Presentation: "Russian and Other (Dis)information Undermining WMD Arms Control: Considerations for NATO"

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[Views expressed are those of the presenters' and do not necessarily represent the views of National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the United States Government.]

---*Begin presentation*---

Good morning. Thank you, Dr. Smith, for that kind introduction, and for inviting us to address this meeting of the Committee. Justin and I are honored to speak to you today on this important, timely, and challenging topic.

[Title slide]

During early strategic nuclear arms control negotiations, U.S. President Ronald Reagan was known to repeat an old Russian proverb, *Doveryai, no proveryai*. "Trust, but verify." Today's contested information environment has diminished the currency of trust held by individuals, institutions, and states.

- False information pervades our world, corrupts the value of open-source information, and poses a challenge to national security and all forms of diplomacy, including arms control. Potential adversaries and competitors have used this type of influence to challenge the United States and NATO in the information domain, weaken U.S. and allied societies, and undermine faith in institutions it sees as favoring NATO.

- In an era of disinformation, NATO must consider how competitors on the other side of the negotiating table will manipulate information in an attempt to gain leverage.

[Slide: Overview]

We are going to talk about five things today:

1. A definition of disinformation, and related terms such as malinformation;
2. How disinformation is employed;
3. Some specific examples of how Russia has manipulated the information environment around WMD arms control in the past;

4. How Russia is doing so again today in Ukraine;
5. We will then close with a few thoughts about how NATO might address these challenges.

[Slide: **What is disinformation?**]

[Slide: **Types of Information**]

Mis/dis/and malinformation have become buzzwords without a common understanding for how they are employed. These terms are too often used interchangeably—but they have different methods and different solutions sets.

- **Misinformation** is the inadvertent spreading of erroneous content. (For example, people share false information believing it is true and are thus inadvertently spreading its message).

- **Disinformation** is the malicious and intentional development and propagation of false information. (Such as the instigation of a bioweapons conspiracy theory).

    o While misinformation lacks malicious intent, misinformation is in no way benign. We have seen how misinformation about masks and the COVID-19 vaccine can endanger lives. Our adversaries and competitors rely on both concepts. We have become an army of "useful idiots" to use the Soviet term. In many ways misinformation can be as or more dangerous to democracies than intentional disinformation. Misinformation is more pervasive and harder to pinpoint since it is almost grassroots in the way it operates.

- **Malinformation** is largely built around facts—but facts that are then taken out of context or otherwise presented in a misleading way. While mis- and disinformation can be defined by their intent, malinformation is tricky because the presentation of out of context information can be unintentional (although certainly irresponsible when coming from a trusted source, leader, journalist), or malinformation can be deliberate and malicious.

- **With a lot of this you will hear people talk about fake news—this is not a useful term**. These days "fake news" is used when anything, even facts, are politically inconvenient. Disinformation is rarely completely fabricated. It often contains a nugget of truth, and this lends it an air of credibility. As a result, many consumers of information will accept what is overall a false narrative because it cites, in the midst of falsehoods, a known fact. Using the term "fake news" is often dismissive and misses the point of how harmful disinformation is to liberal institutions, rule of law, and democracy.

- We denote in our slides when false or manipulated information appears through the use of this "disinformation alert" symbol.

Used to denote RF false information in this brief
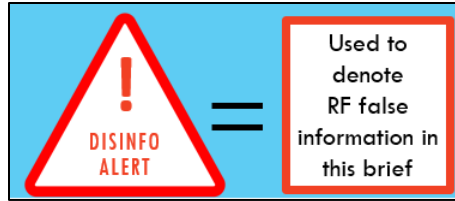
[Slide: Why and how does Russia manipulate the information environment?]

[Slide: Russian Views on Information Environment]

Russia sees "Information [as]...a species of weapon" *(Russian Major General Ivan Vorobvev in 2013)*—all forms of information, across all platforms, are potential sources of power and can be *weaponized.*

- Russia believes the West is seeking dominance across all strategic domains and uses all forms of informational technology against it.

    o **Satellite TV and News Media**: Russia sees Western dominance in the information domain manifested socially and culturally. It sees Western entertainment and media as persistently delivering overtly anti-Russian messages intended to replace Russian culture, values, and language.

    o **Internet/Social Media**: Russia also views the Internet and social media as tools for Western intelligence services to coordinate activists and provocateurs in "color revolutions."

- Russia also views itself as behind the West in science and technology. At points it has reached parity in some defense platforms but for the most part it has struggled to keep pace and relies heavily on WMD for deterrence—and its poor conventional showing in Ukraine confirms this.

- All of this to say, Russia sees itself on the defensive in this scenario and in a constant state of besiegement and deficiency.

- These views predate Information Age...but for Russia, information technology alarmingly exacerbates all of these threats.

[Slide: Russian Information Warfare]

For Russia, disinformation is part of its cross-domain strategy which includes various malign activities, on multiple planes, below the threshold of armed conflict. **There are lots of examples of how Russia has done this, some of which we will show today, but because of the nature of this type of warfare there are likely many more about which we are unaware.**

- Because of the **deniability** that Russia has maintained in each of these cases, **attribution and proportionality** are thrown into question.

- Russia attempts to integrates all military and non-military instruments to achieve its strategic goals, including in the information space.

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- In 2019, Russian General Valery Gerasimov gave a speech in which he stated "Information technologies are becoming one of the most **promising types of weapons**. Having no clearly expressed national borders, the information sphere provides the possibility of remote, covert effects not only against critically important informational infrastructures, but also **against the population** of a country, directly influencing the condition of a state's national security." *[emphasis added]*

[Slide: Aims of Disinformation]

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has had to be calculating and creative to balance its economic, military, and technological disadvantages to compete with the West, maximizing less conventional tools of war, including covert operations within the information domain.

- Russia utilizes information warfare to attempt to achieve certain objectives shown here:

  - Seek to project Russian strength;

  - Broadcast Russia's agenda to the world;

  - And weaken and divide Russia's opponents and alliances it sees as against its interests.

    - An important principle of the Kremlin's approach to information warfare is the concept that if you want to keep an adversary off-balance, keep them busy at home.

    - In looking at which topics Russia targets (politics, race, public health topics, long held norms around state sovereignty or WMD use), Russia clearly recognizes how to identify seams and fissures within societies and seeks to exploit and amplify internal divisions.

    - And as Russia's war in Ukraine veers toward a long war of attrition, we can expect Russian narratives in the West to focus on topics such as isolationism and divisive domestic issues in NATO countries in an effort to reduce public support for backing Ukraine.

[Slide: (Dis)information ecosystem]

Russia has developed a full disinformation ecosystem using bots, trolls, state-run media, and official accounts to amplify messages lending legitimacy, or at least plausibility, to their narratives.

- It is working to create a "**Russia only" internet** with aspirations of creating a Russian equivalent of China's "Great Firewall"—Russia's recent banning of Twitter, Facebook and other media organizations, and a threatened 15-year imprisonment for attempting to publish anything that contradicts Kremlin propaganda on Ukraine—are all steps in this direction of a creating a Russian "splinternet".

- With regard to **Western 24/7 Cable News and Internet presence**:

- Russian news and propaganda (e.g., the state-controlled television network RT and online "news" aggregators like *Sputnik*) is beamed in to counter Western cable news.

- Finally, and importantly for this discussion. **Trolls & bots:** the Russian government's active Internet presence pervades the social media landscape using large numbers of Russian web brigades, troll farms, and automated bots to disseminate propaganda and flood hashtags.

  - These entities (human and automated) are constantly putting out new content and amplifying existing content that is pro-Russian or directed against Russia's opponents. Disinformation is a key tool in Russia's arsenal. Russia seeks to manipulate the full information environment to its strategic advantage.

[Slide: Manipulating all information]

- Often it **is** flat out false information and **deception** which is broadcast and amplified by various Russian means.

- But other times it is **distorting** actual facts or half-truths and using them to support a false argument that is hard to debunk.

- We also regularly see Russia **deflect** its own treaty violations or human rights issues and attempt to use "whataboutism" to turn the narrative back against the US and its allies.

- A huge objective of Russian information warfare is dividing domestic populations; they also go after NGOs and international organizations.

  - We are also seeing Russia use a combination of cyber activities and influence operations—for example Russia employs cyberespionage to gauge support for the war in order to better target its narratives and attempt to exploit and exacerbate divisions within NATO.

- There are multiple forms of Russian manipulation of information across the spectrum of information warfare using its full disinformation ecosystem.

Now I will turn it to my colleague Justin to provide some examples of Russia's manipulation.

[Slide – Russian Disinformation Example: Deceive]

What are some examples of what Russian disinformation looks like? We provide a few examples here, but these are representative of only a few of the many types of disinformation that Russia produces.

- One type of disinformation is entirely fabricated claims produced by media organizations sponsored by the Russian government, such as the many stories in the last few months claiming that the Ukrainian government is attempting to outlaw or eradicate the Russian language.

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- These stories often rely on unnamed sources, have no basis in fact, and are essentially Russian propaganda masquerading as legitimate news reporting.

[Slide – Russian Disinformation Example: Divide]

Another form of Russian disinformation is communicated via fake social media accounts that post statements which are deliberately intended to inflame and divide domestic social or political groups within the United States or NATO democracies.

- One example, shown here, is a Twitter post that includes a picture of a Confederate flag along with the statement "the flag and the [US Civil W]ar wasn't about slavery, it was all about money."
- This "Jenna Abrams" Twitter account was eventually unmasked as a creation of Russia's Internet Research Agency, but only after several years in which it amassed thousands of followers and was treated as if it were the legitimate account of a real person (and a social media influencer), to include having a number of its tweets featured in news reporting by legitimate US media organizations.
- Tweets such as this one were expressly developed to use words and images intended to catalyze engagement and promote angry and divisive debates within the American body politic. With just a handful of characters and a single image this tweet, unfortunately, achieved its actual—and given its reference to the US Civil War, tragically ironic— objective: to get Americans to attack each other.

[Slide – Russian Disinformation Examples: Deny and Deflect]

Russian disinformation also comes directly from official Russian government sources.

- When faced with evidence of the Russian government, or its proxies, directly violating international law—to include noncompliance with treaties—Russian government officials will often first deny complicity, issuing sweeping statements claiming to absolve Moscow of any responsibility.

- They will then seek to deflect blame by claiming that the alleged treaty violation, war crime, or human rights atrocity was either committed by some other party or was entirely staged with the purpose of defaming and embarrassing Russia.

- As many in this audience have probably observed, this includes repeated claims in the last several weeks, to include official statements made by Russian diplomats at the United Nations, that the murder of Ukrainian civilians and other human rights atrocities committed by Russian military forces in the town of Bucha were faked.

- These statements are then repeated and amplified via Russian government social accounts and their supporters, with custom-made graphics often attached to those talking points considered particularly important.

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I'll hand it back to Sarah to discuss why and how this disinformation often spreads easily online.

[Slide: **Within this information environment, what type of information spreads well online?]**

[Slide: **What spreads easily online?]**

Visuals and strong emotions spread quickly online and given the right prompting, people love nothing more than arguing and solidifying entrenched viewpoints. **Russian propaganda relies on the power of narratives**, focusing on simple messages targeting a cohesive group so that its message will then be shared and further amplified. Russia utilizes what is called memetic warfare—collapsing deep seated emotional stories into a picture for a quick emotional punch, often not attributed, and easy to share.

- Here are two memes created by Russia:

  1. The first is what appears to be a benign, cute patriotic dog posted by a regular, patriotic American—but was in fact created by the **Russian Internet Research Agency and targeted Americans in online Facebook groups in 2015.** They draw people in with inane memes like a golden retriever wearing a bandana and captions that encourage engagement. Sometimes it just about building trust, and gaining likes, and creating cohesion within social media groups before they can turn toward more nefarious goals. In the case of these and other Russian-controlled Facebook groups, as trust grew in these communities, IRA employees were told to instigate "political intensity" by "supporting radical groups" stoking division and activism.

  2. This second picture shows a manipulated image of Ukrainian President Zelensky with a pile of cocaine—this is a clearly manipulated image, easy to debunk. But these shallow fakes are deeply harmful because they feed mistrust of societies in what to believe.

[Slide build]

- So content that is visually engaging, scary, or salacious spreads easily online.

[Slide: **WMD an ideal target for disinformation]**

And what is scarier or more salacious than weapons of mass destruction?

- Nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, by virtue of their special status as weapons of mass destruction, hold a place of fear and unknown in the minds of the public, and Russia has exploited that fear.

- **Therefore, WMD is an easy target for Russia to employ disinformation about.**

[Slide: For many, WMD Arms control…]

- For WMD Arms Control, we have a broader challenge. Not only is there the fear of the unknown associated with this complex and often misunderstood topic, but arms control

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is a particularly technical and wonky field that is prone to disinformation in a different way that is sometimes even harder to debunk.

- The field of arms control is often highly technical and bureaucratic. When trying to disprove a false narrative about WMD arms control, we often do not have the strategic communication resources to tell a clear story about the facts without falling into "wonk speak" that is not easily digestible by the average audience.

- If the level of technical expertise needed to show good science from bad science on something like biological weapons arms control is beyond what can be expected of reasonably informed consumers because general information or reasonably straightforward explanations are unavailable to them, this is a huge problem. When we cannot discern between fact and fiction, or disaggregate all the information in front of us, the average person will turn to their own bias and individuals they trust (who may or may not (likely not) possess relevant expertise).

[Slide: **Russia is able to manipulate information about arms control]**

And so when it comes to disinformation about arms control topics, Russia is able to:

- Twist facts to fit narrative, fabricate evidence, call it fake news, blame others, attack messengers, exploit internal divisions, or simply distract audiences by changing the subject.

- This disinformation ultimately **muddies our ability to definitively attribute WMD use or arms control violations. This leads to a failure to hold the perpetrators responsible and opens the door to future use or treaty violations, fundamentally undermining the institutions of arms control.**

[Slide: **Arms control life cycle]**

Today's open and complicated information environment will change the arms control world in many ways, both good and bad, but it is important to acknowledge that each stage of the arms control process is subject to being corrupted by manipulated information.

- Disinformation is such a ubiquitous part of our world, that even Facebook's Meta has codified the post-truth world in its policies, stating "what is true one minute may not be true the next minute"—that world is fundamentally in opposition to arms control which requires truth and data and verification to enforce. How do we have verifiable arms control when everything is "narrative"?

- The next generation of arms control negotiators and implementors will face a drastically different, more complicated and contentious information environment than when the United States and Russian Federation negotiated New START over a decade ago.

[Slide build]

[Slide: Arms control life cycle]

And the challenge disinformation poses to arms control is not awaiting some notional future round of negotiations. It is an issue today. We have seen multiple examples of Russia blasting U.S. and allied diplomats on social media, issuing baseless allegations about treaty non-compliance presented without evidence, and attempting to circumvent verification processes.

- The Russian Federation not only shapes narratives but also attacks the data gathering and assessment process, including labs that are neutral partners in the arms control process. Russia, for example, has tried to use cyber espionage and cyber attacks to corrupt evidence of Russian and proxy non-compliance.

[Slide: Implications for current and future arms control]

Some level of trust is required at every stage of a treaty's life cycle. Future arms control will still have the same old challenges of validating and verifying data alongside new challenges of disinformation and tools for broadcasting propaganda and manipulating and fabricating information.

- During **negotiations**, there is a requirement for some level of trust that whoever is on the other side of the (likely very long) negotiating table is there in good faith. We will have to make clear to Russia if it distorts our negotiating positions, to include by proxies or on social media, it will seriously complicate or even end talks. Russia's active disinformation efforts have already lowered our trust in Moscow and will likely mean we will have to negotiate a robust verification regime, to be able to trust their numbers.

- **Ratification** brings in the public opinion piece. It is an understatement to say that Western societies are polarized, lacking trust in one another and in the institutions of government and science and media. This lack of trust has led our publics to be easy targets for potential adversaries to attempt to influence through disinformation. Potential spoilers, for example, could try to use disinformation to sway public opinion against a recently negotiated treaty as it comes before a legislature for ratification.

- During **implementation and compliance** with a treaty or agreement, there must be some level of trust in the verification regimes and the data being shared.

  - For these regimes to be effective, they must have some inherent level of trust that state actors will work with these institutions and accept the legitimacy of their processes and findings

- There are concerns at each step of the arms control life cycle when information is being manipulated.

[Slide: Disinformation and BWC and public health]

Let's start with some examples of how disinformation has played out in the areas of public health and arms control efforts to address biological weapons.

[Slide: The old is new …]

The Kremlin has long used disinformation methods to stoke fears about scientific and medical issues:

- During the Cold War, Russia planted stories and spread disinformation that the AIDS virus was a U.S. bioweapon.

- While many biological weapons-related allegations originated with the Kremlin, they also amplified accusations by leaders and media sources in developing countries, particularly those allied with the Soviet bloc—such as when Cuba's Fidel Castro asserted that the CIA was behind spreading dengue fever in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, a Soviet magazine in 1982 alleged that a U.S.-funded anti-malaria program in Pakistan was in fact a plan to weaponize mosquitoes as bioweapon delivery systems in Afghanistan.

[Slide: The old is new (and faster)]

Soviet approaches to active measures and disinformation continue today as Russian disinformation, and these activities now benefit from the speed and reach of the Internet. They capitalize on the anxiety that members of the public are already feeling about a disease—that seems to come out of nowhere—to suggest that this fear should actually be directed at the Western governments.

- In 2014, in the midst of the Ebola outbreak, Russia's *Sputnik* news service accused the United States of being behind the outbreak.

- Another example of bioweapons allegations is Russia's recent use of the press, and political theater at the United Nations, to spread falsehoods that Department of Defense-sponsored public health research labs in the Republic of Georgia and elsewhere are in fact secret U.S. biological weapons labs; this despite visits from international experts confirming the Tbilisi lab's peaceful, scientific purpose to assist the country with identifying and treating diseases. These stock accusations are now being employed again in Ukraine.

[Slide: Covid-19 disinformation]

In many ways, COVID-19 disinformation is the culmination of decades of bioweapons allegations that are now supercharged by the new disinformation ecosystem.

- In February 2020, a whole month before the global coronavirus outbreak was officially declared a pandemic, the WHO director-general acknowledged—"[W]e're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus—and is just as dangerous."

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- Russia, China, and Iran have made the accusation that COVID-19 was created by the United States—conspiracy theories include that it is U.S.-manufactured biological weapon targeting Iran, or that the United States is weaponizing the crisis to benefit its pharmaceutical industry, or that it was brought to Wuhan by US service members.

- Russia has conducted targeted influence campaigns in countries it hopes will adopt its Sputnik vaccine including Mexico, countries in Eastern Europe, and Central and West Africa, using its RT affiliates in the region to spread disinformation and malinformation.

  o Selling their COVID-19 vaccine could mean huge financial and diplomatic opportunities in corners of the world Russia would like to establish influence.

  o These methods may be showing success during the war in Ukraine where we are seeing Russia's false narratives land with resonance, and accordingly much softer criticism of Putin, within the global south.

  o Furthermore, we should expect Russia to recycle its successful methods of targeting pandemic fatigue to apply narratives about war fatigue as the conflict in Ukraine continues, seeking to further divide and weaken support for Ukraine.

[Slide]

- **So, we see Russian distortion of facts about biological labs;**

- **Attempts to divide publics from governments** by manipulating the information environment, framing itself as a responsible international actor—and recasting the United States and its allies as the villain in the story.

- **And the ultimate deception by making the claim that COVID-19 is bioweapon.**

[Slide: CWC]

Now let's look at how these methods have been applied to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

[Slide: Disinformation and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)]

The CWC entered into force in 1997 and has near-universal participation. Its core provisions ban the development, production, and use of chemical weapons.

- Despite near universal agreement that this type of weapon should not be used, we have seen in recent years an uptick in CW use on the battlefield by state actors (*Syria*) and VEOs (*ISIS*), and as a tool of assassination (*by Russia and North Korea*). There is growing concern that the global norm against the use of these weapons is eroding.

[Slide: Syria]

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Though there have been over 300 instances of chemical weapons use over the last decade, I want to talk about an attack that occurred on a single day in April 2018 in Douma, Syria—with repercussions that lasted for years.

- The attacks killed 50, wounded hundreds, and there were many eyewitness accounts and videos.

- First responders and people on the ground were already familiar with CW at this point of the conflict. They took diligent notes for future use and prosecution if and when that would be needed. They were well aware the perpetrators would deny the events and change the narrative.

- Many of you will recall that at this point in time the OPCW (the governing body for the CWC) had already found the Syrian government guilty of having used chemical weapons in the country's civil conflict.

- This use of chemical weapons would again constitute another direct violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention by Damascus.

- The international response to this attack was swift, including air strikes, the convening of the OPCW, and the start of an official OPCW investigation.

[Slide: Russia's view of the info environment]

The videos of the attack were immediately viewed as a problem by the Russian government.

- In its view, this type of footage would be utilized to coordinate a response through international bodies, where this "violation" would then be used to justify kinetic action by the United States.

- This would materially aid rebel forces, and—when Syria attempted to "defend" itself— inevitably lead to further accusations against the Assad regime.

- In short, the information, unless countered, would be rapidly weaponized against its Syrian ally. Russia concluded that this cycle needed to be broken.

[Slide: Russia & SYRIA "INFORMATION" MTG at OPCW HQ*]

Disinformation about the attack, both in terms of who was responsible and what weapon was used, was immediate from Russia and Syria. **They started by flooding the information zone and** utilized the full Russian **disinformation ecosystem**.

- In less than three weeks, Russia and Syria held a press conference at OPCW HQ—over the objections of the OPCW, who rightly saw it was being used as a backdrop for political theater—where it brought forward Syrian civilians who claimed that, while they

had come to the Douma hospital for medical treatment, they were not there because of a chemical weapons attack.

- Russia and Syria used this event to demonize the Syria Civil Defence, a humanitarian organization who were on the ground to respond to the attack through providing aid to stricken civilians. Also known as the White Helmets, the Syrian Civil Defence was recast in the Russian and Syrian disinformation narrative as terrorists.

- By conflating the White Helmets and terrorist groups like al Qaeda, Russia sought to make allowances for the White Helmets to be targeted on the ground, shift blame or responsibility, and in general create confusion.

[Slide: Russia "False Flag" CW attack Allegations]

In addition, during this same phase of the conflict, the Russian Ministry of Defense put out false statements claiming that the Free Syrian Army together with US and UK Special Forces were preparing to use chemical weapons and then blame the Assad regime as a pretext for further Western attacks on Syria.

- This served to attempt to confuse the information environment and make it difficult to sort through who did what and who to believe.
- It also sought to discredit any US, British and French airstrikes in response to Syrian CW attacks and seeded a narrative that would allow the Kremlin to blame future Syrian chemical attacks on the West.

[Slide: question evidence]

From here we also saw a number of self-proclaimed "experts" and "witnesses" come forward to throw further doubt on the evidence of the Douma attack.

- Later there would also be allegations, picked up by both RT and Chinese broadcaster CGTN, that a BBC producer claimed the hospital footage was entirely staged.

- Social media accounts tweeting with the #syriahoax hashtag gained a huge following online with claims that CW use in Douma and elsewhere was faked on order to provide an excuse for the West to attack. (Including this "Sarah Abdallah" account that almost certainly not a real person, as proven by a later BBC investigation).

[Slide build: question evidence]

So we see these contradictory explanations provided by officials, fake accounts, and real people sharing false information: it was an attack but not chemical weapons, it was a staged hoax, or even that nothing happened at all—all of this sows doubt about the facts

- Russia also sought to supplement this disinformation campaign with an attempted cyberattack on OPCW headquarters.

- In addition, disinformation efforts by Syria and its Russian ally further sought to undermine the OPCW's efforts to investigate the attacks by denying events, misidentifying victims, discrediting/falsify motives, blaming the US for the attack, and attempting to undermine the credibility of the official OPCW report.

[Slide: disinformation success]

Returning to the information loop that Russia wanted to disrupt …

- Russia was able to create fog and confusion around CW use which interfered with international institutions' efforts to attribute the attack and hold Syria accountable.

- This failure to hold perpetrators accountable opens the door to future use, as we unfortunately continued to see Syria use CW against civilians following this event. When everything is grey, nothing is black and white—and that alone is a success of a disinformation campaign.

[Slide: Novichok Use for targeted killing: Former Russian spy Sergei Skripal]

So that was an example of how Russia came to the aid of an ally who was using chemical weapons, albeit to achieve self-serving gains. Russia has also used novel chemical weapons in contravention of the CWC—both against former Russian Military Intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter and more recently against Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

- In March 2018, Russia attempted to assassinate a former Russian military intelligence officer turned spy for Britain using a nerve agent. The two Russian agents tasked with carrying out the assassination in the United Kingdom botched it. Rather than just issue a blanket denial of the attempted attack, Russia launched a major disinformation campaign to change the narrative.

- The disinformation we saw from Russia following the Skripal case was different from some of the intentional Soviet-style disinformation campaigns that were preplanned to achieve strategic goals. What Russia did after Salisbury was a real time, reactive disinformation campaign using their disinformation ecosystem to sow doubt about every aspect of the scenario, especially Russia's involvement.

[Slide: Novichok Use for targeted killing: Former Russian spy Sergei Skripal]

Initially Russia attempted to provide benign alternative narratives to explain what happened.

- They initially attempted to identify suspects and explanations that had nothing to do with Russia (stating Skripal had a drug problem or attempted to commit suicide and even suggesting that bad weather in the UK nearly killed him) before moving to more sinister narratives about a week later, including that the nearby Porton Down lab was doing illegal CW research.

- Next, as Britain put out more data on the attack, including that the CW agent used was Novichok (thereby clearly implicating Russia), the Kremlin shifted to attacking the messenger. Russian government social media accounts and media sought to spread stories that this was a plot by the British PM to frame Russia in an attempt to deflect attention from UK domestic problems, that the British investigators were bungling and incompetent, and that the whole thing was "fake news" and a complete hoax.

    o Russia also used other false flag narratives to attempt to divert blame by blaming Ukraine and criminal gangs for the attack.

- Did it work?

    o The impact of this disinformation campaign was audience dependent.

    o British consumers largely disregarded it as propaganda.

    o British officials were proactive in calling out the disinformation with consistent, science-based messaging which **helped reveal the lies and inconsistencies** within the Russian disinformation campaign.

    o However, 3 in 10 Russians believe the British were behind the attack. More than half agreed with the statement: "It could have been anyone." This is a big part of disinformation campaigns i.e., even if it is difficult to deny something entirely, seek to sow doubt.

[Slide: **Novichok Use for targeted killing: Opposition Leader Alexei Navalny]**

Now Skripal is no longer the latest use of Novichok by Russia.

- In August 2020, Russia's leading political opposition leader Alexei Navalny was poisoned with Novichok on a flight to Moscow.

- The international community quickly and unequivocally concluded it was Novichok based on lab tests, leading many experts to conclude the Russian FSB was to blame.

[Slide: **Novichok Use for targeted killing: Opposition Leader Alexei Navalny]**

Russia's disinformation ecosystem kicked in with the Kremlin denying they were involved, denying he was poisoned at all, and claiming it was an elaborate plot by the West to undermine the Russian government.

- Russia actively worked to discredit the German findings that the substance used was Novichok with the narrative that it was a "staged and mystical use of chemical weapons," arguing that the US and EU had studied Novichoks and made the weapon themselves. Similar to the Skripal assassination plot and Syrian chemical weapon use, Russia attempted to again use a "false flag" narrative to divert blame for the use of a banned weapon.

- This also demonstrated how narratives and denial can weaken the effectiveness of arms control regimes. The OPCW provided technical assistance to Germany, where Navalny was being treated, to test and confirm that the chemical agent was Novichok. But Russia refused an OPCW technical assistance visit to determine whether chemical weapons had been employed on Russia's territory. Without Russia's agreement, the OPCW was at a stalemate, as it lacks the authority under the CWC to conduct an investigation on a state's territory without the state government's assent. This shows how denying a treaty violation, even in the face of compelling evidence, can stall many arms control processes.

- These examples raise fundamental questions about Russia's willingness to comply with the CWC and other arms control agreements.

[Slide]

Russia's manipulated information was used to:

- **DENY Syrian violations of CWC**

- **DEFLECT charges of CW attacks**

- **DISRUPT narratives that could prompt intervention**

Now Justin will discuss Russian disinformation efforts related to the INF Treaty.

[Slide – INF Treaty (1988-2019)]

Signed in late 1987 by the United States and the Soviet Union, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty banned an entire class of missiles and nuclear-capable delivery systems.

- Both sides agreed to completely and permanently eliminate all ground-launched ballistic or cruise missiles—and their associated launchers—with a range of 500-5500 km. For over twenty years the treaty was a triumph of nuclear arms control.

- Unfortunately, in the early 2010s Russia decided to violate the treaty by first testing, and then producing and fielding, the SSC-8—also known as the 9M729—a ground-launched, intermediate-range missile of the type expressly prohibited by the treaty.

[Slide – Russia's INF Treaty Violation]

The Kremlin attempted to keep this secret. But the United States uncovered evidence Russia had violated the treaty. This violation was a two-step maneuver by Moscow.

- First, Russia tested a new missile at a distance greater than 500km from a fixed launcher on the ground. Now, note that you are allowed to test intermediate-range sea and air-launched missiles—which are not prohibited by the treaty—in this way.

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- Russia then tested the same new missile at a sub-INF range from a mobile launcher. On the surface, individually neither of these acts is a violation of a treaty.

- But when combined, this information provided data for a new, ground-launched, intermediate-range missile on a mobile launcher. This was an attempt to maintain a façade of compliance while gathering test data that would then be used, as Moscow later did, to develop and deploy a banned missile.

- Now what I've described is complex. It involves one missile, two launchers, two types of tests, and a lot of malign intent. How do you explain this violation? How do you communicate it effectively? Let's set that aside for a moment.

- So what did the US do? Behind closed doors, the identification of the violation was an information coup. The United States quietly, but insistently, raised the violation with the Russian Federation through diplomatic channels. Moscow repeatedly denied wrongdoing.

[Slide – US State Department Report of RF Violation (2014)]

- The United States then chose to make this violation public with the July 2014 publication of the U.S. State Department's annual arms control compliance report.

- The key statement from the report is shown here—the U.S. determination that the Russian Federation is in violation of its obligation under the treaty to not flight test a ground-launched cruise missile with a range of 500 to 5,500 kilometers.

- A page of compliance analysis, primarily focused on identifying the specific clauses of the treaty violated by the Russian tests, followed this finding.

- This information was accurate, fact-based, and carefully-worded—very similar to a well-written legal brief. It was also a bit dry. What was provided was only text—no graphics, no charts, no visuals.

- And for the next four years, little additional information was made openly available by the United States.

[Slide – NATO Agrees US Findings/Assessment]

Then in the fall of 2018 the United States announced its intent to withdraw from the INF Treaty within six months unless Russia returned to full compliance.

- The United States stated that the Russian Federation had now not just tested, but fully developed and deployed numerous intermediate-range SSC-8 missiles – a clear, direct, and willful violation of the INF Treaty.

- In close consultation behind closed doors, it shared additional information with NATO, and the alliance fully agreed with the US assessment.

[Slide – On Eve of Withdrawal (Nov/Dec 2018)]

In the next few months, as the U.S. deadline for Russia to return to compliance approached, the United States provided some additional public-facing information in terms of online resources and press statements regarding the Russian violation, together with a few limited details about the missile and its deployment. But this remained a text-heavy approach.

[Slide – Publicly Available Information Late 2018]

It is important to note here there is a tension between protected information you can share with allies and the open information you can share with the general public about treaty violations. This is often a challenge, particularly when the offending state is working hard to attempt to keep its actions secret.

- Nevertheless, it is important to provide context and information when and where you can, particularly with regard to something as complicated as the Russian INF Treaty violation.
- Because within a highly contested information environment, if you do not provide a detailed explanation or a convincing narrative, someone else will provide it for you.

[Slide – Russia's Response]

Now to the Russian response.

- Before the U.S. statement of its intent to withdraw, Russia too had said and posted little publicly about the INF Treaty.

- But after the October 2019 announcement Russia took action to fill this white space within the public information domain—not for the benefit of the United States government, which it concluded was almost certain to leave the treaty, but for other audiences.

- First, Russia disclosed it did indeed have a 9M729 missile. But it stated this missile was a short-range missile that it claimed did not violate the INF Treaty.

- A few weeks later Russia announced it would hold an event on 23 January 2019 at the Patriot-Military Culture and Recreation Park of the Armed Forces outside Moscow— sometimes called Russia's "Military Disneyland"—to address the United States charges and provide information about the 9M729 to invited international press, foreign diplomats, and foreign military attaches.

[Slide – Two Narratives]

So on the eve of this event there were two diametrically opposed narratives about the INF Treaty violation.

- One narrative was put forward by the United States and backed by NATO. It was largely dependent on protected information and largely discussed within classified spaces.

- And the other was previewed by, but about to be unveiled in, a very public, dramatic, and—given the location—somewhat theatrical way by the Russian Federation.

[Slide – 23 January 2019 RF Press and Def Attaché Event]

The Russian event was held in two parts. First, the invited guests were ushered into a large exhibit hall ...

[Slide – Part I – RF MoD Presentation of Canisters]

… where they were greeted with two missile canisters, one labeled the 9M728 and the other labeled 9M729, and …

[Slide – Part I - RF MoD Presentation of Launcher]

… what was described as a self-propelled missile launcher for the latter. The Russian MoD would stress before, during, and after event that this was the first public viewing of the 9M729.

[Slide – Part I – RF MoD Presentation of Hardware]

Russian Lieutenant General Mikhail Matveyevsky, Chief of Russian Missile Forces and Artillery, would then offer to attendees the explanation that both the 9M728 and 9M729 were short-range missiles of sub-500 km that were closely related to Russia's 9K720 Iskander, a short-range missile that was permitted by the INF Treaty.

[Slide – Part I – Missile Canister Display]

For the display, the individual sections of the missile canisters were labeled with placards, and each canister was placed next to a black and white measuring rod.

- The purpose of this labeling and display was to show that the two very similar sounding missiles (or rather their canisters—the missiles were not shown) had very similar dimensions, with the 9M729 having one additional section and being slightly longer.

[Slide – Assessment: The Pictures Tell the (RF) Story]

The first half of the Russian event was a public affairs effort struck through with disinformation that was intended to both deceive and distract.

- By providing interesting and exclusive visual content with the hardware that was displayed, the Russian Ministry of Defense was able to distract the international press from actually digging into the nature of the treaty violation.

- The pictures provided to the world by the assembled news photographers and camera operators helped tell a Russian narrative.

[Slide – RF: "Look at Our Voluntary Transparency"]

First, the Russian military claimed it was being fully transparent, voluntarily displaying sophisticated weapons systems for all to see—although not to examine too closely.

[Slide – RF: "Basically Same as Compliant Missile"]

Second, the nature of the display and the official remarks by the MoD attempted to repeatedly make a parallel between what was described as a non-treaty violating system—the 9M728—and the alleged violating system, the 9M729.

- The side-by-side display of canisters provides a visual of what appear to be two essentially similar items, with the accompanying remarks from a Russian senior military officer claiming that the two missiles are basically the same and both short-range systems within the bounds of the treaty.

[Slide – <u>Never Shown</u>: Actual Missile]

What is <u>NOT shown</u>, however, is the <u>actual missile in question</u>. Canisters are containers, not weapons.

- By comparison, on the right side of this slide are pictures of the Soviet SS-20 Pioneer intermediate range launcher and missiles that were eliminated in an earlier phase of the INF Treaty.

[Slide: Media (Mis)reporting about Missile]

But even though the 9M729 was not shown at the event, nor was any actual evidence relevant to the range of the missile shared, within much of international press and television reporting, these essential points were either reported incorrectly—as shown by these media stories here, which state that the missile in question *was* displayed—or were buried beneath other details.

[Slide: Part 2 – RF MoD and MFA Brief]

The second half of the event shifted away from the exhibit hall for a combined Russia Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs presentation.

[Slide: RF: "We've Responded to US Allegations"]

Here the assembled press and foreign military attaches received a briefing described by the Russian MoD as providing "information about the design of the weapon model and its tactical and technical characteristics," which the briefers claimed both demonstrated Russia's full adherence to the treaty and answered U.S. allegations of noncompliance.

[Slide: RF: "It is the U.S. that is in Violation"]

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The briefing then shifted to Russian counter-allegations that it was actually the United States that was in violation of the treaty.

- The Russian MFA briefer stated that Washington had ignored Russian concerns for years, to include about U.S. rockets used as targets for tests of U.S. missile defense systems—rockets Russia asserted are actually intermediate-range missiles in disguise.

- They also made allegations that U.S. missile defense interceptors in Europe can be converted into ground-launched, offensive, intermediate-range missiles.

[Slide: Assessment: The Pictures Tell the RF Story]

Much of the content of these briefs was fairly dry. And on some international news broadcasts, the non-Russian reporters did present an even-handed assessment of what occurred, summarizing what the Russian officials said while also noting the U.S. government's statements that Russia was in violation of the treaty.

- But again—in terms of supplying visual content, the pictures tell the Russian story, both in these broadcasts and in the record they leave online. They illustrate the Russian MoD and MFA talking points from the event.

- These talking points are that while Russia was open and forthcoming in responding to U.S. charges of INF Treaty noncompliance, the U.S. was not addressing Russian concerns that its missile defense test missiles and launchers raised serious compliance issues.

- Again, even when media voice over noted the two sides disagreement, the pictures showed one side—the Russian side.

[Slide: Russia Assessment of Event?]

As a result, I think Russia likely concluded its 23 January 2019 event was very successful.

- There were over 200 members of the international press in attendance. It generated publicity and content that largely followed and highlighted Russian talking points.

- This included numerous news stories erroneously reporting that Russia had publicly displayed the alleged treaty-violating 9M729 missile.

- Even when press coverage of the event was nuanced or skeptical, the information presented was such that international audiences watching this reporting could conclude "I'm not sure who is right" or "there are two sides to this story" or "who knows, but at least I got to see some cool Russian military hardware."

[Slide: Russian <u>Open Source</u> Information Success]

For Moscow, particularly given it likely concluded the United States was indeed prepared to leave the treaty if the Russian military did not immediately dismantle its already-fielded

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9M729s (which it had no intent to do), this qualifies as a success in providing public information—much of which is actually disinformation—to counter the U.S. charges that it violated the INF Treaty.

- And all of this Russian-curated content filled what—in terms of publicly available, visual content—was largely a vacuum prior to the event. Furthermore, much of this visual information remains online today. It is still helping tell the Russian story for anyone who is curious about the INF Treaty and why it ended.

- Let's face it, many will find pictures of military hardware compelling; few will actually bother to dig down to determine what was actually shown by the Russian government. Which was very little and—importantly—did nothing to address the nature of the treaty violation, which had to do not with the size or shape of the missile, but with how it was tested and how far it could travel.

[Slide: WMD Disinformation in Ukraine]

I will turn it back over to Sarah to talk about how Russia is employing these same tactics in Ukraine.

[Slide: Russian WMD disinformation in Ukraine]

Once again Russia's playbook in Ukraine features false information about weapons of mass destruction.

- As Russia continues its attack on Ukraine, it is spreading disinformation about WMD in an attempt to justify its illegal and brutal invasion, fracture alliances opposing Russia, and potentially set the stage for false flag use of chemical or biological weapons in Ukraine—having pre-laid the narrative to blame Ukraine instead.

- The claims are familiar: Russia's BW allegations are centered on Ukrainian labs that received funding from the Department of Defense's Cooperative Threat Reduction program. This funding has boosted the diagnostic abilities and public health capacity of these labs.

- But the Kremlin has sought to claim that the United States and allies are engaged in BW testing and development for use against Russia, which would of course be in violation to the BWC. As we saw in decades past, they paint peaceful research as malicious, highlighting legitimate research aimed at studying and countering endemic diseases like avian influenza, cholera, and hemorrhagic fever and attempting to denigrate this work, blatantly twisting the facts and mischaracterizing these efforts to fight disease as attempts to manufacture bioweapons.

[Slide: Russian WMD disinformation in Ukraine]

Russia's United Nations ambassador, the official accounts of the Russian Foreign Ministry, and the Kremlin's disinformation network of bots and trolls have all promulgated bogus claims that the United States and Ukraine are developing chemical and biological weapons. This propaganda has also been amplified by China and some media commentators in the United States and other NATO states.

[Slide: Complicated colorful chart]

Russia seeks to confuse and conflate to make their claims seem plausible. In this colorful chart, the Russian government seeks to convince you of the connection of a bioweapons program with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, and others.

[Slide: WMD disinformation: Strategic and Tactical goals]

So what it Russia trying to accomplish with these narratives?

- As we have seen in previous examples, at the **strategic level**, the Russian government employs disinformation to influence the actions, postures, and alignments of state governments. The Kremlin seeks to split alliances and coalitions—NATO in particular—by broadcasting narratives on the dangers of WMD, seeking to fracture NATO's unity in opposition to its actions.

- **At the tactical level**, Russia is likely seeking to achieve several objectives. It was laying the groundwork of the narrative that Ukraine was preparing to use chemical weapons on the battlefield months before Russia's invasion. Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, for example, stated in December 2021 that Ukraine was prepared to use chemical weapons against Russian forces. In the Kremlin's view, this prepositioning of narratives can later be referred to in order to lend credibility to subsequent claims that chemical weapons use on a future battlefield are by non-Russian forces.

- This lays the foundation for the Kremlin to employ chemical weapons in Ukraine—and then, as evidence emerges of military and civilian casualties clearly suffering from exposure to these types of weapons, to accuse Ukraine of being responsible. As noted earlier, Russia employed this type of false flag chemical weapon allegations on behalf of its Syrian ally.

- Second, having this narrative in place allows Russia to deflect responsibility for any hazardous chemical release that results from conventional attacks on civilian infrastructure. Attacks on manufacturing facilities like we are seeing in Ukraine can result in the release of various chemicals that can harm civilians and cause contamination. So the Kremlin could blame any release or spill of chemicals due to Russian military strikes on its opponent employing chemical weapons.

[Slide: Tailored narratives]

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Russia relies on disinformation and control of the narrative to target various audiences. It seeks to both project power abroad while also maintaining control of domestic support for the war.

- Russia has tailored messages to the Ukrainian population with the overarching narrative that Ukraine could not possibly withstand and win the war against Russia, or that it is in fact Ukrainians who are targeting civilians.

- They target the US and NATO countries with divisive narratives to seek to break unity and support for Ukraine.

- And importantly, they target non-aligned countries to shore up global support in the United Nations and other international venues capitalizing on deeply rooted histories and narratives against western democracies. For example, they are now moving to blame global food shortages on the West.

[Slide: Is it working?]

Russia's disinformation has been incredibly successful domestically—within Russia, the narratives play into decades of messaging and deep-seated beliefs about Western motives (and Soviet claims regarding Moscow's sovereignty over Ukraine) so the ground was fertile for these messages to take root in the domestic population.

- Similarly, Russia has had success with its messages in non-aligned countries and the global south. In a survey of Arab nations, a majority believed NATO was to blame for the conflict, echoing Russia's narrative. *(In all but one of 14 countries surveyed in a special Arab News-YouGov poll on where Arabs stand on the Ukraine conflict, a majority of respondents who expressed a view believe the blame for the war lies not with Russia but with NATO. The only exception to this is in Syria, where blame is apportioned equally.)* And in Africa, where Russia has long fostered diplomatic and arms deal ties, we saw 24 African countries refuse to condemn Russia's actions at the United Nations. *(6 African countries abstained, seven didn't vote at all and one — Eritrea — voted against it, keeping company only with Russia, Belarus, Syria and North Korea.)*

- Yet Russia's narratives have not landed in Ukraine and the West in the same way, in large part because of the successful "pre-bunking," and sharing of intelligence ahead of Russia's invasion.

- And yet, similar to the success of the Skripal disinformation, even though outlandish and inconsistent, the disinformation muddied the information environment—which is a success for Russia.

- In an April 2022 survey of Internet users in Russia about whether the Ukraine labs are making BW, 66.5% of Russian respondents said the labs were used to develop BW which could be used against the Russian Federation. *(Vox Populi, April 30, 2022)*

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- In the US, only 7% of American surveyed believed the claims that US is assisting Ukraine in developing chemical and biological weapons in secret Ukraine labs. However, the more concerning statistic is that 40% of US respondents were not sure—that is a problem. They think it is at least possible. That is a victory for Russian disinformation.

[Slide: Longer term effects]

There are longer term effects of this disinformation about scientific labs beyond Ukraine.

- Public health relies on trust. This fear and uncertainty will make global public health collaboration more challenging, and coming out of a pandemic, we can all imagine how detrimental that may be.

- There are other laboratories providing important public health research and monitoring in dozens of countries worldwide, including in the global south where Russia's disinformation is finding success, that are at risk of being targeted with similar false narratives. Proving a negative is difficult and that lack of clear, visual proof is where disinformation can flourish—allegations are easy to make and sow doubt but are difficult to disprove.

- Furthermore, all of these public health programs are actually BWC Article X obligations, which requires countries to provide peaceful assistance and cooperation. Russia's threats and disinformation might cause countries to question these public health collaborations and prevent the United States from meeting its BWC obligation.

- Now with the recent BWC Article V accusation by Russia against the United States and Ukraine, this type of spurious charge—which Moscow has presented without any evidence—is a waste of time and resources for diplomats and subject matter experts involved with the treaty. Coming on the eve of the BWC's Review Conference, which occurs once every five years, Russia's baseless and cynical allegations threaten to sidetrack the conference and its delegates, distracting them from important business.

- Russia's WMD disinformation in Ukraine is not only on biological and chemical issues, but nuclear issues as well.

Justin will address Russia's disinformation on nuclear weapons during its ongoing unjust war against Ukraine.

[Slide - RF Accusations of UKR Nuclear & Radiological Weapons]

The Russian government and Kremlin-backed media have also repeatedly issued bogus claims that prior to the conflict Ukraine intended to pursue the development of nuclear weapons. In addition, during the conflict Russian disinformation has also made groundless accusations that Ukraine plans to use radiological weapons either against Russian forces or in a provocative attempt to create an international incident that it would then blame on Russia.

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[Slide - Putin's 24 Feb Address]

On February 24th of this year, on the eve of conflict, President Putin delivered a speech that was itself riddled with disinformation and historical revisionism.

- Amongst a litany of threats and grievances, Putin included statements that Ukraine was preparing to build its own nuclear weapon, stating:

- *[slide build]* "Ukraine is using Soviet know-how to create its own nuclear weapons, and this is tantamount to preparation for an attack upon Russia."

[Slide – Russian MFA Claims (Mar 2022)]

In the following weeks these spurious claims were amplified by Russian government officials.

- The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government sources would issue claims that the Ukrainian government was considering violating its Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligations and pursuing development of an indigenous nuclear weapons program.

- Konstantin Gavrilov, head of the Russian arms control delegation in Vienna, stated (and his colleagues then tweeted, as shown here) that Ukraine was carrying out research and development that could be used to develop nuclear warheads.

[Slide – Amplified by RF Media (Mar 2022)]

These accusations were then amplified by Russian media, both in its English and Russian language publications, websites, and news broadcasts.

- This 6 March story published by the official Russian government news service TASS, for example, opens with the headline "On the nuclear weapons capabilities of Ukraine."

- The story claims that various knowledgeable (but unnamed) Russian government sources informed TASS that the Ukrainian government had pursued work on nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable missiles for twenty years.

[Slide – Claims (Without Evidence) of US Assisting UKR in Developing Nukes (Mar 2022)]

Similarly, and also in March, both Russian officials and unnamed sources would state—without the provision of any evidence—that the United States had intended to help Ukraine develop its own nuclear weapons.

[Slide – Accusations of UKR Radiological Weapons]

These claims expressly referred to the manufacture and, presumably, future deployment of nuclear weapons. The Russian government and Kremlin-backed media have also issued numerous claims that Ukraine intends to rapidly assemble, and then employ within the present

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conflict, radiological weapons, often colloquially referred to as "dirty bombs." These weapons combine radiological material—such as nuclear materials from civilian nuclear power plants, or radiological material used for nuclear medicine— with high explosives.

- Russian officials—and again, unnamed but allegedly "highly competent" Russian government sources—issued both direct claims that Ukrainian nationalists intended to blow up nuclear research facilities and blame the resulting radiological disaster on Russia, and also a number of vaguer statements alleging that Ukrainian militants might seek to divert nuclear fuel from civilian power plants in order to make and use dirty bombs.

[Slide – UKR "Nuclear Weapons" - Distort Facts]

Now a number of these allegations are outright fabrications—statements that are offered without any corroboration. But some of these claims also use the Russian tactic we referred to earlier of constructing arguments that, while false in their conclusions, both use and distort real facts to give an argument a veneer of truth.

- With regard to President Putin's false allegation that Ukraine was planning to develop a nuclear weapons program, for example, within his speech—and in numerous Russian government statements that followed—two true facts were referenced.

- It is true that Ukraine has civilian nuclear power plants and nuclear fuel; it is also true that during the Cold War Ukraine hosted numerous Soviet nuclear missile manufacturing facilities, as well as bases hosting Soviet nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable delivery systems.

- But—as the Russian government knows, as it was a full partner at the time, Ukraine gave up these nuclear weapons in the 1990s and even participated in the dismantlement of numerous Soviet nuclear-capable delivery systems, such as the Tu-160 strategic bomber being cut up that is shown here on the right of the slide.

- Ukraine joined the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1994 and for over twenty years has been a member in good standing that is in full compliance with its nuclear safeguards and additional protocol agreement with the IAEA.

[Slide – UKR Alleged Nuclear Weapons R&D]

Importantly, as a member of the UN Security Council and a country with its own agreements with the IAEA, Russia is well aware of the gravity of any alleged violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. If Russia really believed that Ukraine had harbored nuclear weapons ambitions for years—as its media reported after Putin's speech—it could have brought these claims forward to the UN Security Council or to the IAEA.

[Slide - UKR Alleged Nuclear Weapons R&D (II)]

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Russia could have called for IAEA inspections, but it did not, because the IAEA's systems of accounting and monitoring nuclear materials and activities was in place and effectively verifying Ukrainian compliance with the NPT.

[Slide – UKR "Dirty Bomb" - Distort Facts]

The Russian charge of a Ukrainian dirty bomb was also a blatant distortion of facts.

- It is true that Ukraine has nuclear materials at power plants, university research laboratories, and at hospitals, for various legally permitted civilian uses.

- But there is no evidence of Ukrainian plans to divert any of these materials (which in any case, would be a hazardous, foolhardy thing to do) to attempt to make a dirty bomb, nor that it would blow up one of its own research institutes—an act that would likely lead to Ukrainian civilian casualties.

[Slide – Why UKR Nuke Disinfo? 1. Attempt to Justify Invasion]

So why did Russia make these accusations? I think there are several reasons; I offer four here.

- First, Putin's charge that Ukraine was building a nuclear weapon was an effort to offer a pretext for Russia's invasion of its smaller neighbor.

- By citing Ukraine as a direct and urgent nuclear threat to Russia, he aimed to justify his imminent invasion as necessary for national security – particularly when this threat was combined with charges that Kiev was led by unhinged fascists. What could be more frightening than neo-Nazis with nukes?

[Slide – Why UKR Nuke Disinfo? 2. Signal High Stakes]

I think this first argument was primarily intended for the Russian public. However, when combined with Russian nuclear saber rattling, which has occurred throughout this conflict, I think invoking a fictional Ukrainian nuclear threat was also part of a broader effort to signal to NATO and the United States that this was a war with high stakes for Russia. As such this was a component of a broader strategic communications strategy aimed at preventing outside intervention.

[Slide – Why UKR Nuke Disinfo? 3. Explain Seizure of UKR Nuclear Plants]

Third, this disinformation served as a cover for the Russian military seizure of Ukrainian nuclear power plants.

- Allegations of Ukraine preparing to violate the NPT were intended to justify occupying these plants to check whether Kyiv was illegally diverting nuclear material from its civilian nuclear complex. But in reality seizing the plants was part of a larger Russian military effort early within the conflict to attempt to quickly take control of Ukrainian

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critical infrastructure. It was an important component within a broader Russian campaign of regime change.

[Slide - Why UKR Nuke Disinfo? RE: UKR "Dirty Bomb": Deflect Blame]

- Fourth, specific to Russian charges of a Ukrainian dirty bomb. The Russian way of war relies on massive firepower and is often brutal and indiscriminate in its application.

- I think there was an implicit Russian recognition that Ukrainian nuclear facilities could very well be damaged—as indeed later occurred—within the conflict.

- Similar to Russian warnings of possible chemical weapons attacks serving to lay the foundation for the possibility that hazardous chemicals could be released as Russia attacked Ukraine civilian industry and infrastructure, Russia's radiological dirty bomb allegations may have been intended to pre-emptively provide a false explanation for the release of radiation or the destruction of Ukrainian nuclear facilities that could result from indiscriminate Russian shelling or bombing.

[Slide: Why does this matter for NATO?]

Why does Russian disinformation on arms control matter to NATO?

[Slide: RF WMD & Arms Control Metanarratives]

Russian disinformation is constant, and it tends to follow a few key themes. Several of the metanarratives Russia pushes in its ongoing information war against the United States and NATO center on WMD and arms control.

- There are three that we have discussed throughout the brief that are worth summarizing here, because this audience will continue to face them in the days ahead. Each of these narratives has two sides: one side focuses on promoting Russia and its strategies and policies, while the other seeks to denigrate and disparage NATO. In brief, these three are:

  1. One, a nuclear metanarrative, which is that Russia is a strong and responsible nuclear power whereas NATO is committed to costly, dangerous, and destabilizing nuclear policies;

  2. Two, that Russia takes international law seriously and fulfills all its arms control treaty commitments; in contrast, NATO member states are hypocritical serial violators of these treaties who conceal and proliferate illegal weapons;

  3. Three, the Russian military will never employ WMD, but NATO state militaries constantly plan for its use and are prepared to both employ WMD and then attempt to pin the blame on Moscow.

[Slide: RF WMD & Arms Control Metanarratives - II]

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Moreover, these metanarratives represent an enduring challenge.

- The Kremlin's strategic messaging on WMD and arms control, to include messages directly aimed at NATO governments and NATO publics can be expected to be constant, generated by multiple sources, and, importantly, to reflect Russia's understanding that within the present information environment it is visual content—photos, videos, graphics, and memes—that grabs the attention of the average media consumer and is far more likely to spark an interaction and, in turn, be shared with others.

- Unfortunately, most democratic governments and many international organizations have struggled to mount an effective and timely response to this information, relying on the occasional production of static, text-based official statements in response. This is insufficient in the present Information Age.

[Slide: Arms Control Can Play a Key Role in NATO-RF Strategic Stability, but …]

This is a problem, because arms control in 2022 is a dumpster fire— for those not familiar with this American colloquialism, this refers to a chaotic, messy, disaster—and the Kremlin's disinformation has helped provide many of the matches to set it aflame.

- Earlier we noted that Russian disinformation poses a challenge to each stage of the arms control process, from negotiation through implementation. Russia has used disinformation to spread falsehoods about its own treaty noncompliance; to issue baseless accusations stating that NATO members are committing treaty violations; to slam diplomats attempting to conduct negotiations; and to attempt to undermine the investigation and verification processes of international bodies.

- All of this disinformation has taken a toll on arms control, and it is imperative that everyone who considers arms control as an important potential tool of national and international security policy take steps to address this challenge.

I will turn it over to Sarah to conclude the brief by presenting our suggestions and recommendations for how to counter Russian disinformation.

[Slide: What do we do about it?]

[Slide: Countering the Influence]

Anytime we are dealing with complicated topics, especially topics that are imbued with the unknown or fear or other strong emotions as is often the case with the public perception of WMD and arms control, there is an opportunity for disinformation to fill those gaps.

- Disinformation is not going away, it's cheap, effective, and potential adversaries believe it helps them achieve their goals. There are things that can be done to if not deter disinformation, then to inoculate against it. But this will have to be a whole of society effort from the government, industry, and members of the public. And there is no silver bullet. Multiple layers of defenses are required to make it more difficult for

disinformation to be circulated, and when it is viewed, for citizens to critically evaluate and disregard it so it does not take hold.

- As NATO seeks to counter the threat of disinformation from Russia, it must keep in mind the goals Russia seeks to accomplish by manipulating information: to divide and weaken the resolve and unity our alliance and undermine democratic principles. As we consider what to do, all layered solutions should be in service to maintaining the common values of NATO highlighted in the 2022 Strategic Concept: **individual liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.**

[Slide: Layering Defenses]

In countering disinformation about arms control specifically, we need to layer the defenses of relationships, education, strategic communications, and technical solutions.

[Slide: Relationships]

Relationships: While faith and trust in the institutions and principles of arms control have weakened, never underestimate the value of relationships in national security conflicts.

- A challenge we face is connecting across sectors ahead of a crisis, so trusted partnerships are in place to help resolve problems, be it an arms control compliance issue or WMD use or false narratives about WMD. We must connect across the sectors of **WMD, public health, nonproliferation, public diplomacy, foreign and public affairs offices, laboratories, and counter-disinformation communities** to work together and develop tools and strategies to be resilient to future campaigns

- Each of these entities have a role in bolstering arms control and also may be the target of attacks by Russian disinformation, so it is important to share best practices for countering these attacks and become ever more resilient.

- Building relationships builds **confidence and trust and facilitates the sharing of information.**

[Slide: Education]

The best counter to disinformation is **Education**: as democracies, we need to make sure our citizens have the tools and ability to utilize social and traditional media and be able to identify good sources of information, and how to disregard falsehoods more effectively.

- In general, for countering disinformation, there is a need to focus on digital and media literacy as a society in order to be resilient and spot and identify false information.

- For arms control specifically, we need to make arms control feel more accessible and help educate the public about what arms control is and why it is important—when we

communicate on arms control, it cannot only be in pages of black and white text, but it must be made accessible to the public (including on social media).

- Here are two good recent examples from the US State Department Global Engagement Center and DoD Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

  - The Global Engagement Center regularly updates its Disarming Disinformation page with visually engaging counter disinformation content including this video of experts discussing disinformation in the chemical weapons space.

  - And for DTRA, when presented with Russian disinformation about DoD's Cooperative Threat Reduction program they quickly put out this 3-minute video debunking bioweapons allegations and sharing facts.

- Now not everyone will be swayed by good educational content from the State Department or DoD. So we must also use the partnerships I mentioned before to help emphasize good information from trusted sources.

- Education is a herculean, long-term effort, but education will be one of the most impactful solutions to make NATO resilient to disinformation.

[Slide: **Strategic Communication: The Challenge**]

We also need to be better at telling our story.

- The fact is, Russia often plays better in this space than NATO traditionally has, utilizing a wide variety of platforms and constantly putting out content designed to catalyze engagement.

- Take a look at this screen shot of the top of the home page of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They have every conceivable social platform in use to disseminate their message, and we have been slow to adapt. We have not established meaningful presences on some of these platforms where mis/disinformation spread, and that is a lost opportunity to help put out positive messages on these platforms

- Even when NATO has information proving malign behavior by Russia, China, and other competitors, to include on arms control violations, we have done a poor job of communicating this information within the present information environment and linking it to a larger, cohesive, meaningful narrative.

[Slide: **Strategic Communications**]

And this is frustrating, because it is possible for our countries to communicate engagingly with visuals that can inform and be easily shared …

- … as you can see from these screenshots taken from the US Navy's Instagram account. Come to the account for Baby Yoda in a sailor hat pictures; stay around for the

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communication of important messages like this one about COVID protocols using language and pictures that will resonate, be remembered, and will be shared with others.

- One way the White House addressed this challenge was to engage with a number of Tik Tok influencers early in the Ukraine conflict, briefing them on the crisis and what United States is doing to help. By partnering with these content creators, they are able reach individuals who might not otherwise see or trust information coming from more traditional mouthpieces.

- So, it is possible to conduct strategic communications on important but complex topics such as public health, WMD, or arms control and to do so in ways that protect our democratic ideals.

[Slide: **Utilize new technologies]**

The importance of utilizing technological edge was a focus of NATO's New Strategic Concept—resilience through new technologies will be important for countering disinformation in arms control.

- New technologies, including information technologies, will certainly make arms control more challenging. But we can also utilize innovation and creative ideas to our benefit.

- As we have discussed today, Russia is willing to put conflicting reports undermining faith in data exchanges, accuse the West wrongfully of non-compliance, or forge documents. All of this is made more challenging to detect and oppose when talking about deep fakes and spoofed data.

- Therefore, we will need **new types of verification** to address this new world: our national laboratories, like Sandia in the United States, are acutely aware of this disinformation challenge and are looking at better understanding how disinformation lands in populations, help identify manipulated information, and help decisionmakers validate data.

- Open-source organizations will play a huge role in future arms control. In the CWC cases we discussed in Syria and Novichok use, we saw open-source successes, such as work conducted by the non-government organization Bellingcat, in countering disinformation and uncovering treaty violations. But in a post-truth world when "anything can be manipulated" our society is primed to doubt, even if the facts are right in front of us. So now is the time to think through the best way to support and bolster these open-source organizations and associated technologies.

- This complicated information environment will reveal new solutions and advantages for arms control negotiations, implementation and compliance, but we also have to recognize the information environment is a contested space.

[Slide: (Dis)trust and verify?]

Russia's theory of victory is that democracy and adherence to traditional international order is a weakness. NATO can prove Russia wrong if we ensure our solutions to disinformation are in lockstep with NATO member states' common values of democracy, individual liberty, human rights, and the rule of law.

- As noted in the NATO Strategic Concept, the erosion of the arms control has negatively impacted strategic stability. Russia's violations and selective implementation of its arms control obligations have been enabled by their denial, deflections, and disinformation.

- We are glad to be with you at an important moment in addressing the Russian disinformation challenge and discussing how NATO can be more resilient. Thank you for your time and we look forward to Q&A to discuss these challenges and solutions with you today.

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