

# Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: No Change in the Offing

Olena Bagno-Moldavsky

Russia's current foreign policy in the Middle East will likely follow a similar course in the future: its actual presence in the region will remain limited, while issues related to the Middle East will continue to occupy an important place in its diplomatic rhetoric. Russia views the Middle East (defined here in narrow geographic terms as an area that encompasses Egypt, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories) as a low cost tool for boosting its international standing and securing additional common ground in its relations with Arab partners.

This argument is based on four premises. First, three Foreign Policy Concepts<sup>1</sup> (FPCs, of 1993, 2000, and 2008) suggest a departure from messianic philosophy. Second, the collection of doctrines enacted over the last decade to regulate Russia's conduct abroad – military doctrines, national security concepts, and foreign policy concepts – all bear an imprint of Vladimir Putin's political philosophy, which endorses "pragmatic nationalism." The third reason is the relative insignificance of the region for Russia. Finally, Russia's freedom of action is curbed by various domestic constraints. It cannot afford to be more militarily involved in the Middle East as an independent player because on the home front it deals with negative demographics, a significant and growing proportion of Muslim citizens, a commodity-driven economy of insufficient diversification, and a slow pace of modernization in the military complex.

Dr. Olena Bagno-Moldavsky is a post doctoral research fellow and a visiting faculty member at the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan.

## Setting the Stage

Russia's interest in regional developments in the Middle East has ostensibly intensified. It was among the 138 members of the UN General Assembly that voted in favor of upgrading the Palestinians' status to a non-member observer state. Along with French and Swiss experts, Russian toxicologists were sent to examine evidence of polonium in Yasir Arafat's remains. During Operation Pillar of Defense, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov informed the Special Representative of the Palestinian Authority and member of the PLO Executive Committee Saleh Raafat "on the multifaceted efforts made by Russia ...to normalize the situation."<sup>2</sup> The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently issued a statement that urged the convention in 2013 of a conference on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and all other weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery (WMDFZ). The conference was previously postponed, and Russia reminded the other sponsors (the US and UK) that it was "committed to its commitments and the mandate" to schedule the Helsinki conference on the establishment of a WMDFZ in the Middle East. Russia supported the Syrian government, stressing that "Assad's exit from power cannot be imposed from abroad."<sup>3</sup> Earlier this year UN Ambassador Vitaliy Churkin vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that threatened sanctions against Syria, Lavrov aired critical remarks on NATO's operation in Libya,<sup>4</sup> and Vladimir Putin criticized the West for behaving in the Middle East "like an elephant in a china shop."<sup>5</sup> Some Western analysts have interpreted these moves and Russia's heightened activity in the Middle East as a sign of increasingly chilled relations with the West.

Does this mean that Russia is preparing to increase its presence in the Middle East? How does Putin's return to power influence Russia's relationships with its Arab and Israeli partners? This article addresses these questions, focusing on the continuity of principles outlined in three Foreign Policy Concepts and providing examples from relations between Russia and the regional actors. Following Putin's return to the presidency, conservative political circles resumed discussions of Russia's global ambitions, inter alia in the Middle East. In fact, however, the strong overtones in diplomatic messages appear against the background of consistent, predictable, and stable foreign policy initiatives pursued by Russia in the Middle East. At the same time, continuity should not be equated to an absence of a certain dynamic. From being entirely reactive,

Russia's foreign policy in the region has turned to moderately proactive, but its major goals – multipolarity and economic opportunism – are unlikely to change in the future.

### The Foreign Policy Concepts of 1993, 2000, 2008

When Boris Yeltsin approved Russia's first Foreign Policy Concept in 1993, the country lost interest in the Middle East. The document was a product of its time, stressing a foreign policy of accommodation, retrenchment, and risk-avoidance in bilateral relations with states beyond the borders of the former USSR. Of the nine "vital interests" identified in that text, only one referred to the world outside the borders of the former USSR. The document was criticized for the lack of clarity,<sup>6</sup> but in any case, the Middle East was mentioned there only briefly and in the context of settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In 2000, the Putin administration adopted the new Foreign Policy Concept, the Military Doctrine, and the National Security Concept.<sup>7</sup> The need for refocusing foreign policy goals emerged primarily from the failure of the Yeltsin administration to build an equal partnership with the West and the US.

Although presented as an ontologically new document, the FPC of 2000 re-emphasized the principles that Sergei Stankevich, foreign policy advisor to Yeltsin, and the camp of "pragmatic nationalists" offered to Yeltsin back in 1992: "Foreign policy with us does not proceed from the directions and priorities of a developed statehood. On the contrary, the practice of our foreign policy... will help Russia become Russia."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the new concept rebranded Russia as a country that is uniquely capable of harmoniously unifying many different elements in its search for Eurasianism – the term especially favored by President Putin. It suggested that Russia implement the tactics of pragmatic opportunism and at the same time perform the mission of a conciliator that maintains a multilateral dialogue of "cultures, civilizations, and states."

In 2008 Dmitry Medvedev approved the amendments to bring the previous Concept up to date. The new document is more sophisticated in style, and addresses new threats such as wars in cyberspace and

From being entirely reactive, Russia's foreign policy in the region has turned to moderately proactive, but its major goals – multipolarity and economic opportunism – are unlikely to change in the future.

nonconventional terrorism. These changes, however, do not affect the essence of the text, which reemphasizes the same foreign policy goals. Stankevich's idea of helping "Russia become Russia" also appears in Medvedev's Concept. All three documents envisage Russia as a Rosetta stone of sorts, i.e., a key to understanding and dialogue between the West and the East. Following the advice of pragmatic nationalists from the early 1990s, Foreign Policy Concepts cultivate Russia's image as a country that is said to possess the qualities of an ultimate mediator equipped to reconcile the conflicting values of Eastern and Western worldviews in a search for Eurasianism.

### **Eurasianism in Practice**

Eurasianism is to be understood as neither a goal in itself nor a rejection of the West, particularly as multipolarity is the fundamental goal of Russian foreign policy. To achieve multipolarity in the current configuration of world power, Russia must promote cooperation with the East.<sup>9</sup> Eurasianism is a message that Russia is no longer prepared to put up with a role of a junior partner, particularly in that some Eastern partners such as China and Iran treat it as an equal, and some states, such as Syria, position it in a senior role. To some extent, Eurasianism is a reaction to the neglect that the West, broadly defined, expressed toward Russia in the 1990s.

The new focus on the East has been reflected in diplomatic initiatives launched by Vladimir Putin during his second term and continued by his successor. In a first visit since Nikita Khrushchev's tour in 1964, Putin visited the Middle East in 2005 and declared a willingness "to develop a better understanding of the Arab world." In 2009 Medvedev addressed the League of Arab Nations in Cairo, and referred to Obama's offer of a friendship between the West and the Muslim World with, "Russia does not need to seek friendship with the Muslim world: Our country is an organic part of this world."<sup>10</sup> This quote encapsulates Putin's rhetoric, derived from and reflected in the Foreign Policy Concepts.

Thus as opposed to the Soviet period, Moscow no longer aims at exporting its values through economic and military help. The analysis of the Foreign Policy Concepts suggests that Russia's approach is exactly the opposite. The Kremlin is ready to deal with any political actor if that will promote objectives that "pragmatic nationalists" set up for Russia in 1993.

### Domestic Constraints

Unlike in Soviet times, the Middle East is no longer a high priority region if compared to Central Asia, member states of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), or other former Soviet republics. The Middle East was important during the Cold War, but modern Russia has other priorities. Russia's leadership realizes that objective domestic socio-demographic and economic conditions do not allow resorting to activities beyond essential diplomatic involvement in the region.

Three graphs can help illustrate the situation.<sup>11</sup> Figure 1 suggests an unstable GDP growth rate that reflects dependence on the export of raw materials and the world oil prices. Figure 2 presents military expenditures as a percentage of the GDP, and illustrates that Russia's campaign of upgrading its military complex faces an uncertain future. Figure 3 shows negative demographics that are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, this against the background of a growing Muslim population (the only group in the Russian Federation that has a positive birth rate).

Putin reflected on this idea when commenting on the proposition that Russia should return itself to "superpower" status: "We are not imposing; if we are not welcome, we don't insist. Why should we? Our top priority is to help our country develop...once the growth rate of our economy makes it possible for us to boost our defense and ensure our security, we will automatically acquire such a status and such a standing in the world."<sup>12</sup> This remark is a key to understanding Putin's political philosophy: foreign policy will not change unless favorable domestic conditions are achieved. The objective assessment of Russia's economic indices suggests that the challenges that it now faces will likely persist in the coming years, thus precluding a shift in foreign policy.

Throughout the decade of the Putin-Medvedev engagement in the Middle East, Russia searched for multilateralism and exercised pragmatic opportunism. A brief analysis of Russia's bilateral relations with major Middle East actors (Egypt, Syria, Israel, and the Palestinian leadership) supports the argument that Russian foreign policy in the region will not change any time soon.

#### *Egypt*

Putin gave a face-lift to Russian-Egyptian cooperation in 2005, but it was clear to both sides that Russia's role in the region was secondary to

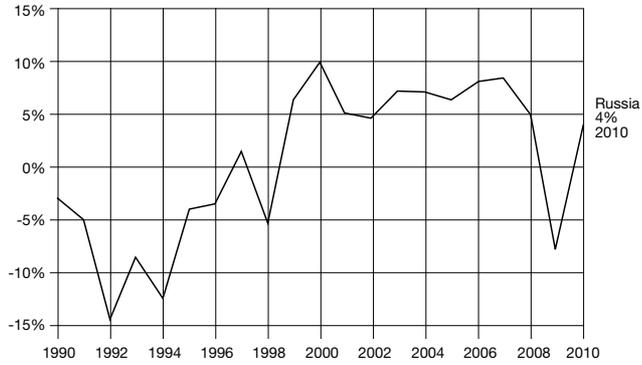


Figure 1. GDP Growth Rate

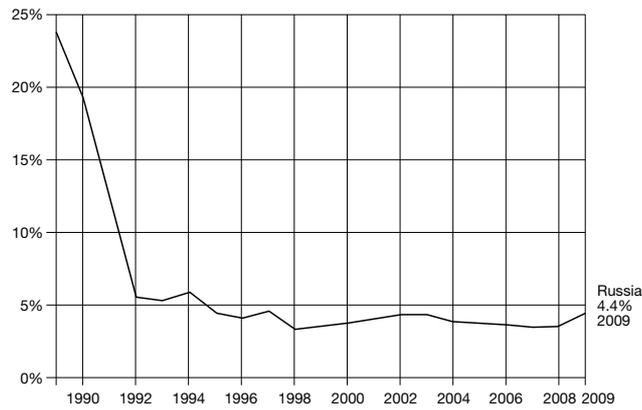


Figure 2. Military Expenditure as a Percentage of GDP

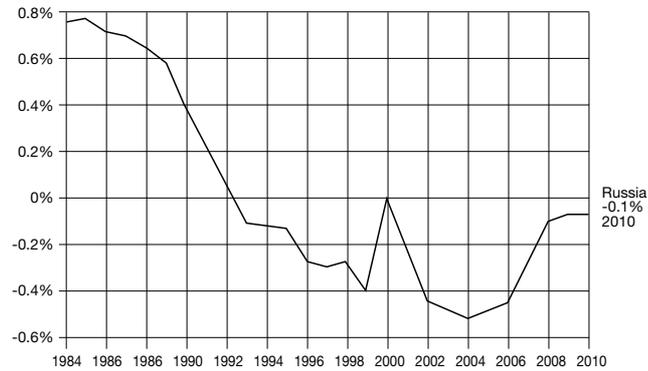


Figure 3. Population Growth Rate

America's and nothing would alter that balance in the foreseeable future. Political cooperation centered predominantly on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Against this common political background, Egypt and Russia cooperated successfully in the economic sphere; in 2010 the trade volume between the countries was 3.46 billion dollars, which is comparable with Russia's trade volume with Iran. In the last decade Russia's leading producers of natural gas (Novatek) and oil (Lukoil) entered the Egyptian market. The trade volume plummeted following the Arab upheaval, but Russian energy companies are poised to return.

Prior to Mubarak's overthrow Moscow called for a peaceful settlement of the domestic uprising. However, once his defeat appeared inevitable, Moscow immediately welcomed the creation of a "strong and democratic Egypt."<sup>13</sup> Recently, Lavrov invited Mohamed Morsi to Moscow, reiterating that the Kremlin was ready to cooperate on trade, industry, and science as well as on Syria and the Palestinian issue.<sup>14</sup> Moscow, like the US and other West European countries, strives to establish good relations with new leadership in the motherland of the Great Sphinx.

### *Syria*

Commercial, military-industrial, and diplomatic ties with Damascus serve Moscow's interests, though Syria under Bashar al-Assad has never been a vital strategic asset for Russia. In the UN Russia has acted to deny diplomatic cover to avoid a repeat of the Libyan scenario, but it has also made clear that no guarantees and no refuge on Russian soil will be provided to President Assad.<sup>15</sup> Backing the current Syrian leadership serves the goal of multipolarity and allows Moscow to assume the role of a key arbiter, but Russia is ready to welcome any political force that may seize control of Syria.

President Putin revived relations with Damascus during his second term, when Bashar al-Assad initiated the rapprochement to cope with Syria's increasing international isolation.<sup>16</sup> During the Medvedev administration these ties intensified further, and Russia has since adopted a proactive approach to the Syrian crisis. Security Council resolutions against Syria were vetoed; Russian delegations (headed by Lavrov, the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service Mikhail Fradkov, and other high ranking officials) made repeated visits to Damascus, and Syrian officials have visited Moscow on a regular basis.

These efforts can be interpreted as unequivocal support for the regime. However, from Russia's standpoint Assad is no more than a convenient ruler. He provided Russia with its only naval base in the Middle East (Tartus), which serves to restore a tarnished image of the Russian navy that now has few ships regularly deployed on the open seas. Syria is the seventh largest client of the Russian defense industry. In the sphere of military trade, from 2003 to 2010 realized contracts with Syria constituted \$1.5 billion. Although the figure is not high, the market potential is estimated around \$3-4 billion in future contracts. New contracts to be realized until 2014 make up another \$600 million, not including new "quick contracts" signed by Rosoboronexport in June-December 2011.

However, a purely economic interpretation of Russia's stance on Syria overlooks more essential diplomatic interests. Disagreement over Syria places Russia in the center of international diplomatic bargaining, indirectly serving the purposes of Eurasianism (e.g., it strengthens Russia's position vis-à-vis Iran).

Russian-Turkish dialogue on the Syrian issue is a case in point that illustrates Russia's stance on Syria – a convenient but by no means strategic partnership. Putin visited Turkey early in December expressing discontent over Ankara's request to NATO for the deployment of Patriot missiles on the border with Syria. He commented that Turkey and Russia disagree<sup>17</sup> on the methods of how to regulate the situation in Syria, but emphasized that their "assessment of the situation completely coincides."<sup>18</sup> Putin made it clear that the Syrian issue is of lesser importance compared to the growing economic and energy cooperation between the countries.

Similar to its conduct in Egypt, Moscow has kept all its options in Syria open. Russian diplomats meet both Syrian opposition groups and Baathist officials. Undoubtedly, Assad was a preferred partner, but Moscow is preparing the ground for dealing with any political force that may wrest power from the regime.

Throughout the decade of the Putin-Medvedev engagement in the Middle East, Russia searched for multilateralism and exercised pragmatic opportunism. Analysis of Russia's bilateral relations with major Middle East actors supports the argument that Russian foreign policy in the region will not change any time soon.

*Israel and the Palestinians*

The Russian leadership capitalizes on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, seeing it as a low cost opportunity for gaining international recognition and forging relations with Muslim partners in the greater Middle East and Central Asia. Addressing the Arab League, then-President Medvedev commented on the issue of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “The key to overall normalization in the Middle East is the Palestinian issue and ending the occupation of Palestinian and other Arab land.”<sup>19</sup> On the ground, Moscow advances multipolarity via UN-backed diplomatic actions to reduce the US influence on Israeli-Palestinian relations.

As part of this strategy the Russian Federation supported the upgrading of the Palestinians’ status to a non-member observer state at the UN, following its previous support for the Palestinian bid for membership in UNESCO. Lavrov presents these moves as natural because the embassy of the State of Palestine has existed in Moscow since January 1990, which means that the Kremlin does not face any legal, moral, or diplomatic dilemmas while supporting international initiatives of the Palestinian leadership. The Russian leadership meets with Palestinian President Abbas on a regular basis (in 2010-12 Medvedev saw Abbas in Jordan, in Sochi, and in Gorky). Hamas representatives were also hosted in the Kremlin.<sup>20</sup>

Moscow wants to strengthen its status as a conduit with Hamas, but the recent escalation in Gaza showed that the truce that ended Operation Pillar of Defense was primarily a product of Egyptian and American pressures, while Russia’s role remained marginal. The Gaza crisis showed that Moscow is failing in positioning itself as a meaningful mediator, and its place in the current hierarchy of actors involved in the conflict remains peripheral, restricted to diplomatic initiatives in the international organizations. It is clear that the Kremlin will use any low cost diplomatic opportunity to upgrade its position, though the current government in Moscow does not even try to challenge relations between major actors in the region (e.g., between Hamas and Egypt or Israel and the US). It realizes the limitations of its power (the trade volume between Israel and the US is approximately 20 times larger). Instead, Moscow concentrates on using the diplomatic platform

Compared to other regions, the Middle East is obviously of secondary importance to Russia.

around negotiations to increase its political leverage (e.g., the Putin administration will continue to promote the Moscow Peace Conference). Thus the facilitation of talks will be viewed as a goal in itself, while feasibility of achieving tangible results is seen from the Kremlin as being of secondary importance. It does not trouble Russia that the approach leaves poor chances for the genuine resolution.

In its relations with Israel, Russia is likely to continue supporting international initiatives interpreted in Israel as confrontational. At the same time, it will cooperate with Israel in economic and cultural spheres. For example, Israeli specialists from hi-tech, biotechnology, and nanotechnology industries are invited to work in the Russian Silicon Valley Skolkovo project, and numerous cultural initiatives have been launched. However, economic cooperation between Russia and Israel is unlikely to become a significant factor in the bilateral relations given the reliance of the Russian economy on the export of raw materials and the overall lack of interest by Israel in working together in the military sphere.<sup>21</sup>

Moscow's current approach sees the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the classical spirit of *realpolitik* as a matter to be exploited for its own political and, ultimately, economic advantage. The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is thus a good illustration of Russia's pragmatic opportunism. Therefore, attempts to discuss peacemaking initiatives by Moscow<sup>22</sup> will likely resume in 2013, along with the calls to schedule the Helsinki Conference on the establishment of a Middle East WMD FZ.

### Conclusion

Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East under the new Putin administration will be consistent with the present policies that advance multipolarity and promote mercantile interests. On the ontological level Russia has renounced the Soviet messianic ideology. Major foreign policy documents already reflect Putin's political philosophy, and provide clear guidelines for conducting opportunistic foreign policy in the Middle East. Although the economic situation in Russia is no longer described as a "crisis," it remains meager and constitutes an objective constraint. The actual results of a well-advertised campaign for technological modernization are yet to be seen. Russia lacks economic means to conduct a great power style of politics in the region. Its economy predominantly depends on the energy market, which means that the country will seek

energy contracts with all the interested parties in the Middle East. Finally, current developments in the Middle East, despite their dramatic public appeal, are not within the circle of Moscow's essential interests. If compared to other regions (e.g., CIS, Central Asia, EU), the Middle East is obviously of secondary importance for Russia. It allows practicing multipolarity and advancing some economic interests, but compared to the developments in its "essential sphere of interests,"<sup>23</sup> Russia is much less sensitive to the changes in this region.

### Notes

- 1 The Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) is a basic document that spells out the principles that guide Russia's foreign policy.
- 2 Documents and materials of the Russian MFA. Source: [http://mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/english!OpenView&Start=1.232&Count=30&Expand=1#1](http://mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/english!OpenView&Start=1.232&Count=30&Expand=1#1).
- 3 Steve Gutterman, "Russia Says West Pushing Democracy with 'Iron and Blood,'" *Reuters*, December 1, 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/12/01/syria-crisis-russia-idINDEE8B006020121201>.
- 4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, October 6, 2012, [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/1020A28FFA62C6F9C3257922002A18C7](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/1020A28FFA62C6F9C3257922002A18C7).
- 5 Vladimir Putin's meeting with the representatives of traditional religious confessions in Russia on February 8, 2012. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUa\\_Ua3xIEg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUa_Ua3xIEg).
- 6 Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000).
- 7 The Military Doctrine and the National Security Concept assign more power to the Security Council and less to the Defense Ministry, rebuff the politics of NATO enlargement and military intervention, and recognize the need for structural and technological modernization of the Russian military forces.
- 8 Sergei Stankevich, March 28, 1992, quoted in James Richter, "Russian Foreign Policy and the Politics of National Identity," in Celeste A. Wallender, ed., *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War* (New York: Westview, 1996), p. 69.
- 9 "East" is defined broadly and includes but is not limited to Central Asian countries and Russia's partners from BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization).
- 10 The Institute of Religion and Policy, "Russia: Part of the Islamic World," June, 23 2009, [www.i-r-p.ru/page/stream-event/index-23456.html](http://www.i-r-p.ru/page/stream-event/index-23456.html).
- 11 The graphs are generated from the Google Public Data Archive.
- 12 Interview to the three Russian TV channels, October 17, 2011, <http://ria.ru/politics/20111017/462204254.html>.
- 13 Twitter by Dmitry Medvedev. See <https://twitter.com/#!/MedvedevRussiaE/statuses/36407375581683712>.

- 14 "Egyptian President Mursi to visit Russia," Andalou Agency, November 6, 2012, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/rss/97219-egyptian-president-mursi-to-visit-russia>.
- 15 Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Won't Host Syria's Assad, Foreign Minister Says," *Huffington Post*, December 22, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/22/russia-syria-assad\\_n\\_2352209.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/22/russia-syria-assad_n_2352209.html).
- 16 Russia supported UNSC Resolutions 1559 and 1636, which criticized Syria's occupation of Lebanon. However, they also voted in favor of several resolutions initiated in 2002-4 by Syria, Sudan, Pakistan, and South Africa (vetoed by the US) that condemned Israel.
- 17 The tensions grew in mid-October when Turkish F-16 fighter jets forced a Damascus-bound plane en route from Moscow to land in Ankara's international airport. The Turkish authorities checked the cargo on board the plane, claiming that it was intended for military purposes. Russian diplomats raised objections but the incident was downplayed during Putin's visit.
- 18 "Putin Warns Deploying Patriots in Turkey will Raise Tensions," Channelnewsasia, December 4, 2012, [http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp\\_world/view/1240902/1/.html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_world/view/1240902/1/.html).
- 19 Medvedev's address to the Arab League in Cairo, 2009.
- 20 In May 2011 Lavrov hosted the Palestinian delegation in Moscow See "Russia's Top Diplomat Set for Talks with Hamas, Fatah Leaders in Moscow," *Rianovosti*, May 23, 2011, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20110523/164169127.html>.
- 21 The two exceptions to this were an agreement on military cooperation signed in Moscow in September 2010 between Defense Ministers Anatoly Serdyukov and Ehud Barak, and a \$400 million contract signed in 2009 to acquire the UAV systems (drones) from Israel.
- 22 On the other hand, it is unlikely that these initiatives will be welcomed by other international actors because the US is likely to remain passive during the election year.
- 23 For example, Russia is much more sensitive to issues related to the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline that reduces Europe's dependence on Russian energy.