
- *Some Israel policy makers are arguing that Israel needs to define new and broader "red lines"* and gain greater leverage over Syria's future. Some argue it is now in Israel's interests for the war to end quickly and for Assad's central regime to stabilise with Russian support and thereby reduce their dependency on Iran.
- *Syria blamed Israel for an airstrike on a regime site on 8 September*, variously reported to be developing chemical weapons, as well as precision missiles for Syria and Hezbollah. If so, it would mark a significant development for Israel to target a Syrian regime facility as opposed to Hezbollah weapons in transit. It comes after repeated warning from Israeli officials of Iranian efforts to upgrade Hezbollah's supply of precision rockets. Notably, the strike garnered no public reaction from Russia.

*between the Gulf and the West ... has been the bedrock of our shared prosperity and security".* She added that, "we must also work together to push back against Iran's aggressive regional actions, whether in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Syria or in the Gulf itself." She highlighted the importance of cooperation in counter terrorism and defence, and a UK-GCC trading relationship worth £30bn per year and set to become even more important as Britain leaves the EU. The opening of the new Royal Navy base HMS Juffair in Bahrain illustrates UK commitment to the region. By contrast Russia's policies are empowering Iran in all these theatres.

- *In Syria, British policy makers need to look wider than the immediate concerns* of Russia's shocking human rights violations, its diplomatic cover for Assad, and its failure to focus its fire on ISIS. UK policy makers should also pay attention to the long term strategic significance of Russia's regional strategy, which threatens to allow Iran and Hezbollah to fill the vacuum in Syria.
- *The UK and its allies should consider how to prevent Iran using its strengthened position in Syria to upgrade the military support it provides to Hezbollah*, undermining the UK's important work to isolate the group, which led to the proscription of its military wing by the EU in 2013. If Iran establishes, with Russian acquiescence, the land bridge it seeks through Iraq and Syria to South Lebanon, its strategic position and that of Hezbollah will be greatly enhanced, increasing the risk and potential severity of a renewed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.
- *UK policy makers should recognise that Iran will remain a threat to regional stability long after ISIS is defeated.* It is a threat that will grow as its economy and military recover from sanctions, and when the restrictions on its nuclear program are lifted. Iran's quest for regional hegemony, fuelled by a radical anti-Western Islamist ideology, makes it inherently threatening to its Western-aligned Sunni Arab neighbours. Iran's increasing threat will further ratchet up tension and the risk of conflict between Iran and its proxies, and other states in the region. It is important to consider how to contain this rising threat.
- *Consideration should be given to the question of to what extent Russian and Iranian agendas can be separated*, and whether Russia can be persuaded that its interests in a stable Syria may be undermined by Iran using the territory as a base to extend its regional threat.

*What should Britain's priorities be?*

- *Theresa May told Gulf leaders gathered in Bahrain in December 2016 that the "relationship*

- *The UK should encourage the US to maintain a leadership role* in the Middle East and to consider options for a more active military and diplomatic role in shaping the future of Syria. Russia has achieved leverage with relatively small deployments of forces, aided by the US decision not to take military action against Assad's forces or airfields and not to impose a no fly zone.
- *Britain must also consider the consequences of allowing Russia to fill power vacuums elsewhere* in the Middle East including Libya, and how Russia's negative influence can be deterred or balanced.

## Why does Russia's Middle East policy matter to the UK?

The Putin-regime's Middle East policy should be seen in the context of its wider agenda, which directly challenges UK-interests in a number of ways:

- The Putin regime perceives the West, including the US and Europe, as an adversary. It opposes a US-led liberal global order. It perceives the EU and NATO as a threat to what it considers its "sphere of influence" in Eastern Europe – a perception fuelled by EU and NATO's Eastern expansion, US missile defence infrastructure in Eastern Europe, and the sanctions following the Russian moves in Crimea and Ukraine. Putin also perceives the US and its Western allies as a potential threat to his regime stability – fuelled by US public support for anti-Putin protests in Russia in 2011. Putin therefore uses all opportunities to undermine Western power, including in the Middle East.
- Russia sees a confluence of interests with powers that share its agenda to counter US-hegemony, such as Iran.
- Russia repeatedly undermines the norms of international behaviour supported by Britain – including human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and peaceful resolution of conflict through international institutions – through aggressive foreign policy and covert intervention in the internal affairs of other states, including:
  - o Invasion and occupation of its neighbours, as in Ukraine and Georgia.
  - o Deliberately targeting civilians in Syria, according to Western governments.
  - o Attempts to sway democratic elections not only in the US, but elsewhere including France, and Macedonia; a policy tool that seeks to exploit the "vulnerabilities" of free elections that are open to manipulation, and to undermine confidence in these institutions.
  - o International assassination of regime adversaries, e.g. Alexander Litvinenko in London.
  - o Large scale deceptions, to the point of denying military involvement in Ukraine, but also large scale cheating in sports events.
- Russia's military interventions in Ukraine and Georgia have heightened concerns of NATO members, leading to the UK deploying a battalion in Estonia; deploying Typhoons for a Baltic Air Policing mission; and leading NATO's Very High Readiness Task Force with 3,000 personnel.
- Russia has also repeatedly probed areas adjacent to UK air and naval spaces.
- The dependence of the EU on Russia for 25-30 per cent of its solid fuel, gas and oil is also a source of vulnerability for the UK's European partners.
- The UK also has significant economic relations with Russia, including trade and investments, with BP's 20 per cent stake in the Rosneft energy giant a notable example



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