Russian Policy in the Middle East and North Africa – Some Driving Forces

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The Russian policy in the Middle East and North Africa (hereafter – MENA) region should be understood within the broader context of Russia's foreign policy efforts in general. These are predominantly shaped nowadays by the dramatic mismatch between the Kremlin's ambitions in the international arena, on the one hand, and the actual base of resources needed to carry out its aggressive external policies, on the other. According to Moscow's 2015 National Security Strategy, the ability of Russia to stand out as "[…] one of the world's leading powers" in the international arena is a key strategic priority.

Limits of Russia's Power and the Way to Move beyond Them

However, this stated ambition to create a strong Russia suffers from the reality that Russia is also a declining economic actor. Indeed, while Russia holds the 43rd position in the Global Competitiveness Index, the nation's industrial production is currently stagnating at best, with Russia's manufacturing index increasing at an average annual statistical error level of 0.39% between 2007 and 2016. At the same time the depreciation of fixed assets in Russian industry in general is 48.7% in 2016 (49.5 and 51.8% in manufacturing and construction correspondingly) with 15.8% of all assets fully (i.e. 100%) depreciated; the depreciation of fixed assets in Russian infrastructure has exceeded 70% (with an average of below 20% in the US and estern Europe). The coefficient of fixed asset renewal stood at 3.9% in 2015, which did not help improve the situation – and certainly did nothing to reverse it – and Russia's state statistics body has no data published on this key indicator after that time, implying the existence of politically humiliating statistics. The amount of high-performance jobs in the Russian economy in general had dropped by 13.5% by 2017 against the 2014 level. The Kremlin's geopolitical adventurism in Ukraine has led to economic sanctions being imposed on Russia, obstructing its access to both foreign investments and modern Western technologies, both badly needed to heal the nation's existing economic difficulties. Taken together, these factors clearly depict a downward trend in the prospects for Russia's future economic competitiveness and its chances of relying on the Russian economy to secure the position of "one of the world's leading powers."

It is evident therefore that, within the framework of the existing world order, Russia is increasingly losing its competitiveness and its status as a "leading world power." For that reason, one possible Russian solution is to change the very rules and norms by which the world order is "governed." To that end, the Kremlin is seeking to resurrect the model of the Yalta Accord between the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union in February 1945. According to the Russian worldview, Yalta led to the creation of a firm and stable international system in which there were mutually-recognized "spheres of influence." This is, one can argue, both the goal of, and the means by which, Russia aims to offset the consequences of contemporary relative decline. In other words, Moscow is seeking the restoration of a Russian sphere of influence or "zone of privileged interests," as it existed in the Soviet times, to offset Russia's inability to compete within the existing rule-based framework of international relations. By Moscow's design, the cre-

ation of such a zone would also lead to the creation of a Russian "orbit," and by extension an expansion of Moscow's importance as an international player, increase its "weight" in the international arena, and help re-establish Russia as a great power beyond Europe. That is why Moscow's desire to re-exert control over countries formerly under its influence is championed at the very top of the Russian State by President Putin himself.

And the closer countries are to the centre of gravity of world politics, the better. That is where the Kremlin's interest in the MENA region comes from. At the same time, the current Russian leadership is surely opportunistic in a good sense: the Kremlin tends to grab opportunities to promote its plans wherever such opportunities appear. The current instabilities in the MENA region – Syria, Libya and Egypt partially – as well as the transitional situation in Turkey, provide ample opportunity to promote Russia's influence, on the one hand, and diminish that of the West, on the other. This is especially the case in the "zero-sum" approach to international politics that is typical of Moscow nowadays, in which the balance of power leans towards the states closest to Russia.

Smart Action Planning

In pursuit of that goal Moscow employs certain methods which might be eyebrow-raising, while surely elegant by design from the political standpoint. The Russian operation in Syria designed to force Europeans to accept Moscow's policy in Ukraine, and make the US a guarantor of Russia's national interests – all with a minimal use of Moscow's own resources – is one of the best examples of such designs. Indeed, as the conflict in Syria became complicated by the activities of Daesh/ISIS and led to a substantial increase in refugee flows to Europe, Turkey and the United States envisioned a plan involving US warplanes, Syrian insurgents, and Turkish forces working together to establish a "safe zone" for displaced Syrians in northern Syria. This zone would prevent the mass influx of refugees into Europe from Syria – a primary security concern for NATO's southern members. Based on the Libyan experience, a proposed "Syrian no-fly zone" resonated in the Kremlin as an attempt at another regime change, this time against Russia's only remaining ally in the Middle East. Russia rushed to deploy a small force, tailored for air defence and jamming airborne fire-control radars, in the evident pursuit of deterring US and Turkish aircraft from attempting to enforce a no-fly policy over a refugee safe zone by raising the prospect of a Russia-NATO clash. Moscow quite rightly assumed that the prospect of such a clash would force NATO to abandon the no-fly zone idea, eliminating the danger of regime change. This would preserve Assad's regime and give the Kremlin leverage to force the Europeans to make concessions on Ukraine and other issues in exchange for Russia's willingness to allow European attempts at resolving the refugee crisis. Indeed, with the deployment of its anti-aircraft assets, the Kremlin could theoretically pull in and pull out of countering the creation of a refugee safe zone, thus trading its non-obstruction to the Europeans' efforts to solve the refugee crisis for the desired concessions from Europe.

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Another element of Moscow's plan was to equip Damascus with adequate firepower to fight rebels attempting to overthrow Assad's regime. Preserving Assad's regime would effectively secure Russia's presence in the Mediterranean and ensure that it remains a significant voice on policy in the region. Indeed, Syria is the only country in the Mediterranean that provides Russia with naval basing rights and an air base for the Russian Mediterranean naval squadron's air support. The survival of the Syrian regime is therefore vital to Moscow's aspirations. If Assad's forces eliminate the moderate opposition groups directly threatening the regime, it would result in a fundamentally different dynamic, leaving only two forces

in the country: the Assad regime and Daesh. Given the unwillingness of Western and Arab countries to put boots on the ground, the Western-led coalition would be forced to support Assad as a source of ground forces to fight Daesh, making the pursuit of his ultimate removal questionable. Should Russia's plan work as intended, the United States will eventually be compelled to preserve Assad's regime, which, in turn, guarantees the newly acquired Russian military bases in Syria and secures Moscow's influence in the Middle East and Mediterranean.

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Russia has deployed, on a rotational basis starting in September 2015, a moderate force comprised of a mixed air brigade, three manoeuvre battalions, two Spetsnaz/reconnaissance battalions, and two to three artillery battalions since 30 September 2015, when the Russian operation was officially announced. These forces wage a mainly contactless war and largely target non-Daesh elements; these are Damascus' Syrian Army, Iranian-backed Shia militias, as well as Iran's Qods Force and a limited number of regular Iranian military who bear the brunt of the land campaign. Furthermore, Moscow employs Russian mercenaries, disguised as "private military companies," to reinforce the land push when necessary, to avoid using Russian troops. Russia persistently refers to Damascus' official request to send Russian troops to assist in the fight against "terrorists" as the legal basis for its military involvement in Syria thus legitimizing the potential gains in Syria in the eyes of the international community. Neutralizing the "terrorist threat" in distant lands to defend Russian people from the migration of that threat into Russia has also served as a vital Russian domestic propaganda tool too. It allows the Kremlin to boost domestic support for the military operation in Syria and portrays the government as the defender of the Russian people, not the least useful outcome, in view of the unfolding economic crisis in Russia, for diverting the attention of the public away from the government's domestic failures.

Success – but Difficulties Are Looming

Moscow showed a lack of respect to its client, Damascus, when it made certain moves without the proper consultations. The idea of Syria's "federalization" (in the form of the establishment of Kurdish Autonomy in an initial phase, with the possibility for other parts of the country to follow this path), publicly promoted by Moscow for a short period of time as the way to resolve the ongoing Syrian conflict in January 2017 when Russia publicized its unsolicited draft of a future Syrian constitution, is probably the best example of such a move. Regardless of the fact that the prospect of the Levant's partition was furiously rejected by local politicians and the population in 1920-1946 when tried by French authorities, Russia repeated the proposal – quite expectedly infuriating Syrians and revealing its own lack of nuanced understanding of the local political dynamics.

The operation undertaken in Syria has, however, been fruitful for the Kremlin in certain areas – the expansion of the 720th naval rear-support station in Tartus into a fully-fledged naval base is among them. Moscow and Damascus have signed an agreement which secured Russia's right to deploy to Tartus up to 11 large warships (up to 10,000 tons of displacement), including nuclear-powered ones, implying plans to use Tartus to provide rear support to nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) deployed to the Mediterranean (as just Russian SSNs fall into the described displacement category of nuclear-powered warships). Meanwhile, the Russo-Syrian agreement on Tartus, signed on 18 January 2017, revealed the limits of Moscow's potential to expand its influence. The Tartus agreement was not defined as indefinite, as was the agreement signed in August 2015 on the lease of the Khmeimim air base, currently used by the Russian air force operating in Syria. Instead, the lease of the naval base is limited to 49 years, with the possibility of an extension after 25 years, although the right of the Syrian side to end

the lease with one year's notice is stated in the agreement. Moreover, the Khmeimim agreement was also modified on the same day the Tartus deal was signed – revoking the indefinite nature of the lease and imposing the same restrictions as used for Tartus.

There are reports that such restrictions (which were not originally assumed when the Russo-Syrian talks on Tartus were announced in October 2016) were predominantly the result of Iranian pressure on Damascus. The situational alliance of Moscow and Tehran over Syria is therefore evidently weaker and more controversial than might be perceived at first glance. That is not surprising bearing in mind the deep differences between Russia and Iran in their corresponding attitudes regarding the Syrian conflict. Indeed, the two governments are de-facto competing for the influence over post-conflict Damascus. The Kremlin needs a stable and loyal government for western Syria to secure Russia's gains there (the air and naval bases). It also needs the friendly neutrality of neighbouring Israel as Tel Aviv's diametrically opposed attitude towards developments in Syria would endanger Russia's achievements in the country, thus undermining prospects for using bases on Syrian soil as a powerful outpost of Russian policy in the MENA region. Tehran, meanwhile, is pursuing undisputed influence over Damascus to gain direct access to the eastern Mediterranean and continue its uncompromising fight against Israel. Russia and Iran evidently envisage mutually exclusive roles for post-conflict Syria which inevitably sets the two governments on a collision course in the not-that-distant future.

The same can be said about the recent Russo-Turkish rapprochement. While Moscow and Ankara have become situational allies in the bitter confrontation (albeit of a different nature) with the US and western Europe, both governments currently pursue regional dominance in the Middle East – a recipe for Russo-Turkish competition at best, rather than *entente cordiale*. It is also highly illustrative how the Kremlin's rigid, uncompromising approach to foreign policy diminishes, rather than improves, Russia's chances of securing its potential gains in the near future. Indeed, the tactics of raising stakes and "cornering" international interlocutors, in the expectation that they would be unable to cope, would give in to Moscow's pressure and make concessions, has been the general trend in Russia's foreign policy since 2007, and especially after Crimea's annexation in early 2014. Recep Erdogan's Turkey has become Russia's unexpected ally after the attempted anti-government coup in July 2016 was suppressed by the Turkish authorities. One might expect that the Kremlin embracing Ankara would promote an unexpected alliance. Moscow instead displayed unwillingness to completely lift its sanctions imposed against Turkey after numerous violations of Turkish airspace by Russian combat jets operating in Syria resulted in a Turkish F-16 jet shooting down the Russian Su-24M bomber in November 2015. The Russian support for the Kurdish fighters in North Syria – a cause of great vexation in Ankara – remained intact too. The Russian-Turkish background so complicates sincere cooperation between the two countries that any alliance between them is relegated to the category of fragile and situational, rather than reliable and long-term.

Moscow Never Stops Looking for Opportunities

The Kremlin meanwhile keeps seeking other opportunities in the MENA region, providing support to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in Libya, in opposition to the UN-brokered Government of National Accord (GNA), and building closer ties with Egypt under the President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Considered together, these two areas of Russia's Middle Eastern activism reveal a number of Moscow's political preferences. Near universal support to those fighting radical Islamists is evidently one of them. On the other hand, Russia's support to the forces challenging the results of the "colour revolutions" in North African states – Haftar and al-Sisi both fall into this category – is the second evident preference. There are two political interests underlying this. The Kremlin stubbornly views the "colour revolutions" as a Western conspiracy, and their results as a Western gain that belittles Russia's influence in the region – so it is quite natural for Moscow, in its pursuit of promoting Russian influence, and diminishing that of the West in the region, to support those who seemingly aspire to reverse the results of the revolutions. The second interest is aimed at achieving an almost tectonic shift: success in reversing the re-

sults of the "colour revolutions" would "educate" the West and the rest of the world in the way that regime change attempts are ultimately doomed to failure. Recognition of the futility of such attempts should water down the West's appetite to repeat them thus forcing the West to adopt a passive stance in its perceived crusade against Russian influence. And the MENA region is the perfect location for this sort of "education" as this is precisely the area where the original attempts took place – so their negative outcome would be, by Moscow's design, the most convincing for the West not to dare repeat them.

It is worth mentioning that the Balkans (above all the former Yugoslavia) is another region where, as perceived by Moscow, the West has nearly completed the extensive regime change attempt between the 1990s and now. The ultimate failure there would, by design, have the same educational effect. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Russia has aggressively pursued policies to reverse the results of peacekeeping efforts in the Balkans, dating back to the Dayton accord of 1995, and re-ignite instabilities in the region. Russian activities with regard to Kosovo, Montenegro, and Macedonia should be mentioned in this respect. These developments have the additional implication for the MENA region as Russia de-facto states its aspiration to shield the Middle East against Western influence using the buffer zone of "neutral" (i.e. submissive to Russia, rather than to the West, as this term is understood in the Kremlin) Balkan countries and thus claiming even broader control of this potential area of Russia's privileged interests.

Being in the Russian sphere of interests – which, when all is said, is equivalent to being within the Russian sphere of influence – is not a position that comes without strings attached. Those questioning the existence of the Russian threat to NATO's southern allies surely miss the fact that Moscow is persistently putting southern and southwestern Europe in the cross-hairs of its *Kalibr* sea-based long-range cruise missiles, which are quite openly announced as a nuclear-capable weapon system. Deployments of *Kalibr*-capable Russian warships to the Mediterranean are routine practice now, and this will be further extended when construction is completed of the Tartus Russian naval base. As that is not enough, the December 2015 edition of the Russian Federation's national security strategy postulates that out-of-area actions by NATO (all actions in North Africa or near its shores in the Mediterranean evidently fall into this category), if not authorized by the UN Security Council, are unacceptable from the Russian standpoint, and represent a threat to Russia's national security, which the Russian government is determined to counter using any means, including military power. This means that the Kremlin is calling for any of NATO's out-of-area actions, aimed at resolving non-military crises concerning the southern Allies, to be stopped unless given Moscow's approval (which has the power of veto at the Security Council), otherwise Russia reserves the right to resort to the use of its military power. And that is precisely what the Kremlin understands as standing out as "[…] one of the world's leading powers": dictating its will to others who happen to find themselves pulled into areas which Moscow considers its sphere of privileged interests. When all is said and done, that is the ultimate goal of Russia's current policy in the Middle East and North Africa region.

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