



Politics once removed:

EVERYDAY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE 2014 MILITARY OPERATION RECSYR

Christine Nissen and Jessica Larsen

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ABSTRACT

International relations play out on multiple frequencies, where adversary states in one conflict may be partners in another. How do such shifting circumstances influence the conditions for ongoing international military operations? This paper seeks answers through an analysis of Operation RECSYR, the 2014 Danish-led naval intervention to remove chemical weapons from Syria. It was carried out by the UN and key states – including Denmark, Norway, and Russia. Yet this was also a period of highly tense relations between the West and Russia due to the latter's involvement with President Assad in the Syrian war, and the annexation of Crimea. Thus, the successful cooperation largely hinged on the tactical level, and the politics of the day needed to be set to one side. Drawing on Bourdieu's theoretical 'practice approach' to 'field analysis', this article opens up 'the black box' of the state to look at everyday international relations. It uncovers how military practitioners facilitated cooperation despite a conflict-ridden political context. The paper argues that the conditions for international operations neither leave military practitioners in a stalemate, nor are they impervious to strategic-level politicking. Rather, it is the capacity of the tactical level to shift between using and then decoupling its culture and practices from shifts and conflicts playing out on the strategic level that produces the everyday international relations.

INTRODUCTION: THE SHOW MUST GO ON

While Great Power politics often steal the headlines in international news and create headaches for political leaders around the world, practitioners on the ground are able to circumvent political stalemates and avoid conflict. We may call it ‘everyday international relations’. This paper studies these everyday international relations and shows how great power politics play out on multiple frequencies, which allow cooperation on the tactical level, despite political conflict on the strategic one. The international naval mission Operation Removal of Chemical Weapons from Syria (RECSYR) is a case in point. Authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 2118 in September 2013,¹ the navies of the small Nordic states of Denmark and Norway were tasked with removing declared chemical stockpiles from President Assad’s war-torn Syria. In late December 2013 Russia and China suddenly claimed a role in the operation, and the two Nordic NATO countries, lacking experience in terms of cooperation and interoperability, had to quickly devise reasonable working relations with these foreign naval powers. Seemingly unconnected, yet quickly of central relevance, Russia annexed Crimea some months into the RECSYR operation in February 2014. While the assistance of Assad’s ally Russia in RECSYR lent the operation a particular and much-needed political clout vis-à-vis Syria, the Crimea annexation dramatically aggravated the already strained relations between the West and Russia and, indeed, the rest of the world grew sceptical about the operation. And yet the mission was successfully concluded.

These circumstances pose the puzzle of how political adversaries in one area can simultaneously be practical allies in another. Conceptually, this challenges the IR analytical practice of treating the state as a single entity, since evidently it is possible to act as a state on several frequencies at once, sometimes even on contradictory ones. Cases like these beg the question: in which ways do the circumstances of strategic-level conflict become enmeshed with tactical-level operations, and how may we understand these circumstances analytically? This paper seeks an answer by analysing RECSYR from an operational perspective, drawing foremost on the experience of particular practitioners deployed in 2013–2014 in the eastern Mediterranean, as well as on that of their counterparts in defence headquarters. Their positions in the operation provide critical standpoints from which to study the different frequencies of everyday international relations – within and across states. Our aim is to contribute empirical-level insights to IR scholarship and policymakers, and to suggest a tool with which to analyse, anticipate and address the apparent ‘messiness’ of international politics.

¹ UN Security Council, 2013

To do so, the paper makes use of an approach that allows opening up the ‘black box’ of the state to study different settings of practice in the context of international politics. Herein also lies the main contribution of the paper. In the broader scholarship of IR analysis of state interactions, the state is understood as possessing a certain set of interests and ideas, of learning through encounters, of being self-reflexive and in continuous making.² Yet it is commonplace to treat the ‘state’ as a monolithic, unitary actor and to focus on the level of policy or a specific group of actors within a state.³ The wide range of – different – units and individuals that, in fact, make up the state are often left out of the analysis.⁴ Recently, so-called ‘third-generation constructivist scholarship’⁵ has brought a new orientation to IR studies by moving the enquiry away from an ‘asocial ontology’, i.e. one where social relations are widely ignored.⁶ Accordingly, a central task for third-generation constructivists has been to study the situated practices of how international relations are played out, and the individuals that produce global politics.⁷ Here, the focus is on human practices that extend beyond key social science dualisms between objectivism and subjectivism, materiality and ideas, or society and state.⁸ And yet, even though practice-centred scholarship has much to offer IR studies and is particularly relevant for the purpose of this paper, analyses of international operations within IR so far still remain largely divided between a focus on elite decision-makers in international headquarters *or* on soldiers deployed on the ground.⁹ Consequently, the translation of political decisions into material actions, as well as the link between levels of policymaking and implementation, remain understudied in the existing literature.

In an attempt to fill this gap, the present article seeks to understand how international relations play out in practice and it does so by stratifying the notion of ‘the state’ into distinct fields with actors that are analytically separated from any (monolithic) official national level or entity. Conceptually, by drawing on Bourdieu’s practice-oriented approach, the article contributes a framework to the study of international politics for analysing the state across different domains of policy. The paper approaches the defence and diplomacy domains as playing out through social processes and draws on Bourdieu’s notion of *the field*,¹⁰ including his concept of *nomos* whereby context-specific rationales are expressed in given social

² Palan, 2000

³ Bourdieu, 1985

⁴ Adler-Nissen, 2016; Nissen, 2018

⁵ See for example Leander, 2014; Pouliot, 2010; McCourt, 2016; Adler-Nissen, 2016.

⁶ Adler-Nissen, 2016

⁷ Adler-Nissen, 2016

⁸ Bigo, 2011

⁹ Dreyer, 2021

¹⁰ Bourdieu, 1984

spaces and then go on to shape the practices that take place.¹¹ With this framework, it is possible to study how military practitioners facilitate cooperation on the tactical level, in an otherwise conflictual strategic political context.

Methodologically, the article is an example of global political ethnography¹² and is inspired by Nader's notion of 'studying up'¹³ to unpack global politics through key practitioners. This entails an ethnographically-informed approach that studies the positions and practices of actually occurring interventions – where politics gains meaning in practice. It draws in activities where policies are being implemented, rather than remaining at the level where decisions are taken, and it adds empirical knowledge of practitioners operating in the field of practice. Concretely, the analysis is based on empirical data collected through interviews with naval staff and officials involved in Operation RECSYR. To unpack the inner workings of 'the state', it focuses on the operation's flag state, Denmark. The paper thus adds an empirical perspective to the practice-based approach to international relations, which can contribute to the understanding of the state as possessing different domains of activity: the Bourdieusian fields. The paper uncovers how, below the high politics of the day, a working layer of practitioners across several states carry out their duties. They are not in a stalemate; the show must go on. Neither are they flying under the radar, so to speak, of strategic-level politicking; for they are not impervious. Rather, the paper argues, they improvise to get things done, and shedding light on these processes is necessary to understand the different levels of strategic and tactical dimensions of the state that emerge in international politics, and emanate from both defence and diplomatic settings and even across different national contexts, in this case converging in a specific security operation.

The paper is structured into three parts. First, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's key concept of practice adjusted to the study of international relations, we present the background to the case of Operation RECSYR and devise a conceptual framework with which to approach the everyday international relations playing out in situ. In the second section, the analysis begins by situating the field(s) of the defence and diplomacy actors involved in Operation RECSYR and, accordingly, the nomos inherent in the field. The analytical framework is then applied to this field via three illustrative cases of how international relations are played out at different strategic and tactical frequencies as seen through the eyes of the military actors in theatre. The article concludes with some brief remarks on the concept of multiple

¹¹ For clarity of the analysis, the paper sets aside Bourdieu's understandings of habitus and doxa, as the aim is specifically to delineate the concept and rationale of the field as an approach in IR.

¹² Stepputat and Larsen, 2015

¹³ Nader, 1972; Gusterson, 1997

frequencies of the state and on how a Bourdieusian approach can be helpful for analysing ‘everyday international relations’.

STUDYING EVERYDAY PERFORMANCES OF WORLD POLITICS

Operation RECSYR and its political context

The international naval mission Operation Removal of Chemical Weapons from Syria (RECSYR) in 2013–2014 was authorised by UN Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013) in September 2013,¹⁴ to remove the – declared – stockpiles of chemical components from Assad’s war-torn Syria. The navies of the small Nordic states of Denmark and Norway were chosen to deploy frigates to the Eastern Mediterranean, namely the Danish *Esbern Snare*¹⁵ and the Norwegian *Helge Ingstad*. Their mission was to protect two further, civilian, vessels, the Danish *Ark Futura* and the Norwegian *Taiko*, tasked with removing chemical components from Syria through the port of Latakia, and to coordinate with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) headquartered in Limassol, Cyprus.¹⁶ The US vessel *MV Cape Ray* was reconfigured to receive and destroy the key components of the chemical stockpiles transported out of Latakia, while the remainder was destined for neutralisation in various European states.¹⁷

Denmark was chosen to be the flag state with task force commander Admiral Torben Mikkelsen in charge of the two military and two civilian vessels. This choice was not stated in the UN Security Council resolution but was to a large extent decided by the US;¹⁸ indeed, the operation was brought into action after the then US President Obama in August 2012 voiced what was perceived to be a public threat by drawing an infamous red line across Assad’s use of chemical weapons. With this, Obama effectively placed the option of a military attack on the table. *Foreign Affairs* described it as the US president having ‘painted himself into a corner’,¹⁹ and it seemed impossible: the Obama Administration’s general lack of Congressional, indeed Republican support paralysed this option,²⁰ and it is safe to say that it would also have met resistance from Russia in the UN Security Council, unless Obama

¹⁴ UN Security Council, 2013

¹⁵ At the time of Operation RECSYR, *Esbern Snare* was classified as a ‘flexible support vessel’ and was reclassified as a frigate in 2020.

¹⁶ The Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force in 1997. A key part of the Convention was the setting up of a control mechanism, called the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) with the aim of destroying the world’s stockpile of chemical weapons.

¹⁷ Bleek and Kramer, 2016

¹⁸ Authors’ interviews

¹⁹ Price, 2013

²⁰ Rhodes, 2018

intervened without authorisation. In any case, in the light of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, another potential war in the Middle East was a less than desirable option to most stakeholders.

In the spring of 2013, following the red line statement, US intelligence established that Assad had, in fact, breached the chemical weapons taboo by using them against his own citizens,²¹ and when the news broke in August 2013 of a major sarin gas attack – classified by the UN as a weapon of mass destruction – killing over 1,000 Syrians outside of Damascus the red line had been crossed and something had to be done. The big issue was what? Among Western states, the US could not and would not walk it alone. The UK parliament voted against a military intervention. But as it turned out, on the question of how to deal with the existence of chemical weapons in Syria there was an option that represented mutual interests among the main stakeholders, where all parties were seen to actively pursue a part in the operation and therefore stood to gain.

Russian President Putin addressed the West in the New York Times on 11 September 2013, first of all positioning Russia as the bearer of peace: ‘From the outset, Russia has advocated peaceful dialogue enabling Syrians to develop a compromise plan for their own future. We are not protecting the Syrian government, but international law.’ And subsequently, he encouraged alternatives to military action: ‘The United States, Russia and all members of the international community must take advantage of the Syrian government’s willingness to place its chemical arsenal under international control for subsequent destruction.’²² Spurred on by Russia, Syria actually signed the Chemical Weapons Convention on 9 September 2013 enabling action.²³ On the same day, US Secretary of State John Kerry suggested at a press conference that Assad place his chemical weapons arsenal under international control, an idea that was picked up by Russia; five days later, and Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov laid out a plan in Geneva to this end.²⁴ By November, the OPCW had created a timetable for the process, which called for the removal of the most dangerous components by 31 December 2013 and the destruction of all other components no later than 31 June 2013.²⁵ As we shall see, however, this proved much too ambitious, as the first pickup only took place in January 2014.

In this way, it seemed that stakeholder interests aligned and all parties ultimately stood to gain something: Assad officially avoided a military attack and unofficially

²¹ Rhodes, 2018

²² Putin, 2013

²³ Arms Control Association, 2018

²⁴ Friedman and Brom, 2013

²⁵ OPCW, 2013

controlled how much of his chemical stockpile was actually destroyed; Russia, an ally of the Assad regime, would not let the West attack Syria, in which it had a vested interest, and could simultaneously be seen as the grand orchestrator of what became Operation RECSYR; the West led by the Obama Administration could save face by being seen to nevertheless act on the infamous red line but in a more subdued and peace-seeking fashion that fitted the liberal democratic model better than a conventional military response – while simultaneously avoiding another potential war in the Middle East, which could turn into a protracted affair. Operation RECSYR was a compromise, which seemed satisfactory to all.

While interests across the main, self-proclaimed stakeholders seemed to align, it also brought together states who could well be described as adversaries. This was underscored a few months into the operation when Russia, as mentioned in the introduction, annexed Crimea and tensions grew in Eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile Operation RECSYR continued, seemingly without being affected, and the next section of this paper digs into this circumstance to identify the multiple frequencies with which states can be seen to interact in international politics. But first let us take a look at the methodological framework with which to do so.

A methodology of the disaggregated state

Our framework for analysing Operation RECSYR and how the different strategic and tactical frequencies influence the operation builds on that strand of political sociology which studies everyday practices of world politics. It takes into account the situated nature of human activity. We take a practice theory approach to studying international relations, which enables us to capture the ways in which individual people make sense of the world and go about their day-to-day activities. This approach holds that social life is deeply situated. It assumes that subjectivity, meaning and consciousness do not exist prior to experience; that they are emergent in action and interaction; an approach that situates action as a primary conceptual and analytical focus.²⁶ Because definitions of a particular situation may differ from person to person and from group to group, understanding the realities within which people operate is thus crucial for understanding the social world. Values, norms and identities are produced in everyday interactions of international relations, they are embodied and still interactional. Operationalising such ideas into an analytical framework, this article returns to the work of Bourdieu and draws on key concepts in his social theory, namely *field* and *nomos*.

For Bourdieu, the field is a social space produced by a group of actors belonging to this field through status, knowledge, and position. Bringing the field into the

²⁶ Waskul and Vannini, 2006

analysis 'makes it possible to see social space as an objective space, a structure of objective relations which determines the possible form of interactions and of the representations the interactors can have of them'.²⁷ In other words, a field is a socio-spatial setting in which people with their particular social dispositions are located or belong. While field sociology has been criticised for being inflexible and the social world as too fluid and complex to be captured in one field,²⁸ we see it as a useful analytical tool to make sense of the world, rather than insisting on it as a constant fact. Indeed, any field would arguably always be in a state of flux, constantly produced and reproduced through practices, and this does not detract from the understanding of how actors interact within them – it just requires a situated analysis through attention to practice.²⁹ Indeed, identifying a field is not an exact science.³⁰

Furthermore, for Bourdieu a field of social practice is relatively autonomous – its autonomy resting on a particular *nomos*, i.e. a set of beliefs characterising a given society. *Nomos* is thus unique to every field and governs practices and experiences within that field. The *nomos* of the field are phenomena that are generally accepted as self-evident or unquestionable within a given social situation – and they differ depending on the field. Collectively, the concepts of field and *nomos* thus allow us to establish analytically the relative autonomy of different fields of social practice within the international system around Operation RECSYR and study each field in its own right, as well as to see how they interact as expressions of international politics.³¹

In this article, we analyse and distinguish empirically between two general settings of international politics. In the first setting, there is the *political level related to strategy and policy choices* where politicians, civil servants or diplomats work in headquarter offices to determine the intentions, objectives and decisions that make up the direction of their foreign policy. The second setting is the *implementational level related to practice and tactical choices*, whereby policy choices are put into action by professionals and practitioners operating in situ – in our case, naval staff directly involved in the operation in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It is tempting to define these settings as the strategic and tactical level respectively, but the distinction is more fluid, as it is possible to identify both levels within every setting – hence the need for a practice-based approach to studying the fields. In this paper, we analyse the two different types of setting with an emphasis on the implementation level in

²⁷ Bourdieu, 1984

²⁸ Bauman, 2009

²⁹ Leander, 2011

³⁰ Adler-Nissen, 2013

³¹ Leander, 2011

situ, but constant linking it to the HQ, with a view to illuminating the ways in which the policy and implementational levels within the state, and also between states, interact through collaboration and sometimes even contestation. We unpack how policies and mandates are performed in global politics by means of exploratively studying the concrete example of Operation RECSYR.

This is done through a thick description of the experiences of, primarily, practitioners involved in the operation and their contacts within and across states. Here, the 'state' in question is the illustrative one of Denmark, who held a leading role in the operation and who served as mediator between the diverging positions of other states involved in the operation – big and small. Exploring the practitioners' view, we are inspired by person-centred interviewing,³² in which semi-structured interviews with key individuals are seen to provide two kinds of information. First, they give the interviewees' own reports, views and interpretations of phenomena related to experience. At the same time, interviewees can also be seen as objects of systematic study in themselves, in whose discourse and forms of discourse the researcher detects knowledge about the organisation of experience by that particular individual.³³

The analysis is based on primary data consisting of interview notes from conversations with key practitioners: a case officer in the Danish Defence Ministry, two lieutenants on board Esbern Snare and the Operation RECSYR task force commander, Admiral Torben Mikkelsen, as well as Mikkelsen's account of the mission published in a detailed book, which includes extracts from his diary during the operation, meeting notes, and first-hand accounts.³⁴ Through these conversations, we nuance and detail a level of policy implementation which cannot be found in official accounts from the states involved in the mission. The methodology enjoys the benefit of hindsight, which gives a certain measure of distance from the operation and allows for scrutiny of the political interests when providing a certain account of the events. We furthermore build our analysis on secondary data. This includes media articles, official reports from states, OPWC and organisations monitoring the operation.

³² Once developed by Robert Levy to elicit and analyse psychocultural phenomena in his study of Tahiti and Nepal, and later adapted by anthropologists as a means of interviewing and observing individuals in groups.

³³ Hollan, 2005

³⁴ With this perspective, an important bias is the very specific perspective of the force commander. The aim, however, is not to strive for an objective and generalizable truth, but to illustrate through cases grounded in the empirics of Operation RECSYR the multiple levels upon which 'the state' acts and the ways in which strategic and tactical level perspectives meet in international politics (Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019).

GLOBAL POLITICS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF A NAVAL OFFICER

In this section, we analyse various events, which are particularly illustrative of why and how international politics are being played out at different frequencies in what is often treated in IR analyses as one 'state'. We structure the analysis around thick descriptions of three cases, each drawing on the concept of field and nomos to identify and examine how the different dimensions function and interrelate. The first case analyses the processes when an operational concept of RECSYR, the so-called 'Moscow Plan', was negotiated and devised by representatives from all states involved in the operation – Denmark, Norway, Russia, China and Syria. It approaches the operational context of different international actors cooperating as a distinct field and investigates the cultural, national and historical differences that exist when nomos from different contexts converge. The second case turns to how the Danish force commander engages with his colleagues in Copenhagen defence headquarters during the collections of chemical components in Latakia Port. It dissects the state proper and uncovers how distinct fields of policy and implementation interact within a single state. The final case explores the extent to which the notion of the field can be extended beyond a single geographical or thematically-bounded site to be an exponent of the tense higher circles of international politics. It analyses examples of wider geopolitical relations of the day as expressed through practices within the operational context of Operation RECSYR.

To inform the analysis and understand these contradictory dynamics, there is little help to be found in existing scholarship. Academic contributions on Operation RECSYR and reflections on the interaction between their strategic and tactical settings is limited. In fact, in the political and social sciences, RECSYR in itself has yet to be substantively studied. Rather, the broader case of Syrian chemical weapons and their destruction in 2013–2014 has been taken up. This includes security studies as part of a literature on the international taboo on chemical weapons, for instance to discuss whether the Assad regime pushed the boundary of war in a way that compelled insurgents and militant groups like IS to use chemical weapons?³⁵ It also includes studies on non-proliferation, which are brought to bear on the Syrian case in terms of lessons learned,³⁶ as well as related to a more general debate on the current state of weapons of mass destruction.³⁷ Another body of literature scrutinises the Syrian case in terms of its legal aspects, for instance using the case to analyse accountability in international law,³⁸ international law in relation to

³⁵ Price, 2019

³⁶ Bleek and Kramer, 2016; Abe, 2017

³⁷ Hersman, 2016

³⁸ Naqvi, 2017

American practice³⁹ and its human rights implications.⁴⁰ Some studies reflect on the role of international organisations, such as the role of the OPCW in the Syrian case to discuss the concept of institutional autonomy,⁴¹ and the legal basis of the OPCW to act.⁴² As such, these studies use the Syrian case as a vehicle for greater debates within their discipline. However, a study of Operation RECSYR itself seems a gap in the literature, and analysis of the tactics and practices of RECSYR in the context of a highly fraught international political landscape is absent.

That said, three studies of relevance stand out. They use the Syrian case to map the various positions and international political perceptions of the stakeholders involved. They document the diverging narratives and interests of Western, Russian and Syrian states displayed by how each state framed the perceived success of the disarmament process,⁴³ the nature of US–Russian collaboration in the context of their historical relationship and the Crimea crisis,⁴⁴ and what role criminal justice and accountability should play.⁴⁵ However, while these studies home in on the states involved and how they position themselves, the perspective adopted remains fixed on the assumption that a state is a monolithic entity, which thinks and acts as one. In turn, the case study provided by this article allows for a unique glance into the machinery of a high-level international military operation. To nuance the picture in IR, we use ethnographic data to move the study of these positions forward, not only to uncover the positions of states but also to take a step into the state proper in order to illuminate and discuss the different levels that exist and collectively produce international politics – even within a single state.

Case I: The making of the Moscow Plan

The crankshaft of the international cooperation to carry out Operation RECSYR was what came to be known as the Moscow Plan. The Moscow Plan was the concept of operation; a document spelling out tactical specifics about the operation. It was formulated and signed by Denmark, Syria, Russia and China in December 2013 at a tactical planning meeting in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴⁶ The Moscow Plan did not enjoy status as an international agreement, nor as an operational

³⁹ Daugirdas and Mortensen, 2014

⁴⁰ Geis and Schlag, 2017

⁴¹ Makdisi and Hindawi, 2019

⁴² Sossai, 2019

⁴³ Makdisi and Hindawi, 2017

⁴⁴ Notte, 2020

⁴⁵ Edwards and Cacciatori, 2018

⁴⁶ There were 45 participants. From the Russian side, this included the vice foreign minister, Sergey Ryabkov, and a Russian colonel, but also a US general. Given that Denmark was leading the operation, a large delegation participated in the meeting: the navy's operation commander Frank Trojahn, the force commander Admiral Torben Mikkelsen, the Danish liaison officer to the OPCW office in Limassol, a brigadier general, the defence attaché to Russia, a captain, a military legal advisor, a linguist, and a staff planning officer (Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 43).

mandate, in fact, its physical form was a PowerPoint slide show which had been prepared by the staff of the Danish Force Commander, printed out and signed by the participants after the meeting.⁴⁷ But as we shall see below, it proved pivotal even so as a common, if informal accord for the operation.

The meeting leading to the Moscow Plan was a Russian initiative after the Russians and Chinese claimed a part in the operation, as explained in the introduction. An operational planning meeting had already been held mid-December 2013 in Stuttgart between the NATO countries involved. Russia was not invited.⁴⁸ To position itself more centrally in the mission, Russia decided to provide a ship and invited stakeholders to Moscow. In an interview, the Danish force commander recalled that while the Moscow meeting was held with the aim of working out how Syria, Russia and China could provide force protection in Syrian territorial waters to the commercial vessels *Ark Futura* and *Taiko*, picking up chemical components, his sense was that their aim was to keep an eye on the Nordics and to gain control and influence over the mission's course of action.

Thus, from the very beginning the different positions of the parties involved was a constant factor in establishing the rules of the game beyond tactical considerations. This, however, was seen by the Danish admiral as no obstacle, as long as the permission of the frigates *Esbern Snare* and *Helge Ingstad* to enter territorial waters to protect the civilian ships remained intact – and this permission had already been granted by the Syrian government through a UN process.⁴⁹ Yet the Russians began the meeting by suggesting that Denmark and Norway would escort the vessels up to the 12NM territorial water line, whereafter Russia and China would take over vessel protection the rest of the way into Latakia Port. The Russian representatives furthermore explained that they assessed the threat of a land-based missile attack as high, and given the already volatile security situation, Russia therefore suggested dividing the theatre into a northern and southern sector with the Danish-led task force in charge of securing the northern sector, and Russia and China in charge of the southern.⁵⁰ In turn, Denmark presented its plan to allow Danish and Norwegian frigates all the way to the docks – as stipulated in the UN Security Council⁵¹ – and subsequently negotiations ensued to find a middle ground that could please all parties involved.

Ultimately, a compromise was reached. The Russian wish for a south/north division of responsibility was kept, and the Danish demand that the task force be allowed to

⁴⁷ Authors' interviews

⁴⁸ Notte, 2020, p. 14

⁴⁹ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, pp. 37–38

⁵⁰ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 44

⁵¹ DG Statement, 2019

escort the civilian vessels all the way to the Syrian shores, as already agreed internationally, was accepted by the Russians. The Syrians then declared that they would deploy a couple of smaller naval vessels in the northern sector to help the task force, to escort the civilian ships into Latakia when they left the northern sector – although another motive could have been to signal that Syria was present and in charge and capable of securing its own waters. Finally, even though it was not technically nor legally required of the task force to ask permission, given its UNSC mandate through Operation RECSYR, the Danish admiral informed the meeting delegates that a British frigate was planning to join the operation in mid-January 2014 with the aim of providing support outside of Syrian territorial waters.⁵² The admiral explained to these authors that this information was provided to avoid it coming as a surprise and potentially creating tension within the new operational partnership, in particular if the Russians felt that they had been kept in the dark.

With this, the Moscow Plan was born. It provided all states with designated roles and set Russia and China on an equal standing with the Nordic task force, even if not formally involved in the mission, and it laid out a game plan that all parties could agree upon. It also orchestrated on the one hand the formal Operation RECSYR and on the other hand the informal collaboration with Russia and China, thus proving central as a reference point during operations and giving it weight similar to a political or legal mandate, even if unofficially.

An 'international' field

The Moscow Plan's existence, not to mention the Nordic cooperation with Russia and China, is significant. On the one hand, it stands in contrast to the atmosphere in international politics at the time, given the well-known tensions between Russia and Western states. On the other hand, and as this paper argues, it is symptomatic of the different strategic and tactical frequencies that converge in cases of international politics. This emerges most clearly if 'the state' is stratified into fields and actors below the official, 'national' level, and if a practice-oriented approach is adopted to its examination. Thus by framing the Moscow meeting and its resulting plan as a field several traits can emerge, which deepen the understanding of how international politics play out on different frequencies. A meeting is clearly a fleeting field constellation, lasting only a few hours. However, through the Moscow Plan, this fleeting field arguably extended as an abstraction throughout the 16 months that the operation lasted and, as an agreement established between all the actors involved, the plan was evoked at crucial moments during the collaboration

⁵² Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 46

to ease tensions and provide guidance in the (co-)operation as we shall see shortly in the next case.

The plan in other words epitomises an international field as a referent of the Moscow meeting and the relationships that the meeting launched for the operation to come. As a field, the Moscow meeting was politically charged. It comprised of senior military and diplomatic (but not executive) representatives of states that had diverging, if not opposing official agendas on the topic of Syria in general and Operation RECSYR in particular.⁵³ One example is when, towards the end of the meeting in Moscow, the Danish delegation mentioned that if permission was granted to enter Latakia before the Russian and Chinese warships had reached the area, Operation RECSYR would commence as per the task force's UN mandate. This almost led to an implosion of the Moscow Plan. It was evident from both Russia's and China's reactions that they seemed unable to accept what the Danes perceived as operational flexibility, nor to manage the tactical improvisation it apparently suggested. A plan was a plan, and changes could only be dictated from HQ level⁵⁴ – this despite the fact that the Moscow Plan was already being devised at a setting well below HQ, let alone the UN mandate. The Danish admiral stressed in his diary that it was a tactical level meeting,⁵⁵ yet at the same time, its significance reached beyond that. Russian and Chinese protests included fundamentally questioning the reliability of the Nordic navies as partners, and a formulation in the plan was therefore agreed upon that made provision for *minor* deviations from the plan. As an olive branch, the Danish admiral sent an upbeat letter on his way back to Limassol from Moscow, giving thanks to his new partners for the constructive dialogue, reintroducing a happy tone into the relationship by voicing his expectation of a fruitful collaboration.⁵⁶ As he mused in his diary, he had tucked away the warrior during the meeting and in many instances drew upon the diplomat in order to bring the process forward.⁵⁷

Through deliberations, the Moscow Plan gained significance as a field within Operation RECSYR as actors revolved around it and established relations to one another in the face of it – but it was also a catalyst for the competition for power, with actors literally seeking to position their tactical-level assets and strategic-level ideas at the forefront of the plan. An example of this took place in the Mediterranean theatre, when there was a clash between the Danish force commander and the Russian warship, which almost came across as a battle to define the field. The force

⁵³ Makdisi and Hindawi, 2017

⁵⁴ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 48

⁵⁵ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 42

⁵⁶ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, pp. 48–49

⁵⁷ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 47

commander had called a meeting among the warships, at which the Russians unilaterally proclaimed their intent to head a coordination cell between the Danish and Norwegian Operation RECSYR assets and Sino–Russian contributions. To this end, Russia called for Danish, Norwegian, Chinese and Syrian liaison officers to embark on the *Pjotr Velikij*. This Russian demand was in clear ‘violation’ of, or at least a deviation from, the Moscow Plan and was therefore not even entertained by the Danish admiral as a possibility; the plan posed the naval states as separate but equal and therefore no coordination cell could be accepted by the force commander. A few days later, the *Pjotr Velikij* once again restated its demand for a coordination cell on board the Russian warship,⁵⁸ this time invoking the narrative from the Moscow meeting of ‘un-partnerly behaviour’ and alleging that the Danish force commander was withholding information, hence justifying the need for a cell. The cell never did materialise. But inspired by the events, the Danish force commander ordered an exercise for the crew on board *Esbern Snare*, in which his staff played the role of the *Pjotr Velikij* seeking to take control of the mission,⁵⁹ underscoring that relations between the actors in RECSYR was a tolerated collaboration, rather than any actual partnership.

As we see in the above, it is clear how the Moscow Plan as an exponent of an international field facilitated as well as produced both cooperation and tension, and how it was shaped by highly divergent political and cultural contexts. This is evident in the differences between national military representatives’ ability to absorb change or deviation from the plan and the degrees to which they were variously willing to operate with flexibility. Here, the Nordics seemed willing to decide on unexpected events on an *ad hoc* basis (something that was seen several times throughout the operation, see the sections below) and wished to display an open mind in the collaboration, cf. the olive branch letter. On the other side, Russia and China seemed uncomfortable about diverging from the plan. They used negative language during the meeting and insinuated that they distrusted the Nordics. When they did initiate deviations from the Moscow Plan, it was to seek more influence than the plan allowed through attempting to place themselves in a coordinating role. As we can recall, the different states involved in the Moscow Plan each came with their own reasons to participate in Operation RECSYR.

Such behaviour displays fundamental differences in the various actors’ nomos within this particular field, that is, the beliefs or principles that were held by the actors from each country. Indeed, it also comes down to trust. This was underscored, when the Danish force commander invited the commanding officers

⁵⁸ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 93

⁵⁹ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 102

of the Russian and Chinese warships to a meeting before the first collection of chemical components in Latakia. Russia declined the invitation, informing the admiral that the Russian captain was unable to attend. Yet the Russian warship was already in theatre meaning that a visit would have been easy. The force commander perceived it as a case of leaders in Moscow being wary of giving the Russian warships any opportunity to scheme in ways deviating from the Moscow Plan.⁶⁰ This is of course just the personal perspective of one individual, and the Russian motive remains officially unknown. But as we shall see in the below sections, information did seem to flow between Moscow and the Russian warship in fits and starts, lending credibility to the idea that trust was at a minimum within the Russian camp, as Russian HQ even withheld operative information from its own assets. Such internal tensions, all things equal, hampered Russian ability to cooperate with the Nordics. It would thus seem that even with a common plan which had been discussed, negotiated and signed with all relevant parties physically present in the same room, the nomos within the field was under tension. The parties kept each other at arm's length and the plan did not entirely ensure streamlining of knowledge nor understanding of the operation. Rapport and trust-building did not readily flow from the plan, and the notion of the field brings out this tension. Tension, however, did not prevent the operation from carrying out the necessary collections of chemical components.

Case II: First pick-up of chemical components

From a specific international field of interaction of relevance to Operation RECSYR, we now turn to a case, which digs into the state proper. Taking a practice theory approach, it suggests that there are different fields at play in Operation RECSYR, even on the national level. It took place on 7 January 2014, an easy day to recall for the Danish force commander. On too little sleep and too much coffee, Torben Mikkelsen was about to escort the Danish vessel *Ark Futura* into the Syrian port of Latakia to collect the first delivery of chemical stockpiles, stored in 40-foot containers.⁶¹ From then onwards, the plan was that *Ark Futura* and the Norwegian cargo ship *Taiko*, would collect several containers of chemical materials over the coming months as and when the containers reached the shores from different locations within Syria. In between the collections, RECSYR vessels were to remain in an agreed-upon waiting space outside the Syrian port.

On the day when the first containers were to be collected, the various naval actors from the states involved began arranging themselves according to the Moscow Plan: the Danish force commander informed Russian *Pjotr Velikij* that they were passing

⁶⁰ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 64

⁶¹ Authors' interview, March 2021

into the port area soon, and that the Norwegians meanwhile would sail *Taiko* into the northern area. The Chinese were also quickly approaching the scene, and as organised by the Russians, were to offer protection of the southern zone together with the Russians. When the Danish vessel approached the port, there was a massive security turnout, with soldiers from the Syrian army patrolling everywhere.

The operation of getting the first batch of chemical weapons out of and loaded onto *Ark Futura* went smoothly but the euphoria and sense of history that come with the first part of a 'job well done', however, disappeared the following day. An uncomfortable message reached the force commander on board the Danish frigate, *Esbern Snare*: there was a chance that one of the containers that was now on *Ark Futura* contained a bomb. The force commander had to think quickly; would a potential bomb be equipped with a timer device so it would blow up at a particular time, or during any attempt to disarm it? How should the force commander handle that the entire crew of *Ark Futura* was potentially in mortal danger? The force commander conferred on the matter with the explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) personnel who were part of the mission. The circumstances, as they concluded in their discussion, were to their advantage: it would be much more likely that bombers would seek to detonate a device closer to land where – in this age of social media – it could be seen from land and thus the propaganda effects would be far greater than now, where they were far off the coast. Moreover, any potential bomb was likely to be controlled by mobile phone, and now they were out of signal range for phone connectivity. For these reasons, the force commander decided that it was justifiable to spend some time on solving the situation and to engage in what he referred to in his diary notes as 'tactical patience'. He contacted his superior in the Danish Armed Forces based in Copenhagen, and told him about the situation, and of his decision not to report the incident officially to any higher levels of state. The reason, the commander explained, was that if the strategic level were involved early in the process, they would need to contact all partners, and the matter would become a major cause of concern likely to interfere with the mission's further conduct.⁶² The need for 'tactical patience' was accepted given that the commander was in the middle of the situation, and the most suited to comprehend it and act accordingly.⁶³ In the end no bomb was found on board the *Ark Futura* and the first pick-up was finally secure and completed.

Several other incidents took place displaying the existence of a similar disconnect between the political level of policy choices, and the implementational level of

⁶² Authors' interview, March 2021

⁶³ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 79

practice. A central and ongoing example for this case, were differences across levels of the Danish 'state' in the perception of the Russians, following their annexation of Crimea. At the political level, the official Danish position was clear, to denounce any annexation and support the NATO Alliance's sanctioning of any cooperation with Russia.⁶⁴ Since Operation RECSYR was not a NATO mission, there were no clear guidelines as to how cooperation in situ should continue going forward. From the perspective of Force Commander Mikkelsen and other practitioners involved in the mission, there was no doubt that the fairly close relationship that they had put effort into building with Russia, was pivotal for the success of the mission.⁶⁵ Thus, despite international tensions, the ongoing cooperation, including meetings and common exercises, continued on a regular basis with *Pjotr Velikij*. Several of the practitioners involved in the operation recalled in interviews how the strategic level of policy in Denmark did not seem to grasp why it made sense tactically to keep a close tie with the Russians in the Mediterranean theatre. Interviewees involved at the level of tactics explained how, from a strategic perspective, in a situation where the relationship between the West and Russia was at a new low point, they would have preferred to keep a limit on the contact between the Danish and Russian naval officers.⁶⁶ Yet pragmatics won out, speaking again to the Nordic culture of operational flexibility and tactical improvisation, as discussed in the previous case.

Moreover, a directive was created in Copenhagen which specified that if contact did occur between the Danes and the Russians, the former would refrain from talking about Crimea and politics when engaging with them.⁶⁷ Not talking about politics was, however, already the very essence of the practitioners' handling of the tense, highly political situation. Here, they explained in interviews how the tactical level is apolitical, or at least how their strategy was to carry on a contact which remained stripped of politics. While a few situations did crop up where political issues or sentiments were hinted at, the Danish practitioners largely ignored them in the name of pragmatism. This happened very rarely since the Russian seamen also largely took a similar approach. The practitioners – be they Russian, Danish or Chinese, focused on getting the concrete mission done, which in essence had nothing to do with Russia's activities in its own neighborhood.⁶⁸

From the perspective of HQ back in Copenhagen, there did however exist an unspoken acknowledgment of the need to sometimes keep the tactical and the strategic levels separate.⁶⁹ As explained by one defence ministry official, some

⁶⁴ Hansen and Jørgensen, 2021

⁶⁵ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, p. 139; authors' translation; authors' interviews

⁶⁶ Authors' Interviews

⁶⁷ Authors' interview

⁶⁸ Authors' interviews

⁶⁹ Authors' interview

incidents simply did not reach their levels of state to avoid political tension. Moreover, the focal point from the perspective of the strategic level perspective was very different to that of the force commander and his crew. As an example, where the Russians and to some extent also the Chinese were key collaborators of the Danish force commander, his Danish colleagues back in Copenhagen had no cooperation with these two nations throughout the mission. The Americans, on the other hand, who meant little for the tactical level of the force commander, were seen as a key partner in the mission, with whom close contact was held.⁷⁰

Fields within a disaggregated state

The above examples are illustrative of the disaggregated state as conceptualised by a Bourdieu-inspired reading of international relations. Acknowledging the wide range of units and individuals that in fact make up the state, this approach allows an understanding of a state's practices in its different situated settings. This, in turn, suggests that the state itself holds different sets of nomos.

An example is the tension produced when the commander on the one hand insists on 'tactical patience' (which is granted by Danish HQ) and on the other hand also makes plans to meet the Russians (but delays informing HQ and meets resistance when he does). These are two instances of intra-state communication between different fields within the state apparatus. We see how the policy and implementing levels respectively have separate ideas about how to proceed in Operation RECSYR, given the international politics that condition the operation. That is, different fields in the context of an international operation, even within a single state, are governed by different nomos which come to determine their understanding of the operation.

As such, we can begin to understand how different frequencies play out in international relations, with space for a certain degree of manoeuvre in the interaction between the two. Here, the force commander for instance actively chose to keep the level of policy 'out of the loop' for fear that the mission would have been compromised had he informed Copenhagen in real-time about the indication that that was a slight chance of a bomb on board. In the second example, where the practitioners explain how their daily relations with the Russians are not impacted by Russia's annexation of Crimea, but the policy level in Copenhagen perceives the situation differently, it is again evident how social life is deeply situated and indeed how it is organised according to different sets of nomos.

Thus, by treating the state as a disaggregated unit that constitutes distinct fields, we can capture and explain how global politics operates at different frequencies, and

⁷⁰ Authors' interview

how states at one level of policy may be adversaries, while simultaneously being collaborators at a different frequency of policy, and ultimately, how an operation such as RECSYR ends up as a success story despite the international context.

Case III: The everyday practices of international relations

Having disaggregated the different dimensions of the state proper in the above case, the perspective is now broadened to an analysis that encompasses the group of states involved in RECSYR to illustrate if, or how, the practice theoretical approach can be used also to make sense of the more general level of international politics. As we have suggested in the discussion above, the geopolitics of the day seemed to melt into Operation RECSYR and, as such, this required the task force commander to manage the situation explicitly. Yet the picture as to *how* geopolitics shaped naval operations in the everyday practices of international relations is mixed. For instance, with the understanding of the disaggregated state, it is possible to separate out different frequencies in the field and thus identify varying levels of adherence within the state to the grand geopolitical narrative of tense relations between the participating state actors involved in RECSYR; the West on the one hand, and an increasingly assertive Russia, Assad's Syrian regime, and other central players such as China on the other.

The Admiral's task of maintaining good working relations with Russia thus, in effect, posed an opposite image to that of international relations more generally, where tensions were high and interaction between the West and the Russians was heated. The Admiral's focus on maintaining relations with actors outside the network of conventional military partners proved a challenge and added a further dimension to the already highly complex operation facing him and his task force. Some of the complexity derived from the tense relations between the West and Russia – and the relationship between the West and China which was both new and, given the general political relations between the states, came with a high degree of apprehension. In the interview, the Admiral recalled how he had to address this tension head-on in a meeting with the Russian naval contingent present in the Mediterranean. At this meeting, he explained quite squarely that while they had to acknowledge that there was political discord between their states in the public lines of communication, their respective crews nonetheless had to make things work. By quite literally distinguishing between a strategic and a tactical level, he drew attention to the distinct dimensions of international relations that were merging in the context of RECSYR, isolating the problematic elements discursively and encouraging cooperation in their place. With this, the admiral bracketed the political tensions and reframed the narrative to one of time- and space-bound cooperation on the tactical level. A similar example was when the task force had planned a pick-up of containers in Latakia. As mentioned earlier, the

communication flow from the Russian strategic level to the *Pjotr Velikij* was characterised by restrictions and lack of openness between HQ in Moscow and the naval asset in the Mediterranean. The Danish force commander had for example observed that the Russian warship had not been informed by Moscow of the next planned pick-up. He understood that this condition could be used strategically to maintain good relations on the tactical level between the naval assets. The Danish admiral thus ensured that his ship informed the Russian ship when the Danish warship was on its way into Latakia,⁷¹ thereby seeking to earn goodwill and trust from his counterpart. Indeed, the Russian captain was grateful for the information, confirming that communication channels with HQ on the Russian side were limited.

This focus on tactical relations with Russia through a strategy of dialogue was useful to create a common understanding. Naturally it did not always translate into unproblematic cooperation. Also, the tactical level met situations of discord, not least illustrated in the first case, where differing ideas about how to carry out the operation in situ surfaced – despite the Moscow Plan and suggestions that the operation was about more than removing chemical weapons. But it did not adopt the dominant geopolitical narrative, indeed frozen relations in international politics, wholesale. On the contrary, in the Mediterranean theatre of operation, their circumvention was sought.

A similar example is the ongoing cooperation between staff of RECSYR and the Syrian armed forces of the Assad regime. While no official line of cooperation between Syria and the (Western) partners involved in RECSYR existed at the strategic level of state, the team sent to pick up the chemical weapons when Ark Ventura went into port and dealt directly with soldiers from the Syrian army when the actual handover took place. Exactly who from the Syrian army was present during the pickups was often quite a puzzle, as explained by one interviewee directly involved in the events.⁷² More often than not the group of 100-plus soldiers looked more like schoolboys in frayed military uniforms toting old Kalashnikovs. But at times they were joined by special operation forces, and often this was when a high-profile figurehead of the Syrian regime had decided to oversee the handover. Often, the group of Syrian soldiers was accompanied by pro-regime journalists reporting on the ‘friendly and peaceful turnover of chemical weapons’.⁷³ Here, the position of Assad’s Syrian regime was to show the world its cooperative approach. At the same time however, during the course of Operation RECSYR, the Danish prime minister – in line with most other Western states – officially denounced the Syrian regime and stated that President Bashar al-Assad was no longer seen as the

⁷¹ Mikkelsen and Nørby, 2019, pp. 100–103

⁷² Authors’ interview

⁷³ Authors’ interview

legitimate state leader of Syria. At the tactical level, however, the staff of Operation RECSYR cooperated with the Assad regime every time they went to collect a new batch of chemical weapons. To make things even more complicated, this cooperation was guided by the Russians' good relations with the Assad regime, and as such, the tactical success of the operation relied heavily on the ability of the RECSYR staff to manage their working relations with the soldiers of the Assad regime with the Russians in mind.

Managing geopolitics in a field of naval operation

The way that tense relations in international politics emerged in the context of Operation RECSYR and seemingly conditioned the interactions between naval actors at sea leads to a discussion of the levels and scope that can be analysed using Bourdieu's field approach. Analysing the above inter-state relations within the operation as an exponent of the contemporary international political dynamics that surrounded the operation as one distinct field may be questionable. Indeed, there are limited markers that could neatly delineate the complex case as a field to be analysed through its diverse practice. Even just the physical field of the eastern Mediterranean holds Danish, Norwegian, Russian and Chinese warships and these relate not only to one another but also extend beyond the maritime domain to their own capitals, to OPWC in Limassol, to Washington DC etc – removed in space, and with a frequency of nodes in the network arguably too numerous to meaningfully create an analytical whole. Likewise, defining the field by way of the more abstract notion of the operation itself with its representatives from states with differing views of problems and solutions would bind every relevant actor and activity together but, in that way, seems too exhaustive – and at the same time also too endless – to make sense as an analytical object. To add to this the geopolitics of the day as a driver seems a mouthful beyond analytical meaningfulness.⁷⁴

But from a practice-based perspective, it is possible to inch closer to an understanding of how geopolitics plays into the naval operation. Analysing select actors as they cooperate, a field emerges that, while set at a fairly high level of abstraction, intersects in space and time with the geopolitics of the day and is articulated through concrete, observable actions. Because in this approach the state is disaggregated into distinct frequencies within the policy and implementing levels, the analysis is able to see both how tense international relations affect Operation RECSYR, but also how tensions are circumvented or overcome. Drawing on the field is a way of ordering the empirical object of enquiry. It is based on

⁷⁴ Mouritzen, 2020

analytical choice, does not promise to be exhaustive nor does it provide unequivocal results.

From the outset, it is reasonable to assume that nomos of the actors involved in RECSYR would run in parallel with their respective national origin which, in turn, may very well produce divergent political and cultural input to the operation. There were definitely incidents of divergence that created clashes.

For instance, distrust once again proved an element in the relationship during the operation – just as in the case of creating the Moscow Plan – when the Russians attempted to take on (or, from a Danish perspective: take *over*) a coordinating role of the various national naval contributions in the Mediterranean. This attempt created a new space of tension because Denmark and Norway were the states that had been officially mandated to carry out the mission, and coordination would naturally fall within the remit of their responsibility.⁷⁵ Yet, in the political reality of the day, the operation was contingent upon the ability of Denmark, Norway, Russia and China to effectively collaborate, given that the latter two were determined to play a role. Indeed, the admiral sought to reframe the narrative, isolating the political tensions from the tactical environment, thus actively seeking, as it were, to create a common nomos, or at least create cohesion between the beliefs or principles of the collection of different nationalities within the field in an attempt to make the operation function as smoothly as possible.

In fact, this strategy was seen in several instances throughout all of the three cases analysed in this paper, for instance creating a common plan of operation in Moscow; producing written communications like the olive branch letter; calling physical meetings on board to facilitate ongoing coordination; dispatching liaison officers for the same reason; and placing frequent phone calls to inform everyone, especially the Russians, of operational movements. This method was clearly not always successful in avoiding tension and competition within the context of Operation RECSYR. Yet viewing the operation as constituting a range of different fields and approaching the involved actors from the perspective of the disaggregated state, the interaction between the different national navies, on the whole, achieved the goal of accomplishing the mission – even if this would seem to defy the dominant logic of the international relations of the day, where political tensions between Russia and the West stole the headlines.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Knudsen, 2014

⁷⁶ Reuters, 2014

CONCLUDING REMARKS

On 23 June 2014, OPCW announced that the last consignment of chemicals had left Syria.⁷⁷ The operation was praised for its success at forcing the regime of Syrian *president* Bashar *al-Assad* to join the OPCW and give up all (declared) *chemical weapons*.⁷⁸ The OPCW even received the Nobel Peace Prize for its work to destroy the world's chemical weapons. In reality, the mission's success did not mark the complete end chemical weapons use in the Syrian conflict. *Le Monde* exposed the story that OPCW had strong reasons to conclude that in 2018 the Syrian army had used chlorine to attack the town of Saraqib in the northwest of Syria.⁷⁹ This was not the first indication of the use of chemical weapons. In the years following 2014, OPCW tabled several reports based on fact-finding missions by a joint investigative mechanism authorised by the UN Security Council in 2015,⁸⁰ including a review of medical records and interviews and testimonies, which suggested that the Syrian regime continued the use of chemical weapons such as sulphur mustard, chlorine and sarin, after the conclusion of Operation RECSYR.⁸¹

While the net result of Operation RECSYR may thus be criticised for being far from the sweeping success of effectively removing chemical weapons from Syria that it is heralded as being by policymakers, and even though civil society and academia have pointed to problems, the mission did secure the destruction of large chemical weapons stockpiles in a country in the middle of a complex civil war. This paper sets such debates aside and looks at how Operation RECSYR had to fulfil many purposes of the multiple and diverse actors involved in its success. Drawing on Bourdieu's key concept of field theory, the article has explored how international relations play out on multiple frequencies, where adversary states in one military conflict may be partners in another. While it is not per se surprising that the state is made up of different individuals constituting different levels of international politics, few studies exist that separate and capture such levels, enabling them to be examined in their own right. So far, existing debates in IR tend to treat the state as a monolithic actor, thus failing to capture how state-to-state and interstate relations are taking place across different frequencies of policy. It has become customary to study the individuals that make up international relations in the emerging practice theory literature, but such work nevertheless tends to focus on the diplomacy of international military operations. Rarely is the implementation field of the soldier

⁷⁷ Üzümcü, 2014

⁷⁸ Authors' translation from Danish: 'Dermed var den maritime del af operationen med at fjerne Syriens erklærede kemiske våben succesfuldt tilendebragt. Danmark har efterfølgende høstet stor og bred international anerkendelse for lederskabet og kompetent udførelse af den maritime operation. OPCW modtog Nobels Fredspris i 2013 for arbejdet med at destruere verdens kemiske våben' (Folketinget, 2014-15, p. 1).

⁷⁹ *Le Monde*, 2021

⁸⁰ UN Security Council, 2015

⁸¹ E.g. sulphur mustard in 2015 (OPCW, 2015a), chlorine in 2015 (OPCW, 2015b), and sarin in 2017 (OPCW, 2017).

explored in terms of how it affects state conduct in international politics, nor how the tactical and strategic levels interact.

In attempting to fill this gap, the article has suggested that some key features developed by Pierre Bourdieu can be central to understanding human practices in international politics as organised across different fields of action. We analysed Operation RECSYR as being constituted of dynamic relationships between differing diplomatic and defence fields that not only address international conflict but, in some instances, also influence and create it. In the three cases, the fields are characterised by multiple and sometimes contrasting diplomatic and military nomos, and differing understandings of the conflict and its solutions, which create tensions in security practices, but which also explain the value of analysing – and understanding – international relations as taking place across different levels of policy and implementation and, importantly, which are carried out by a diverse range of actors immersed in fairly separate (but interlinked) fields with distinct logics and goals.

Analysing these actors' interactions as encapsulated by Bourdieu's nomos, we have shown how the situated reality of the practitioners involved in Operation RECSYR at sea differs substantially from that of their diplomatic colleagues based on land back in the capital's headquarters. Thereby, the events analysed in this article have in different ways showed us how the strategic and the tactical levels of an international operation are interlinked but also decoupled to the extent that the two operate according to their own logics. Appreciating this can be key to how a conflict and the response to it play out and, from the perspective of policymakers, learning from it requires careful consideration of the practical interactions in situ, that is everyday international relations.

As such, Bourdieu's sociological framework has allowed us to focus on hitherto understudied aspects of international relations – namely illuminating and conceptually explaining the relationship between different levels of public policy by means of studying the practices of the everyday, the unconscious and unquestioned basic assumptions of an actor's thoughts and actions. By doing so, some of the key dualisms that exist in social research between objectivism and subjectivism, internal and external, can be overcome.⁸² And indeed, as our case has shown; also that between the strategic-level HQ elite and the operational practitioner in theatre.

⁸² Bigo, 2011

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