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From Ideology to Pragmatism: How Putin Changed Russia's Focus in the Middle East

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Abstract: **The success of the Russian military in Syria against all odds has reignited the debate as to what guides Vladimir Putin in the Middle East and whether Syria is only a harbinger of its ambitions. While it is true that the Middle East is an element in the power struggle between Russia and the United States, the Kremlin's goals are far broader and the region is not the goal in itself. The return of Russia was largely incentivized by the Arab Spring, which threatened to rid Moscow of its last remaining regional ally. The Russian leadership saw these events as a continuation of the Color Revolutions in the post-Soviet Union space and feared a similar fate. A return to the Middle East was also necessary for better oversight over Russian Muslims who, the Kremlin still believes, could be used as a lever against Moscow by regional powers.**

WITH THE RETURN OF VLADIMIR PUTIN TO POWER IN Russia in 2012, the country's foreign policy has undergone major changes, becoming ever more ambitious and assertive. In adopting new foreign policy and security strategies Vladimir Putin has spelled out a plan to expand Russia's influence in Eurasia, focusing on the Middle East and North Africa as a volatile region whose instability directly affects Russia and its security.[1] The Russian government came to a realization, triggered to a large extent by the Arab Spring protests, that a pro-active foreign policy in the region is necessary to counter the trend of regime change that has also impacted regimes in countries of the former Soviet Union and could potentially have an effect on Russia.[2]

In Vladimir Putin's early years in the Kremlin, Russia was unable to define its strategy towards the Middle East and North Africa, partly due to financial constraints and partly due to the government's decision to focus on cooperation with the West in the region. The presidency of Boris Yeltsin in the 90s significantly contributed to uncertainty about Russia's intentions in the Middle East. Under Yeltsin Russia was unable to formulate a coherent policy for the region not based on Soviet ideological tenets and the idea of countering the United States. The fall of the Soviet Union led to a drop in arms exports to the Middle East, as well as to a decline in Russian financial support for its allies in the region.

When Vladimir Putin replaced Boris Yeltsin, the Middle East ceased to be a policy priority for Moscow. In fact, in the early 2000s Russia decided to jump on the bandwagon of the Western global war on terrorism launched after the 9/11 attacks. By joining this camp Moscow expected, if not to become part of the West, then at least to be treated as a member. However, in his famous Munich

speech in 2007,[3] Vladimir Putin made it clear that Russia would not put up with a unipolar world and play by America's rules. This essentially put an end to a malleable Russia and signified the emergence of an assertive foreign policy. Back then the Middle East remained a second-tier issue, with the Kremlin not seeing any of its vital interests threatened there.

Perceived Threat of the Arab Spring to Russia

It wasn't until the Arab Spring protests erupted that Russia started paying more attention to how easily social unrest was spreading across the region. According to Foreign Minister Lavrov, the Arab Spring became a surprise that everyone had anticipated at some time but didn't know when.[4] Russia's reaction to the Arab Spring was inconsistent at best: in some cases the Kremlin would simply express concern over protests turning violent, in other cases it would issue harsh statements condemning what it saw as revolts. Libya and Syria are two notable examples of the latter.

This wave of revolts in the Middle East was too familiar to Russian policy makers who had witnessed similar movements much closer to Russia's borders in the early 2000s. Political coups in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan had installed regimes with strong anti-Russian sentiments, convincing Vladimir Putin that Western governments were behind them and had the same scenario in the works for Moscow. The Arab Spring was a painful reminder that Color Revolutions, albeit with a regional flair, could be a foreign policy tool actively used by Russia's opponents.

NATO's military campaign in Libya demonstrated the evolution of what Russia saw as regime change operations. What was previously the job of internal opposition forces supported by Russia's opponents was now done directly by the West, and what was more, it was done with the approval of the United Nations. The Libya campaign left the Kremlin feeling tricked, since it chose not to veto the UN Security Council resolution approving the operation.

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Against the backdrop of these events, internal discussions as to whether Putin should run for President again or let then-Head of State Dmitriy Medvedev stay in power for a second term were happening in the Kremlin. Gaddafi's brutal murder may have been the most convincing argument that brought Vladimir Putin back to power, albeit with a far more polarized worldview. The Kremlin was convinced that a similar scenario to Libya was being prepared for Russia, and that hence the West's expansive policies needed to be countered with a more assertive Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. This could not have been done by Dmitry Medvedev, who had pursued a liberal policy of reaching out to the West. This, however, was a defensive move designed to prevent the domino effect of regime change from reaching Russia. In the most recent edition of Russia's Foreign Policy Strategy, adopted on November 30, 2016,[5] the Middle East figures prominently for the first time and is identified as a region whose instability directly affects Russia.

Countering US Influence in the Middle East

The Kremlin's interest in the Middle East is less calculated and more opportunistic than Western media is trying to portray it as. Russia's return, to a large extent, is capitalizing on the perceived retreat of the West from the region following unsuccessful wars in Iraq

and Afghanistan, and would not have taken place in other circumstances. In that regard Barack Obama's promise to minimize the American presence in the Middle East played into Vladimir Putin's hands when he came back to power in 2012.

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Filling the void left by the Americans in moves reminiscent of the Cold War power plays sometimes required virtually no effort at all, as in the case of Egypt, where President Obama's decision to cut financial aid to Cairo led to the emergence of the Putin-Sisi alliance that immediately resulted in a $3.5bn arms transfer agreement between the two for the first time since 1972.[6] In Syria, on the other hand, Moscow had to invest all its efforts, both diplomatic and military, in order to marginalize the United States in the decision making process. There are a number of other contexts in the Middle East where the Kremlin is currently attempting to counterbalance the US. Across the region, Israel, the GCC and Turkey are all frustrated with the US minimizing its involvement in regional affairs, a dynamic the Kremlin is using to market itself as a new referee.

Russia's return to the Middle East heavily relies on partnerships that emerged during the Cold War. Egypt, Libya, Syria and Iraq all enjoyed strong Soviet support in different periods, and today act as Russia's anchors in the region, saving the Kremlin time in building new partnerships and alliances. The network of military and political contacts that the USSR developed in the Middle East through military aid, joint trainings, study programs for students and government officials is still bearing fruit to this day, allowing Moscow and its regional partners to stay on the same page.

There is little doubt that the Middle East is in the process of undergoing tectonic changes at the moment: National borders are being challenged, while the entire state system is hanging by a thread. Having experienced a similar process in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is still dealing with territorial disputes and regional conflicts left unresolved in 1991. Vladimir Putin sees Russia as a legitimate actor in designing a new power balance in the Middle East, not only because he sees the United States as an outsider in this region, but most importantly because security challenges faced by Middle Eastern powers more often than not translate into security risks for Russia itself (these include the potential proliferation of WMD in the region as well as spread of extremist ideologies to the North Caucasus and Central Asia, among others).

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Part of Russia's strategy to minimize these risks is to restore its military potential across this vast region. This strategy provides for reestablishing old bases in the Middle East as well as restoring its position as a leading arms supplier[7] in order to project power. Vladimir Putin's decision to turn the Hmeymim[8] and Tartous[9] bases in Syria into permanent Russian bases is a demonstration of the country's intention to get a foothold in the Middle East. At the same time Moscow is reportedly

in talks with Cairo about establishing a naval base on Egypt's Mediterranean coast,[10] an indication that a presence in the Middle East is setting the stage for Russia's ambitions in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

The military operation in Syria has served as an effective marketing tool for the Russian defense industry in the Middle East. Purchases of Soviet arms by Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen during the Cold War created a strong incentive to continue buying upgraded versions of equipment and essentially left clients dependent on Soviet weaponry for years to come . Russia expects that the reliance of Middle Eastern militaries on these arms and its effective PR for modern weapons in Syria could allow Moscow to regain its position as a monopolist in the defense market and translate into political influence in the region.

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Putting the Ties of Russian Muslims with the Middle East on the Radar

Some 14 million Muslims living in Russia[12] make it the European country with the largest Muslim minority. According to Russian officials, there are up to ten million more Muslim migrants legally or illegally residing in the country. With such an enormous Muslim community in a predominantly Christian country, the federal government cannot simply disregard the ties that Russian Muslims may develop in the Middle East. In a globalized world these inter-communal relationships exist in parallel to formalized state ties and remain under the radar of the authorities.

External influence in Russia's Muslim regions is not a new factor and goes a long way back in history. During the Russo-Turkish wars and after the integration of Central Asia in the Russian Empire in the 19th century, Islam came to the fore not solely as a religion but as a political factor stoking fears about the loyalty of Russian Muslims and their religious authorities to the empire. In the 20th century, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had the politburo worrying whether Soviet Muslims would unify against this deadly and pointless campaign. The two Chechen wars waged by Moscow later became textbook examples of how perceived foreign influence from the Middle East could set large groups of Russian Muslims against the state. The transformation that the first Chechen war underwent, from separatism to Islamism,[13] was interpreted in Moscow as being sparked by external powers, particularly Saudi Arabia. As per Moscow, Saudi financing and ideological support played a prominent role in triggering jihadist movements in Chechnya.[14]

According to some accounts, Russian security services encouraged homegrown jihadists to flee Russia in order to join the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in Syria, solving outstanding security challenges in the North Caucasus.

Upon his ascent to power Vladimir Putin adopted a new Concept of National Security in 2000 in which he explicitly stated that "international terrorism has unleashed the overt campaign aimed at destabilizing the

situation in Russia.[15]" Against the backdrop of the ongoing military campaign in Chechnya, this was a strong message sent to the Middle East, and specifically to powers not directly named but suspected of exploiting Russian Muslims against the state.

Moscow is interested in expanding its influence in the Middle East because it offers opportunities to tackle foreign policy challenges as well as existing domestic security dilemmas.

The fast spread of Islamist ideas throughout Russia's Muslim regions in the 90s as well as the two Chechen wars showed Vladimir Putin that the Russian government had little real authority over the its Muslim community, as Islamic scholars and self-governed institutions in the North Caucasus and the Volga region more and more came to essentially replace the state. However, by putting political and religious elites in power and funneling money into the subsidized budgets of these regions the Kremlin secured their loyalty. These elites help the federal authorities and security services track people leaving Russia to undertake religious studies in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan, as well as those traveling to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj. The government does encourage the development of business ties between its Muslim regions and the Middle East, especially the GCC countries, but imposes strict federal oversight over these ties.

Ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq have led the government to tighten its control over Russian Muslims, fearing that the Islamic State's calls for jihad against Russia[16] would lead to a spike in terrorist attacks in the North Caucasus and central Russia and the revival of terrorist groups such as the Caucasus Emirate. On the ideological front, the Federal Security Bureau has intensified its work with Russian imams to put a cap on the spread of jihadist literature in mosques, which was widespread in the 90s.[17]

With the decline of the Caucasus Emirate in Southwestern Russia, remaining militants chose to join far more successful organizations in Syria in Iraq, which led to the emergence of terrorist groups in Syria comprising chiefly Russian-speaking fighters. According to some accounts, Russian security services encouraged homegrown jihadists to flee Russia in order to join the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in Syria,[18] solving outstanding security challenges in the North Caucasus.

Conclusion

Russia's steady re-emergence as a leading power in the Middle East is not the goal in itself for Vladimir Putin. Hegemony for the sake of hegemony is a costly affair that never ends well, which is a lesson that the Russians have learned well throughout history. Moscow is interested in expanding its influence in the Middle East because it offers opportunities to tackle foreign policy challenges as well as existing domestic security dilemmas.

The Middle East has also become the stage where the Kremlin has decided to curb the spread of what it sees as US-orchestrated regime change operations. By denying the West the right to execute a Libya-style scenario in Syria, Russia is convinced that it has prevented a similar turn of events in many other countries, including at home.

While Vladimir Putin's strategy in the Middle East heavily relies on the achievements of Soviet diplomacy in the region, there is no Cold War-era ideology-based confrontation with the United States. Poor relations with Washington, however, are a major contributing factor to Russia's vision of the Middle East. There is a strong conviction in

Moscow that the era of US dominance in the region is drawing to an end, providing a unique opportunity for Russia to squeeze it out of several regions of key importance to Moscow, helping Russia to secure its vulnerable underbelly in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The Middle East has also become the stage where the Kremlin has decided to curb the spread of what it sees as US-orchestrated regime change operations. By denying the West the right to execute a Libya-style scenario in Syria, Russia is convinced that it has prevented a similar turn of events in many other countries, including at home.

By increasingly depicting the power struggle in Syria through its sectarian dimension and allying itself with Shia-dominated forces, Russia has alienated a significant part of the Sunni world, which will likely be a long-term contingency factor for Moscow.

Stronger ties with the Middle East allow Moscow to exercise better control over Russian Muslim diasporas throughout the region, examples of which have been seen from the UAE to Jordan and Libya. Despite fears that Russian-speaking extremists will one day bring jihad from Syria back to Russia, better communication between Russian and regional security services is instrumental in keeping track of homegrown jihadists who join terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq. Russia's Syrian campaign, albeit not yet concluded, has demonstrated the prowess of its military and the effectiveness of its diplomacy. Vladimir Putin undoubtedly appears to have been empowered by having averted more regime change in the Middle East. It is a personal triumph, and will encourage him to be more pro-active in the Middle East in future. Signs of this have already been seen in other contexts where the Kremlin may attempt to replace international institutions and the West as the leading broker, such as the Libyan conflict and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Apparent success, however, brings new challenges that will inevitably shape the image of Russia in the Middle East. By increasingly depicting the power struggle in Syria through its sectarian dimension and allying itself with Shia-dominated forces, Russia has alienated a significant part of the Sunni world, which will likely be a long-term contingency factor for Moscow.

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