



UNIVERSITY of
SOUTH FLORIDA
Global and National Security Institute

RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE:

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CENTRAL REGION

6th Great Power Competition Conference

December 8, 2022 // University of South Florida

— **CONFERENCE REPORT** —



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Dr. Galina Alexopoulos





The 4-Star Review

Insights and observations from General McKenzie, who served from 2019 - 2022 as Commander of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM)

The unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has become a prolonged and unresolved war with significant casualties and displaced persons. Western nations, including our own, have provided extensive financial and military support to Ukraine, but this intervention has also heightened tensions with Russia. Those tensions have raised the stakes in the war, including the potential for nuclear confrontation.

Russia's military has performed poorly in Ukraine, proving to be an embarrassment to Vladimir Putin. Unfortunately, both his temperament and Russian strategy emphasize escalation as the preferred way to maneuver out of a crisis. At this point, however, the Russian president has very few escalatory tools available that aren't nuclear.

Russia's invasion has weakened its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and greatly affected its standing in the Middle East. There now exists opportunities for the US to expand our influence in the region, to capitalize on Russia's diverted attention and resources. While these new opportunities are welcome, it is important for the US to remain vigilant with regards to concerning developments in the Middle East.

Russia's growing partnership with Iran poses a significant threat to regional stability, with concerns arising from Iran's missile capabilities and other UAV programs, as well as their support for militia groups. The potential alignment of Iran, Russia, and possibly China, is a critical threat to a world order that supports rule of law over authoritarianism.

Russia is actively working to salvage its influence and access in the region by utilizing its traditional means of leverage: energy transit and military sales. Opportunities persist, however, for the US to exert slow but substantial pressure on Moscow through strategic investments in the region.



General (Ret) Frank McKenzie,
Executive Director, GNSI

One such opportunity lies with the vast diplomatic machinery of the United States, which has championed a world order based on rule-of-law for many decades. This stands in stark contrast to China's purely transactional relationships with the countries in this region and Russia's fear-based engagements. The US can succeed in the region by upholding American values and fostering enduring partnerships. This is not a time for isolationism, but rather a time for strategic agility, leading while actively listening and engaging with other nations from their perspectives.

Meanwhile, we need to utilize foreign military sales (FMS) as a platform for developing partnerships and cooperation. While our equipment and technology is among the best in the world, the antiquated and bureaucratic processes of our FMS system has led some of our partners to turn to China.

For their part, China has quickly engaged them, without extensive end-user agreements. To re-gain a competitive advantage over China, we must streamline and improve our FMS program.

Lastly, as the challenges in the region continue to evolve, our approach should evolve as well. To maintain our competitive advantage, it is crucial to maintain a sufficient military presence in the region. Our allies and partners perceive our decreasing presence in the region as motivation to seek out other security partners. We must show them that we're committed to them for the long run and to the long term vitality of the region.

July 5, 2023

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for the Central Region

6th Great Power Competition (GPC) Conference December 8, 2022

Introduction

On December 8, 2022, the [Global and National Security Institute](#) (GNSI) held the 6th Great Power Competition (GPC) conference titled "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for the Central Region" at the University of South Florida's Tampa campus. The conference featured two panels: "Understanding Russia's Strategy in the Central Region" and "How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Has Affected Drug Trafficking and Transnational Organized Crime in the Central Region." During these panels, invited experts analyzed the implications of the Russo-Ukrainian War for the Middle East and Central Asia, the United States' interests in the region, and the opportunities that have emerged for the United States to compete with Russia and China.

The Current State of the War

The war in Ukraine has lasted over a year with no end in sight.ⁱ Russia's failure in overthrowing the Ukrainian government, and Ukraine's slow advance in its recent counteroffensive has transformed the war into one of attrition. The former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev recently suggested that the conflict could persist for decades punctuated by occasional cease-fires.ⁱⁱ This prolonged conflict has already resulted in the deaths and injuries of more than 350,000 soldiers on both sides,ⁱⁱⁱ as well as the displacement of roughly eight million Ukrainians.^{iv} The scale of the conflict and its impacts continues to grow. Unlike previous conflicts in Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014), the West has decided to take a more engaged approach by providing significant support to Ukraine. The United States has provided over \$80 billion in aid to Ukraine, with \$46 billion covering military assistance.^v

In terms of aid from the West, [Ambassador Marshall Billingslea](#) stated, "Arming a friendly freedom-loving nation to defeat a massive and unprovoked Russian invasion is a quintessentially American thing to do." To provide a historical context, Amb. Billingslea referred to the Reagan doctrine, which warns against passivity in the face of assaults on liberty. Ambassador Billingslea noted, "During the first nine months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they had more soldiers killed than in nine years of their invasion of Afghanistan. This level of casualties is not sustainable for the Russian military." [Amb. Billingslea](#) highlighted the impacts of sending

military aid to Ukraine, "Every \$175,000 Javelin or \$120,000 Stinger that we provide to the Ukrainians that knocks out a 4- or 20-million-dollar tank or helicopter or combat aircraft, that translates into a decimated Russian military." A cost-worthy investment that in Billingslea's view "not only renders Russia incapable of winning in Ukraine but also prevents them from posing a threat to NATO allies for decades to come, if we do this correctly."

This intervention has escalated tensions between NATO and the Kremlin to such an extent that [General \(Ret\) Frank McKenzie](#) described the current situation as the most dangerous he has witnessed in his lifetime. He noted, "We are on the brink of a nuclear confrontation with a nuclear peer." The former commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) explained that a major reason for the rising tensions is the poor performance of the Russian military in Ukraine. He noted, "The war in Ukraine is not progressing as Russia had anticipated. When we refer to Russia, we are essentially referring to one person, Vladimir Putin. Mr. Putin is in a corner, and there are very few ways for him to gracefully back down. Unfortunately...both his temperament and Russian strategic thinking emphasize escalating your way out of a crisis. And frankly, Mr. Putin has precious few escalatory tools available to him that aren't nuclear."

Echoing General McKenzie's remarks on the complexity of the situation, [Dr. Golfo Alexopoulos](#) characterized the



current conflict as an existential one for Putin as he denies Ukraine's nationhood. Dr. Alexopoulos highlighted that Putin's goal is to reclaim what he perceives as lost Russian lands, as outlined in his article [On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians](#). The

recent annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts (Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Luhansk) signifies Putin's determination.^{vi} By understanding Russia's ultimate agenda, Alexopoulos contends, we can better anticipate Moscow's next moves and better prepare for future challenges. Considering Putin's goal to restore Russia's global power, there has been ongoing speculation that his objective is to revive the

Soviet Union (USSR). Putin has lamented the collapse of the USSR as the "demise of historical Russia."^{vii}

[Ambassador \(Ret\) Philip S. Kosnett](#) argued, "I don't think Putin is attempting to recreate the Soviet Union. I think he is attempting to recreate the Russian Empire." Considering the prominent role of the Russian Empire in Eastern Europe and the Baltic region, it is reasonable to argue that Ukraine will not be the last victim of Russian expansionism. He emphasized that, "Russia poses a threat not only to Ukraine but... to Europe as a whole." Countering Ambassador Kosnett's view, [Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg](#) posited that Putin doesn't want to restore either USSR or Russian Empire. He believes Putin's Russia is driven by two major desires in its foreign policy: "One is to control its immediate neighborhood. I think he's trying to just control that region, and in some cases, that means an annexation, as we see in Ukraine. In other cases, it just means sort of trying to dominate the other governments while they retain their independence." Dr. Gorenburg explained that the second desire is attempting to restore Russia's position

of global influence and its ability to interact with the US and China as equals.

The Implications for the Greater Middle East

The Greater Middle East has felt a series of impacts from the war in Ukraine. [Amb. Kosnett](#) expressed his perspective on the situation in the Caucasus, "We can see that Russian influence is, for the moment at least, fading. People see that Russia has bitten off more than it can chew in Ukraine and doesn't have the hard power and soft power to influence events in the Caucasus." According to [Amb. Kosnett](#) the decline of Russian influence has provided opportunities for other actors to expand their presence in the region. He noted that in 2020, Putin had the ability to act as a peacemaker and negotiate a deal between Azerbaijan and Armenia, but it is unclear if he has the clout to do so today.

Russia appears to be losing influence in other regions. [Amb. Kosnett](#) pointed out that the Central Asian states' lack of support for Putin's adventurism in Ukraine distanced them from Russia. Kosnett mentioned "that Putin sought Kazakh troops to join him in the Ukrainian adventure, but Kazakhstan declined, with its leader stating that they are not obliged to kowtow to Moscow or follow Russia's lead. Uzbekistan also expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity, which reportedly angered Putin. He threatened to repatriate the millions of guest workers from Russia to Uzbekistan to create trouble for the country."

The Central Region



Figure 1: Source Data from the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) [Area of Responsibility](#).

[Dr. Gorenburg](#) supported the argument that the war in Ukraine is diverting the Kremlin's attention from other regions, thereby undermining Russia's international influence. He noted, "Russia has somewhat narrowed its focus in the past year. This narrowing can be attributed to the necessity of focusing on Ukraine and various domestic challenges that have served as distractions. Before the war, Russia had been actively seeking to increase its influence in different regions. Specifically, it had shown interest and garnered attention in far-flung regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia. However, the current circumstances have caused a shift in Russia's priorities." Although it may appear that Russia has lost focus on Central Asia and the Caucasus, Moscow has been actively attempting to expand its ties with Middle Eastern

states. [Amb. Billingslea](#) provided an explanation for Russia's decision to expand relationships in the region: "some of the trade restrictions imposed by the United States, Europe, and some Asian allies are starting to have an impact on Russia's war machine. The Russian defense ministry cannot fulfill its needs due to limited access to Western technology and components. As a result, significant bottlenecks are emerging in various areas of the Russian supply chain. In absence of direct access to Western markets, Russia has been [looking] for other alternative options, including the United Arab Emirates with its... free trade zones."

Amb. Billingslea pointed out that Russian intelligence services are actively involved in addressing these bottlenecks. They employ officers specialized in evading export controls and establishing commercial footprints to acquire dual-use technology under the guise of legitimate purposes. Amb. Billingslea particularly emphasized that Dubai has been a hub for such activities and has been used by Iran, China, and North Korea. Furthermore, some vessels previously used by Iranians to smuggle oil are now in Russian service. Billingslea emphasized that oligarchs would play a significant role in revenue generation if the Russian economy were targeted effectively. He suggested freezing and seizing assets as a measure that can be implemented by law enforcement agencies and treasuries. He also highlighted the potential contribution of CENTCOM in this effort, even beyond military forces. Billingslea drew parallels to the actions taken against the Afghan threat and ISIS, indicating the importance of all-source analytical capability, planning methodologies, and military-to-military contacts in achieving success.

Regional Rivalry

Putin's decision to increase cooperation in the Middle East is reminiscent of the Khrushchev era, when the Kremlin's pivot to the Middle East policy significantly escalated tensions in the region^{viii}. This is particularly concerning given the challenges that the US faces from Iran.^{ix} [General McKenzie](#) expressed concerns about Iran's ongoing efforts to enhance the size and capabilities of its missile arsenal. He noted, "Iran is focusing on improving its land attack capabilities, cruise missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles. This indicates that Iran is actively working to strengthen its offensive capabilities in terms of long-range precision strikes and unmanned aerial operations."

Emphasizing General McKenzie's argument on Iran, [Rear Admiral Curt Renshaw](#) underscored the significant challenges and threats posed by Iran in the region. He considers Iran to be the real challenge and raised concerns about the possibility of an unholy alliance between Iran and Russia. He suggested that the current partnership between Iran and Russia could potentially benefit China's global ambitions. The convergence of these powers is seen as a potential threat to the existing

world order and regional stability. Aligned with General McKenzie and Admiral Renshaw, [General Michael "Erik" Kurilla](#) emphasized that Iran continues to undermine regional security through its support of militia groups, its ballistic missile capabilities, UAV capabilities, and routine threats to international waterways.

General Kurilla noted that Iran sends advanced weapons to the fight and its affiliated groups frequently target American troops in Iraq and Syria. He highlighted that Iran now possesses the largest and most diverse arsenal of missiles in the Middle East, using them to coerce, intimidate, and bully neighboring countries. General Kurilla pointed out that the Iranian regime has developed a significant drone capability, ranging from small short-range systems to advanced intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance units. They are also working on larger drones with extended range and more lethal payloads. Beyond drone development, Iran has explored cryptocurrency as a resource, as acknowledged by [Amb. Billingslea](#), "We knew Iran was getting into the crypto business back on my watch at the Treasury." He stated, "Some very recent discoveries indicate that the Iranians were using a dark exchange that was colluding with and financing the huge Chinese exchange, and we found that more than 8 billion, at least 8 billion in crypto assets were flowing."

Illicit Drug Trade

[Dr. Andrew Whiskeyman](#) asserted the importance of continued attention to drug trafficking in the context of CENTCOM. He pointed out that Russia's decision to invade Ukraine has had various second and third-order effects including the proliferation of drug trafficking activities. [Rear Admiral Renshaw](#) furthered Dr. Whiskeyman's comments by drawing attention to the drug trade in relation to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He explained that the major drug trafficking route runs from the opium fields in Afghanistan through the Caspian Sea or the Central Asian nations into Russia. He highlighted that the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and to some extent Uzbekistan, is not secure, and there are smuggling activities along the coastlines of Iran and Pakistan. Admiral Renshaw emphasized that addressing this problem requires partnerships and innovation. He likened having a single destroyer patrolling in the Red Sea to having just one police car, indicating that a comprehensive approach is needed to combat the drug trade effectively.

The Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in 2021 has enormously escalated drug trafficking and may force the US to pay even closer attention. In this context, [Dr. Jonathan Schroden](#) provided insights into the illicit drug trade in Afghanistan and its connection to the Taliban



insurgency. In December 2022, Dr. Schroden estimated that Afghanistan is responsible for approximately 85% of the global supply of illicit opium and heroin, with most of the opium poppy grown in the southern Pashtun heartland. The Taliban insurgency derives a significant portion of its income from the opium trade, and the current surge in opium production in Afghanistan will increase the funds available to the Taliban and other radical groups. Dr. Schroden noted that following the Taliban's takeover, poppy cultivation is expected to expand, although the Taliban leader declared a ban on poppy cultivation in March of 2021. According to Dr. Schroden, at this point the chances of an international endeavor to resolve the poppy cultivation in Afghanistan are minimal because of the lack of significant involvement from the United States and the international community. He expressed skepticism about future engagement, especially given recent Taliban actions like the ban on women's education and public executions.

Although Afghanistan may not currently appear as a promising battlefield against narco trafficking, there are valuable lessons learned from earlier counterdrug operations in the country. [Mr. Matthew Donahue](#) highlighted the success of the joint military-law enforcement efforts in Afghanistan, specifically through the Judicial Wire Intercept Program (J-WIP). This program focused on intercepting communications to gather evidence and share it with various agencies and the intelligence community. The investigative units in Afghanistan serve as an example of what can be achieved when different agencies and authorities work together to stabilize a country and address common problems. Mr. Donahue emphasized the importance of collective and interagency collaboration to tackle challenges in regions like Afghanistan and Mexico. He noted without such cooperation, progress will be limited.

Strategic Competition

[General Kurilla](#) highlighted Russia's objectives to weaken Western security structures in the Middle East and Central Asia, emphasizing the continued challenge to US security interests in the region. He pointed out that Putin's interests in the Middle East range from energy transit to security relationships and military sales. Despite recent damage to Russia's reputation and influence, General Kurilla noted that Russia is actively working to preserve its influence and access in the Middle East. He mentioned Russia's efforts to create an industrial zone near the Suez Canal, with an expected investment of \$7 billion dollars. Additionally, Russia

seeks to control events in Syria through arms and security agreements, private military companies, and military bases. Russia also conducts bilateral and multilateral exercises in the region. Despite all of this, General Kurilla, pointed out that opportunities in the region still exist for the US because of Russia's poor military performance in Ukraine. He suggested that by making strategic investments in Central Asia without jeopardizing the position of US partners would place additional pressure on Putin over time. He emphasized the need to cultivate deep and lasting partnerships to serve as a hedge against China and Russia in the region while deterring destructive behavior from Iran.

[Rear Admiral Nicholas Homan](#) bolstered General Kurilla's point about the growing Russian presence in the Middle East, saying, "Russia currently adopts a pragmatic and opportunistic approach in its engagement with countries in the Middle East and Central Asia." He



explained that Russia presents itself as a great power to achieve its malign objectives while highlighting Russia's military presence in Tajikistan (its largest military base outside its borders). He also mentioned Russia's possession of an airfield in Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, Russia utilizes its dominant role in Central Asian security and economic

organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, to leverage its influence in the region. While the Middle East is not a primary focus of Russia's overall strategy, Rear Admiral Homan suggested that Russia considers its 2015 intervention in Syria as a significant strategic success. This move has allowed Russia to project power into the eastern Mediterranean region and threaten NATO's Southern flank.

Additionally, Russia solidified its control in Syria by securing a 49-year lease for the port of Tartus and developing an airfield to enhance its operational capabilities in the region. Regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on Russia's Middle East policy, Rear Admiral Homan believes that Russia's overall strategy in the Middle East and Central Asia will likely remain relatively unaffected. He suggested that Russia will continue to seek opportunities to deepen and expand its relationships with other countries in the region. While the West focuses on Russia's malign behavior, [General McKenzie](#) emphasized the importance of not overlooking China amidst the focus on Russia. He acknowledged that while dealing with Russia's aggressiveness, it is crucial to remain vigilant regarding China's intentions. He noted that China is engaged in a strategic, long-term plan that has been in motion for decades.

Echoing General McKenzie's warning, [General Kurilla](#) stated that similar to Russia, China has significant interests and investments in the Middle East. China's

goal is to become the world's leading superpower by 2049, which makes the Middle East a key area of focus. As the world's second-largest economy, China has effectively utilized soft power to increase its influence in



the region. This includes creating economic zones, providing infrastructure loans, investing in port facilities, and increasing military hardware sales. China's Belt and Road Initiative is also laying the groundwork for a more active military role in the region, while potentially undermining the

sovereignty of host nations. General Kurilla concluded that both Russia and China have significant stakes in the Middle East and are actively competing against and challenging US security interests.

[Amb. Billingslea](#) discussed a new aspect of China's Middle East strategy, highlighting that in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, one potential response from the United States could be to enforce trade embargoes and blockades on sea lanes. To counter this, China has established contracts with countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as naval facilities in the UAE, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, and Sri Lanka, aiming to reduce the effectiveness of such actions. Amb. Billingslea emphasized that it will be the responsibility of CENTCOM to ensure the openness of trade routes for future administrations. He added that Xi Jinping has likely determined that China can withstand financial sanctions and will seek extensive financial entanglements with gulf financial institutions to help sanction-proof its regime. As a result, Amb. Billingslea predicted that China will aggressively push for assured access to raw materials.

In addition to China and Russia's active presence in the region, their cooperation with regional actors deserves great attention. [Dr. Gorenburg](#) highlighted the importance of this cooperation by referring to the common interests between Russia and Iran. He argued that Iran seeks to collaborate with Russia in bypassing sanctions and exploring areas such as weapons development and suppressing opposition protests. Saudi Arabia perceives its interests as diverging from those of the United States and Western European countries, particularly in controlling oil prices. As a result, they have leaned towards supporting Russia. According to Dr. Gorenburg, both Turkey and Saudi Arabia have expressed dissatisfaction with US pressure on human rights issues. For these nations, collaborating with Russia is seen as a way to exert leverage on the United States to reduce that pressure, aligning with their own interests. Despite having limited resources compared to before the Ukraine invasion, Russia has skillfully used these concerns to maintain its position in the Middle East. For instance, Russia has reduced its military presence in Syria, but the impact has been minimal due

to existing infrastructure and support in the region.

While China and Russia are expanding their ties with regional actors, they are also increasing their bilateral military cooperation in the region. [Dr. Michael Slobodchikoff](#) highlighted the current "marriage of convenience" between Russia and China, emphasizing that their primary objective is to counter US influence in the region. He pointed out, however, that it is important not to overlook the fact that Russia and China have been strategic rivals for a significant period. Despite their current alignment of interests, their underlying rivalry and differing geopolitical goals could resurface in the future. Given the historical roots of rivalry between Russia and China, Dr. Slobodchikoff suggested that "there are many fissures [for the US] there to exploit, Russia is actually very worried about China and China's influence and becoming a junior partner."

The Path Ahead

The implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the Middle East are vast. The growing military cooperation between Russia and Iran presents a rapid threat to the West. Both nations are establishing compatibility in their defense industries, with Iran supplying Russia with UAVs and ammunition, while, in turn, Russia provides Iran with sophisticated warplanes and other advanced weapons. This partnership introduces new challenges for the United States. Furthermore, nations' reliance on both Russia and Ukraine for their wheat imports raises concerns about food security in the region, as the continuation of the war may exacerbate social tensions.^x Moreover, Russia's military involvement in Ukraine has led to the withdrawal of its troops from Central Asia, creating a security vacuum in the region and fueling an increase in illegal drug trades. Additionally, due to international isolation, Russia and its intelligence apparatus have sought to expand their presence in Middle Eastern trade hubs, including the UAE free trade zone, to bypass sanctions. This has complicated anti-money laundering efforts. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its partnership with Iran have created an opportunity for China to exploit the West's attention on the war and pursue more aggressive actions against Taiwan.

Lastly, despite the importance that the US has placed on tightening Russia's sources of revenue, various nations including US allies seem to have difficulties aligning with this strategy. As Ambassador Billingslea stated, "The Europeans today are sending every single day more than half a billion dollars in oil and gas purchases to Moscow [while] India and China have stepped in to pick up what's left... The Wagner group has been operating a wide range of raw material concessions across the Middle East and Africa, which are big moneymakers. [Wagner Group has a] monopoly that they've established over the diamond trade [in] the Central African Republic... they've got gold mines in Sudan [and] they've got concessions in Libya and Syria..."

Although the challenges in the Middle East are vast, the United States has unique resources to overcome its



adversaries in the region. One of these resources is its effective diplomatic machinery. In this context, [Amb. Kosnett](#) emphasized the importance of American diplomacy in projecting not only national interests but also the values that the US upholds. Amb. Kosnett asserted that this is not a time for isolationism or weakness

but rather a time for “strategic humility.” The United States should continue to lead but also recognize that it is not perfect and does not have all the answers. Amb. Kosnett, emphasized the need for active listening and engagement with other nations and perspectives. Establishing a productive partnership with these countries requires “consistency,” as he stated, “People need to trust the US will not change every 4 years.” Complementing Amb. Kosnett’s suggestion, [General Kurilla](#) emphasized the importance of aligning partnerships with American values. He contrasted these values with China’s relationships, which he characterized as usurious and purely transactional. He also highlighted the behavior of Russia’s bullying tactics with its Central Asian neighbors and its building fear-based constructs. General Kurilla expressed his belief that upholding American values and nurturing enduring partnerships is the key for our success.

According to [Dmitry Gorenburg](#), the current divide in Central Asia presents an opportunity for the United States. Gorenburg explained that the people in the region view their alternatives primarily as Russia or China, with limited belief in a US’s long-term commitment. There is a significant amount of distrust towards China, leading them to prefer Russia as a potential partner. Dr. Gorenburg suggested caution should be exercised when promoting democracy in Central Asia. He stated that, “The problem with democracy promotion, as the US has practiced it over time is that a lot of it... falls off whenever there's some other interest that's more important... so there's accusations of hypocrisy. For that reason...I think the way to deal with that is ... a show me don't tell me situation ... if you practice it then you become that beacon.”

Emphasizing Dr. Gorenburg’s point, Amb. Kosnett, “I think the way to get at this is to acknowledge that American democracy is far from perfect. We’ve been at it for over 200 years. We’re still trying to make it work, you know, and rather than just use the old warmed over talking points, acknowledge to countries that are struggling with the same sorts of issues that it’s hard, and we have to look for solutions together. Something

else that I think we need to do, and this is really hard for Americans [to do]. Sometimes we need to do nothing.... So, it’s really tough for Americans just to sit back and watch. But there are times when it’s necessary.” In addition to the significant role that American values can play in resolving challenges, [General Kurilla](#) highlighted the importance of utilizing foreign military sales (FMS) as a tool for partnership and cooperation. He stated while FMS has been a program since 1951 and has played a significant role in the development of military capabilities for NATO countries in Europe, he is concerned about the overly managed and bureaucratic nature of the system. He argued that when the FMS system becomes too slow and cumbersome, it pushes partners towards competitors. In contrast, China can move quickly without the constraints of extensive end user agreements. General Kurilla suggested that by streamlining and improving the FMS program, the US can create a competitive advantage over China that would be challenging for Beijing to overcome.

He concluded by emphasizing that when FMS is not burdened by excessive management and bureaucracy, it has the potential to work effectively for partners in the Middle East. [Rear Admiral Homan](#) echoed General Kurilla’s point that despite Russia’s limited success on the battlefields of Ukraine, it is still a significant supplier of arms in the Middle East. Historically, arms sales have been an area where Moscow has been able to compete with the United States in the region. However, Rear Admiral Homan suggested that in the future, countries in the region may become more skeptical about acquiring equipment of questionable quality, particularly if such transactions could expose them to potential sanctions. He sees this as a potential opportunity for the US.

In this context, General Kurilla suggested that, in order to protect its interest in the region, the United States must, “maintain our competitive advantage there... the US military must partner strategically, and that requires sufficient force posture.” Additionally, General Kurilla argued that while US can amplify its resources by expanding partnerships with Middle Eastern Nations, “it is ideally suited to supercharge resources and expand on those partnerships through the power of innovation.”

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6th Great Power Competition Conference -- Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Implications for the Central Region

December 8th, 2022 (Conference Video available at GNSI YouTube page: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRzAE8cgDJY>)

Speakers

[Rick Scott](#), U.S. Senator from Florida

[Rhea Law](#), President, University of South Florida

[Dr. Eric Eisenberg](#), Senior Vice President University - Community Partnerships, USF

[General \(Ret\) Frank McKenzie](#), Executive Director, Global and National Security Institute and former commander, USCENTCOM

[General Michael E. Kurilla](#), Commander, U.S. Central Command

[Marshall Billingslea](#), Ambassador and former Assistant Secretary at the U.S. Department of Treasury

Panel 1: Understanding Russia's Strategy in the Central Region, post-Ukraine Invasion

Moderator: [Dr. Golfo Alexopoulos](#), Professor and Director of the USF Institute for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies

• [Rear Admiral Nicholas Homan](#), Director, CENTCOM J2

• [Ambassador \(Ret\) Philip Kosnett](#), Former Ambassador to Kosovo and Senior Fellow for the Transatlantic Defense & Security program at the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)

• [Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg](#), Center Associate at Harvard University, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and Senior Research Scientist, CAN

• [Dr. Michael O. Slobodchikoff](#), Chair/Associate Professor Political Science, Troy University

Panel 2: How has Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Affected Drug Trafficking and Transnational Organized Crime in the Central Region?

Moderator: [Dr. Andrew Whiskeyman](#), COL (Ret), Associate Professor, College of Information and Cyberspace, National Defense University

• [Rear Admiral Curt Renshaw](#), Director, CENTCOM J3

• [Marshall Billingslea](#), Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute and former Special Presidential Envoy for Arms Control

• [Dr. Jonathon Schroden](#), Director, Special Operations Program/Director, Countering Threats and Challenges Program, CAN

• [Mr. Matthew Donahue](#), Deputy Chief of Operations, Department of Foreign Operations, DEA

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ⁱ G. Alexopoulos, T. Schnauffer II, [A Lasting Peace to the Russo-Ukrainian War](#), GNSI 2023

ⁱⁱ G. Falconbridge, [Russia's Medvedev: Ukraine conflict may last for decades, no talks with Zelenskiv](#), Reuters (2023)

ⁱⁱⁱ G. Falconbridge, [Explainer: Blood, treasure and chaos: the cost of Russia's war in Ukraine](#), Reuters 2023

^{iv} [Ukraine Emergency](#), USA for UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency 2023

^v J. Masters, W. Merrow, [How Much Aid Has the U.S. Sent Ukraine? Here Are Six Charts](#), Council on Foreign Relations 2023

^{vi} [Factbox: The four regions that Russia is poised to annex from Ukraine](#), Reuters 2022

^{vii} A. Osborn, A. Ostroukh, [Putin rues Soviet collapse as demise of 'historical Russia'](#), Reuters 2021

^{viii} M. Katz, [Change, Continuity and Moscow's Middle East Policy](#), Atlantic Council 2019

^{ix} [Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community](#), Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2023

^x C. Welsh, [The Impacts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies 2022



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