

Implications of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis for the Middle East and North Africa

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International Context

The Ukrainian crisis, currently the most serious crisis in Russia-West relations, which became openly antagonistic over the last year, has emerged as just another piece of evidence that the post-bipolar polycentric world is strongly influenced by the evolving balance between two opposite trends – the trend towards multilateral cooperation on global challenges and the trend towards a new bipolarity that will be totally different from the East-West bipolarity. Unlike the East-West confrontation, it will be a bipolarity within the same economic system – a confrontation between liberal capitalism and authoritarian (or sovereign) capitalism, which will be ‘dissolved’ within the multipolar world.

The Ukrainian conflict has three interrelated dimensions – global, regional and local – with deep implications for international security, including for the Black Sea/Mediterranean region. This is all the more so, since outside Europe the situation is not getting better. The Arab Awakening has triggered deep changes and added instability to an already troubled area. In a region in turmoil, political transitions in North African countries are proving to be complex

and long-term processes, while relations between states are evolving and new geopolitical dynamics are shaking up old patterns, above all in the Middle East (Ottaway, Al-Qarawee, Merone and Achy, 2013). Aside from the conflicts and instability, the international community is faced with new challenges, such as the ISIS threat, the proliferation of WMD, international terrorism, piracy, organised crime, etc.

Recasting a New Balance of Power

The Ukrainian divide has emerged as a key issue for recasting a new balance of power between Russia and the West with a strong impact on their regional relations (Csernaton, 2014). Before the Ukrainian conflict, Russia’s foreign policy had been guided by three factors – the predominance of pragmatic economic interests over political or ideological differences, an emphasis on bilateral relations, and status-(re)building. Since the Ukrainian conflict, it has acquired a new dimension – geopolitical rivalry with the West, not only in the Euro-Atlantic space but also elsewhere.

The geostrategic importance of the conflict in Ukraine goes beyond Europe because the Black Sea region connects Europe with Asia, and the Eurasian land mass is linked to the Middle East through the Balkans, where Turkey borders with Syria, Iraq and Iran in the south.

Since incorporating the Crimea, Moscow has been sidelined in the international arena and excluded

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from important international formats and forums.² Russia's alienation has encouraged the Kremlin to look for its own allies to mitigate its isolation by the West. The CIS region will become the main arena in the battle for spheres of influence between Russia, on the one hand, and the EU and NATO/US, on the other. Russia still has the potential to oppose those projects in the CIS that it perceives as threats to its national interests.

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Beyond the CIS, Moscow might view the so-called Eurosceptic countries – in particular, Greece and Cyprus, in the EU, and Turkey, in NATO – which are unhappy with Brussels' policy, as potential Russian allies. However, this would only go as far as an 'à la carte' partnership on particular issues not of fundamental importance. As long as the Eurosceptic countries remain in the EU, and Turkey in NATO, there will not be any fundamental change in their policy towards Russia. Turkey's theoretical departure from NATO, were it to happen, would in any case be the result of internal cataclysms linked to a rise of radical Islam in Turkish society, rendering the whole question of a potential strategic partnership irrelevant.

On 1 December 2014, during a visit to Ankara, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia was abandoning the South Stream project

and would instead build a new subsea link to Turkey. He declared that South Stream had reached a dead end because of opposition from the EU, which has said that the Russian-backed scheme may violate provisions of the Third Energy Package (Badykov, 2014).

At the same time, Russia has turned to Turkey's old opponent – Cyprus. Under an agreement signed by President Putin and Cypriot leader Nicos Anastasiades in February 2015, Russian navy ships can now stop at ports in Cyprus, and Moscow will continue to provide the Mediterranean country with debt relief. This will lead to the extraordinary situation of Cyprus becoming a military hub for both Britain, an EU and NATO member, and Russia. This access to the port, as an alternative to Tartus, is especially important in view of Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's statement that, "It has been decided to set up a navy department task force in the Mediterranean zone where naval forces will stay on a permanent basis." This 'permanent' presence would allow Russia to "secure shipping access to the Suez Canal and extend its influence in the Middle East" (Saunders, 2015).

Russia has opportunities to strengthen its political and economic influence in the Western Balkans, which remain Europe's soft underbelly. In addition to their internal problems, Bosnia, Kosovo and Albania are the main recruiting grounds in the Balkans for radical Islamists seeking fighters for the wars in Syria and Iraq (Tomovic, 2014). The primary example here is Moscow's efforts to establish special relations with Serbia and Macedonia.³ "Those in the EU who are skeptical towards further enlargement – and there are many – might even silently welcome the new power of Russia" (Jović, 2014).⁴

Bosnia's survival as a unified state cannot be taken for granted.⁵ Moscow's decision to abstain in a UN

² The G7 leaders, meeting in the Hague on 24 March 2014, decided to hold their own summit in Brussels instead of Sochi and, thus, to meet without Russia for the first time since 1998. After condemning the 2014 Russian military intervention in Ukraine, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe voted to suspend the Russian delegation's voting rights as well as its rights to be represented in the Bureau of the Assembly, the PACE Presidential Committee, and the PACE Standing Committee, and its rights to participate in election-observation missions until the end of the 2014 session (26 January 2015). This list could easily be expanded.

³ Both countries are currently in talks to join the EU, but the European Commission's five-year moratorium on taking in new members leaves them no hope of accession in the near future.

⁴ For various reasons (both economic and political), these countries did not support sanctions against Russia and seek to strengthen bilateral ties with Moscow. On 5 December 2014, EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini called on Russia not to involve the Balkans in tensions between Brussels and Moscow over the Ukrainian crisis.

⁵ However, it should be noted that the current instability in Bosnia is not the result of Russian policy. Bosnia has become destabilised for many reasons – economic, political and constitutional – but the truth is that right now Bosnia is at a critical juncture, and Moscow's influence on the Republic of Srpska is very real. This is well known – many have already pointed out that Moscow's influence in Banja Luka is much stronger than, for example, Belgrade's.

vote authorising a prolonged EU mission to the country leads many to believe that the Kremlin is seriously considering such a move (Krastev, 2015). That is a very new development, because until recently the Balkans were one of the very few areas where cooperation between Russia and the West in the 90s was quite productive.

The 'Foot in the Door' Middle East Strategy versus Cooperation

The emerging bipolarity of Russia-West relations at the macro level has already been projected to the Mediterranean region. This trend's continued development would inevitably create a new fault line in the southern Mediterranean region and push the competing sides into foot-in-the-door policies of the type practiced during the Cold War. Generally speaking, Russia's relations with the countries of North Africa (Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) aim to take advantage of the new opportunities, but are not really guided by a well-thought-out strategy for the region. As with the Balkans, Russia seems to be increasingly keen to position itself in the region as an alternative to the EU or the US. In February 2015, President Putin visited Egypt, where he was warmly welcomed by his Egyptian counterpart, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. The visit came at a time when Cairo-Washington ties remained frayed. The two leaders agreed to boost trade and military cooperation, and, in March 2015, Russia began supplying weapons to Egypt after signing a memorandum.

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As for Russia's engagement with the problems of the Middle East, it is aimed at exacting leverage over the West, as Moscow's assistance could play a crucial role in the settlement of major issues such

as the Iranian nuclear problem, the Syrian conflict, the stabilisation of Afghanistan and violent jihadist groups (Kozhanov, 2015). It can also be viewed as part of a strategy aimed at avoiding international isolation in the wake of sanctions over the Ukraine conflict and persuading the West of Russia's indispensability in handling major Middle Eastern issues.

The collapse of the P5+1 talks on the Iranian nuclear programme would increase the risk of an Israeli military strike, the spread of hostilities and violence throughout the Middle East, and the unravelling of the entire nuclear non-proliferation regime. The Ukraine conflict has deeply divided the P5+1 group, which previously spoke with a single voice on the Iranian nuclear issue, making it difficult for Russia and the West to cooperate on it (Arbatov, 2015). Russia can be helpful in the dialogue with Bashar al-Assad and in the Middle East Quartet on Palestine.⁶ However, many experts say that Russia is more interested in the process of the negotiations than their outcome. This can be explained not only by the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West but also by Moscow's economic interests.

Any intensification of Russian efforts towards Palestinian independence may make the Israelis reconsider their ties with Moscow. Meanwhile, Russia is interested in certain technologies that Israel could provide, as well as in bilateral trade with that country, which reached \$4.6 billion in 2014 (Kozhanov, 2015). Economic cooperation with Middle Eastern and North African countries also weakens the anti-Russian camp in the region. The Near and Middle East, together with North Africa, is the second largest market for Russian military exports, accounting for 23% of all such exports (Wezeman and Wezeman, 2015). For security and political reasons, Russia clearly does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. However, unlike the United States, Russia has huge political and economic interests with Iran. Iran is one of the main recipients of Russian peaceful nuclear technology and arms sales. Also, Iran is seen as a geopolitical counterbalance to the expanding influence of Turkey, the United States, and Islamic Wahhabism in the South

⁶ In March, the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, argued that Russia can be helpful because only Moscow (and Tehran) speak directly to Bashar al-Assad.

and North Caucasus and Central Asia. Finally, Iranian oil and gas resources (the fourth and second largest in the world, respectively) are a lucrative target for future Russian investment.

There is one issue that still unites Russia and the West in the region despite their differences – the ISIS challenge. The sharp deterioration in political relations between Russia and the United States in the last two years has seriously undermined both the level of and potential for counterterrorism cooperation, since intelligence in this highly sensitive area of security cannot be shared without a high degree of trust between the two sides. Who stands to lose more – Russia or the West – is a matter of debate. But one thing is clear: the winner in the rapidly deepening disengagement between the two sides, which is undermining cooperation on fundamental security issues, is radical Islamism. That is why both Russia and the US must realise the folly of sacrificing strategic interests for short-term geopolitical gains and show that the civilised world is capable of drawing lessons – however bitter they may be to swallow – so that new and perhaps even more terrible catastrophes can be averted.

The scenario of limited bipolarity is not irreversible. A great deal will depend on how Russia and the West come out of the Ukrainian crisis. The relationship will probably never be the same unless Russia re-embraces its European vocation. But Russia and the West could return to a more balanced and non-confrontational model of relations based on an agreed set of rules and common interests along the lines of the Gorbachev USSR-West relations.

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