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Russia: A New Look at the Peace Process

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Russia has recently taken a renewed interest in the Middle East peace process. Several factors apparently led Russia to conclude that the time is ripe to raise new proposals: Russia is finding itself sidelined in the process; its sense of self-confidence is returning; and it apparently assesses that the international standing of the United States is weakening and the current peace process has reached a dead end.

As is typical of Russia's international conduct, the forum chosen to announce its intentions was an international academic conference of the Valdai International Discussion Club, meeting in Malta on December 9-10, 2010. Before long, the ideas presented there will likely be promoted as operative proposals in the international arena.

Russia attributes a great deal of importance to the Middle East peace process and sees it as the central issue of the region. For Russia, the Palestinian issue has become one of the leading causes of international instability, boosting the rise of Islamic radicalism. Russia's concern is that the Arab world is moving away from the political process, and that the Palestinian Authority is losing ground to Hamas. In Russia's understanding, a successful peace process is the central tool for curbing this worrisome trend and stopping Islamic terrorism in general.

In Russia's estimate, the process has reached a dead end and blame lies with both Israel and the US: Israel has embraced the status quo, primarily because of internal political considerations, whereas the US has failed to implement its policy, and Obama is now losing his political clout. His conduct caused the Israeli position to harden and he has gradually backtracked to the policies of previous presidents.

To Russia, the root of the evil lies in the unjust American monopoly on the political process, and its marginalization of Russia vis-à-vis the Middle East. Russia is contesting this unilateral American stance and demanding a change in US conduct – even though it claims to have no intention of distancing the United States from the peace process, but only of achieving parity with the US in the process. As for the reasons it feels entitled to such a status, the Russians point to their relative advantages over the United States: Russia's success in positioning itself as a balanced, acceptable broker to all parties in the region (including Israel; its relations with Israel have been described as “excellent”) and

its having recently become an influential power in the international area in general and in the Arab world in particular. While Russia admits that it cannot exert pressure on Israel, it points out that the US too is losing ground in this crucial niche.

The Russians thus propose to revive the idea of the multilateral channel, since the present current bilateral track has lost its effectiveness. To them, the idea of the Quartet is a reasonable alternative that would ensure a broad and acceptable international channel. However, it must be upgraded so that it becomes an international body with real influence and authority (rather than merely a mediating party, as it is seen today). To attain this goal, the suggestion is to include additional players such as China and India (the possibility of adding representatives from the Middle East has also been raised). It is also critical to the Russians that the Quartet's current envoy to the Middle East, Tony Blair, be replaced with a Russian envoy, because only Russia has the appropriate, acknowledged standing in the region.

The assumption is that new ideas are not needed; rather, the process should be based on current proposals that must be updated and translated into a clear plan of action to be presented to the sides. The primary emphasis should be a multilateral approach. Proposals for a positive compromise plan have also been raised, among them territorial swaps, a compromise on Jerusalem, and a postponement or change in the refugee question. Likewise, the sides will be offered solutions for comprehensive security issues and proposals on the economy, energy, the environment, water, and more.

As for the regional players, the following picture is emerging, the implication being that Russia is prepared to assume the role of mediator:

1. The Palestinians are in distress and their internal split is damaging them. The radical forces are gaining strength (and Hamas has a chance of scoring a victory against the PA in the future).
2. Syria, which maintains positive cooperation with Russia, is not a candidate for negotiations with Israel before the Palestinians, in part because the Syrians would not agree to be the only ones engaged in a peace process with Israel.
3. Israel is the only central element that can affect the continuation of the process; therefore, it is necessary to exert pressure on it. Only the United States has this leverage, but America's policy propelled the Israelis into the negative status quo. Russia is convinced that it would be able to act more energetically in the Israeli sector because of its positive relations and its improving image as a fair broker even though it has no real leverage. (In this context, the possibility of creating influence by means of Russian/Soviet immigrants to Israel was discussed but ultimately rejected).

Iran was presented by the Russians as a dangerous state because of its efforts to undermine the peace process and because it threatens the stability of the region as a whole. Turkey has lost its status as fair broker in the Middle East because of the overtures it has made to the Islamic world and is not expected to be able to rehabilitate its image any time soon. The Arab peace initiative is seen as a positive phenomenon, proving that regional players are indeed interested in arriving at a resolution. At the same time, the

moderate states, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, are not doing enough on behalf of the peace process; therefore, it is necessary to increase coordination between them and Israel.

In conclusion, there is a renewed Russian effort to become part of the political process in the Middle East. Behind this strategy, which is one piece of Russia's current assertive foreign policy, lies the assumption (whether real or imaginary) that the American administration is weak; the dead end of the peace process is but one expression of that weakness.

What is now proposed is the old multilateral model in a new guise: an enhanced version of the Quartet. This enhancement entails expanding the Quartet by including additional players and turning it into an authoritative body. Such a model, should it be accepted, would give Russia essential advantages over other Quartet members and position it as the most influential player in the Middle East. Russia's sense of urgency is linked to its belief that the peace process can counter the disturbing trends in the Muslim world.

The Americans, or most of the other players for that matter, are likely to display little enthusiasm for the Russian proposal or identify it as a viable alternative. However, in light of the changes in America's status in the region, one cannot altogether rule out the possibility that the United States would be prepared to make certain concessions to Russia and accept, if only in part, the Russian initiative.