Russia and the Global Balance: A Middle East Perspective

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Contrary to what many had expected, the global balance that emerged since World War II has not evolved into a unipolar world, and a stable new balance is not apparent. The Middle East has now given Russia a chance to assert itself as a major actor, and for Moscow the region has become a testing ground for the development of its own future foreign policy. The challenge of working out a new balance is at the top of the global agenda, and Russia must necessarily be involved in addressing it. Those who want to respond to this challenge have a vested interest in Russia's participation. This is true for the United States and Europe—and true for Israel, for whom a regional tectonic split would be fraught with grave consequences.

Announcing the withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria, President Donald Trump said that he was willing to let "anyone who wants to…whether it is Russia, China, or Napoleon Bonaparte" protect the Kurds. Yet once the US military had left Manbij, Raqqa, and Kobani, it was not the French tricolor flag but the flags of the Syrian Arab Republic—and of the Russian Federation—that were hoisted over the abandoned US military bases.

Vladimir Putin learned of the rapidly changing situation when he was away from

Moscow, on a visit to Riyadh. The rulers of Saudi Arabia, which has a reputation as the staunchest US ally in the Middle East, rolled out the red carpet for the Russian President.

Just six or seven years ago, early in Vladimir Putin's third presidential term, Russia's foreign policy appeared to be lacking direction or purpose. Russia was becoming marginalized as a global player, and its chief concern seemed to be protecting domestic stability from foreign irritants. There was reason to believe that this would be a long term trend: there seemed to be little that Russia could offer the world or demand from it. Russia lacked the kind of national goals that shape foreign policy.

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It is debatable whether it has such goals now. However, 2014 opened a new era in Russian politics. First of all, Russia began to use the tools of foreign policy to accomplish tactical tasks. Second, even though the goals remain somewhat unclear, there is no doubt about the direction: an attempt is underway to regain the positions from which Russia withdrew in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In the West, 2014 was a year of both victory and defeat for Moscow. On the one hand, Ukrainian events clearly demonstrated that Moscow simply lacked the power to reassert full control over the post-Soviet space. Using force or successfully competing with the EU integration project is still out of the question for lack of resources. Western analysts believe, however, that the Kremlin has so far been successful in sowing doubts over any possibility of the integration of former Soviet republics in the European Union or NATO.

On the other hand, Russia has been gaining ground rapidly as a global power, albeit at the expense of relations with the European Union and the United States. Although Russia's place among the great powers has never been in doubt, this status for years remained almost a mere formality. While Russia had all the trappings, such as a permanent seat and veto power in the UN Security Council, nuclear weapons, enormous resources, and a unique geopolitical position, it did little to assert itself as a major player.

By all accounts, this has changed over the past five years. Whereas from the Western perspective Russia appears to be a global enfant terrible, always ready to subvert democracy and foment trouble in order to weaken its opponents, outside of the Euro-Atlantic discourse it is regarded as a major power center. It may not be the strongest such center, as compared to China, but it is certainly not seen as the most destructive one.

Five years ago, sensing a dead end in relations with the West, Moscow decided to look for partners and prospects in other parts of the world, declaring a "pivot to the East." As of now, this has resulted in a certain political and economic rapprochement with China. Yet it remains rather unclear how the two partners expect to benefit from it practically. Nor do they fully trust each other. Most Russians still regard China as a significant, albeit distant, threat to their country's sovereignty and control over its resources. In contrast, Russia has been much more successful positioning itself as a strong player in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

It is true, however, that these recent successes are of a less than strategic value. Indeed, while Russia's President and its Foreign Ministry have formulated their vision of the country's mission in today's world, including the goals of an equitable polycentric international system and collective cooperation in countering common threats, in practice Russia does not seem to believe that these goals can be achieved within the existing system of supranational

institutions or that this system can be reshaped into something truly equitable and effective.

The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation—a document approved by the President, with the latest version published in December 2016—has been enriched by references to the Middle East, including Syria and ISIS, and by promises to react either reciprocally or asymmetrically to "unfriendly actions" of the United States. It states that the "containment policy adopted by the United States and its allies against Russia, and political, economic, information and other pressure Russia is facing from them undermine regional and global stability, and are detrimental to the long term interests of all sides." Indeed, this depiction of the West as a source of threats to the Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as to its domestic stability and power system, echoes the Russian Federation National Security Strategy, approved in 2015: "The strengthening of Russia is taking place against a backdrop of new threats to national security that are of a multifarious and interconnected nature. The Russian Federation's implementation of an independent foreign and domestic policy is giving rise to opposition from the United States and its allies, who are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs. The policy of containing Russia that they are implementing envisions the exertion of political, economic, military, and informational pressure on it."

Some of the provisions contained in the previous versions were deleted from the 2016 version of the Foreign Policy Concept. Notably, the emphasis on participation in shaping a global agenda and the foundations of the international system and on developing Russia's own vision of the global order is now absent. While not stated directly in the programmatic documents, it is apparent that Russia's main foreign policy principle is to avoid any systemic approach that would seek to contribute to a search for global solutions. The emphasis is on problem-solving "on the ground" while working together with interested parties capable of exerting real influence.

All actions deliberately aimed at worsening the crisis in relations with Western "partners"—the word still commonly used by Russian leaders—actually sought to alleviate Russia's international isolation. The idea of "coercion into dialogue" seen in Ukraine was also the underlying reason for Russia's entry in the Syrian conflict. Whereas in the first case the results have been mixed and the game, at least for now, definitely zero-sum, in Syria the situation looks much more optimistic.

Andrei Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, believes that in recent years, the results of Russia's foreign policy in Europe on the one hand, and in the historically, economically, and cognitively distant Middle East on the other, are quite paradoxical: "In the Middle East, Russia, with relatively modest initial investment, has become perhaps the most influential actor, whereas in Europe it has been politically sidelined. In the Middle East, Russia's position is respected even by its long-time opponents; in Europe, even its traditional friends are now reluctantly distancing themselves from Russia. In the Middle East, Russia is capable of surprising its partners with bold, out-of-the box initiatives; in Europe, it has been on the defensive for several years."

The main reason is that the Middle East is looking for an alternative external factor. The foreign policy of other outside players, particularly the United States, is inconsistent and often at odds with the interests of the region's countries, which rarely see eye to eye. Therefore all Middle Eastern power centers want to make sure that they can seek outside support from multiple sources.

Channeling Middle Eastern developments in a positive direction requires a balance. Such a balance is more difficult to achieve with multiple actors involved. On the other hand, a multiplicity of players also gives balance a chance: there is less probability that a little push from one of them would tip the scales decisively. There

are also some other, specific factors involved here. Since the Soviet times, Russia has had important ties and a fairly positive image in the Middle East as well as a high level of expertise. Furthermore, right now proactive policies in the region do not require a substantial expenditure of resources.

Moscow has been updating its Concept of Collective Security in the Persian Gulf, promoting the idea of a regional conference on security and cooperation, a kind of Middle Eastern OSCE, with associated membership of other world powers. It is assumed that "in the future, in the context of an Arab-Israeli settlement, an organization for security and cooperation in the Persian Gulf could become part of a common regional security system for the Middle East and Northern Africa." According to the Concept, regional cooperation should be based on military transparency, arms control agreements, and efforts to make the region a zone free of weapons of mass destruction.

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The Concept is a declaratory and in large part utopian document. In practice, however, Russia's policy in the region is quite realistic. During the past five years Russia has proven its effectiveness both militarily in Syria, and on the diplomatic front. It has created the Astana forum —a fairly viable approach that brings together Turkey and Iran. On Syrian issues Russia has also interacted with Israel and the United States. It is due to this ongoing interaction that some conflict situations, inevitable during hostilities, were nipped in the bud.

Unlike the talks in Astana, the June meeting in Jerusalem between the heads of the National Security Councils of Russia and Israel and the US National Security Adviser did not have a high media profile, but there can be no doubt as to its importance for a Syrian resolution. As for Netanyahu and Putin, they have had fourteen meetings in the past four years. There is of course no question of solidarity on Syrian issues, but there is definitely a mutual recognition of each other's interests and of the right to defend them, which means quite a lot.

It is not just Syria that is in play. Moscow has taken a strictly neutral stance in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while also expressing its willingness to help in its resolution. As of now, its priority is to make sure that this conflict does not interfere with its bilateral relations in the region. Of course, Moscow has developed its own approaches to the problem, which are at odds with some of the initiatives now proposed, for example, the June 2019 "workshop" in Bahrain, another US attempt to move the Palestinian issue onto an economic track. Be that as it may, the interaction has been intense, and that is precisely why at the recent summit in Sochi Prime Minister Netanyahu was able to state that "relations between Russia and Israel have never been so strong."

For Russia it is important that the Middle East is giving it a chance to establish and maintain positive relations with all key players—not just with its traditional allies or those regarded as "anti-American." Russia has been working with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which the Russian President visited in mid-October, as well as with Israel. It has nurtured ties with Tehran, which enables others in the region to look to it as a potential go-between in seeking to improve relations with Iran, though President Putin has recently said that he sees no need for it. Moreover, existing and potential contradictions between Moscow and Iran, particularly on Syria, are quite significant.

For a quarter of a century, the West continued to see Russia more as a problem than as a global actor, despite objections from sober-minded observers such as Henry Kissinger, who wrote in his seminal work *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the*

21st Century in 2001: "The United States and its allies need to define two priorities in their Russia policy. One is to see to it that Russia's voice is respectfully heard in the emerging international system – and great care must be taken to give Russia a feeling of participation in international decisions, especially those affecting its own security. At the same time, the United States and its allies must stress – against all their inclinations – that their concerns with the balance of power did not end with the Cold War" (p. 77).

Both sides are undoubtedly to blame for the problematic situation that has evolved. Yet the Middle East region has now given Russia a chance to assert itself as a major actor. For Moscow it has become a testing ground for the development of its own future foreign policy—with clear goals and willingness to cooperate and, most importantly, to seek common interests.

It is worth paying close attention to these developments. Contrary to what many had expected, the global balance that emerged after World War II has not been transformed into a unipolar world. A stable new balance is not apparent. The trends of the past few years—the weakening of the United States, with which the US itself is trying to come to terms, the uncertainty of a united Europe's future, and the gradual emergence of China as a new empire, relying not just on investment but also on military power—are fraught with two undesirable prospects: either chaos and a struggle of all against all, or a tectonic splitting apart of East and West.

Donald Trump has said he doesn't want to intervene in what's happening "seven thousand miles away" from Washington. But the US political elite is still aware of the challenge their country faces, as formulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*: "to consolidate and perpetuate the prevailing geopolitical pluralism on the map of Eurasia," which means, first, "to prevent the emergence of a hostile coalition" that could eventually seek to challenge the United States; then, over the medium term, to find partners to shape a broad "trans-Eurasian security system;" and "eventually, in the much longer run," to create "a global core of genuinely shared political responsibility."

The challenge of working out a new balance is at the top of the global agenda, and Russia must necessarily be involved in addressing it. Those who want to respond to this challenge have a vested interest in Russia's participation. This is true of the United States, Europe, and of Israel—"the West of the Middle East"—for whom a regional tectonic split would be fraught with grave consequences.

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