

Putin's Middle East Policy: Causes and Consequences

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Brief Analysis

Two experts discuss Russia's increasingly assertive regional policy and what it means for American and allied interests. Read a summary or watch video of the full event.

On March 17, Anna Borshchevskaya and Philip Gordon addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute to mark the publication of the new Policy Focus [Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects \(/policy-analysis/view/russia-in-the-middle-east\)](#). Borshchevskaya is the Institute's Ira Weiner Fellow and a fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy. Gordon is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and served as special assistant to the president and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf region from 2013 to 2015. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA

Russia is not the Great Power it once was, but the Middle East is fragile, and Moscow does not need to do much to assert influence and gain a military foothold, particularly against a perceived Western retreat from the region. President Vladimir Putin continually tests the West, diverting attention from Russia's domestic problems and allowing him to further assume the role of a consequential leader.

Russian regional influence is on the rise -- and not only in Syria. Last month, the largest Russian delegation in many

years visited Iraq, pledging more weapons and aid to the Baghdad government. Moscow has also defended Iran's recent ballistic missile tests, and further maintains that its own possible arms sales to Iran, including fighter jets, do not violate the United Nations arms embargo on the grounds that fighters are defensive weapons. Meanwhile, the Kremlin's standoff with Turkey continues after Ankara's shootdown of a Russian jet last November. And just this month, King Mohammed VI of Morocco visited Russia for the first time since 2002.

Many similarities exist between Russia's reaction to uprisings in the post-Soviet states and its reaction to the Arab Spring. Historically, both czarist Russia and the Soviet Union cared less about the region itself than about possibilities for economic and political gain, and likewise for reducing Western influence and thereby creating the perception of Russia as a Great Power. In the early post-Soviet years, President Boris Yeltsin briefly retreated from the region, but following the turbulent 1990s, Putin rose to power promising stability, prosperity, and a restoration of Russia's greatness.

Another theme of Putin's tenure is distrust and hostility toward the West. He regards the Soviet Union's breakup as a tragedy and perceives that the West is now similarly targeting Russia's unity. Western talk of democracy is cast as a smokescreen for regime change, and Putin cannot fathom the idea that people would overthrow their rulers without orchestration from foreign powers.

Russia's policies tend to be reactive and therefore emerge in response to Western policies and actions. Putin sees diplomacy as a zero-sum game, and he has sought to reduce Western influence by entering vacuums left by the West. For instance, he used the decline of U.S.-Egypt relations to advance Russia's own ties with Cairo. Despite a heavy emphasis on fighting terrorism, Russia has at times been willing to work with Islamists such as the short-lived Morsi government in Egypt and Hamas in Gaza. Moscow has greatly benefited by acting when Washington failed to enforce its own redlines, such as in Syria. Overall, Putin has sought to improve ties with traditional friends and adversaries alike in the Middle East primarily through trade, arms, and energy-related means.

PHILIP GORDON

Russia's interests in the Middle East relate to its distrust and hostility toward the West. Moscow has Great Power ambitions and wants to be treated as one. For his part, Putin understands the Cold War's conclusion as a truce that should have engendered an even balance of power but instead resulted in U.S. pursuit of global hegemony. Russia likewise resents NATO's enlargement and U.S. activity in the Middle East. Broadly speaking, Putin identifies Russia's interest as opposing the global trend of spreading democracy, consistent with Moscow's outreach to more autocratic states and its aversion to U.S. interests in democracy promotion.

Iran and Syria represent the two most important nodes of U.S.-Russia relations in the Middle East. On Iran, Russia holds the contradictory interests of wanting to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons while opposing any development perceived as supporting U.S. hegemony. Moscow insisted that any Iran nuclear deal pass the UN Security Council, where Russia has a seat. During the talks, one feared scenario by the West was that Russia would offer the bare minimum as a partner, agreeing to prevent an Iranian bomb but not to the broader U.S. approach on the matter. Another fear was that a Western strike against Iran could help Russia by directly addressing the nuclear issue, driving up oil prices, and discrediting the United States and Israel, while ultimately allowing Moscow to advance its own relations in the region. The revelation of Iran's secret Fordow nuclear site, however, unnerved the Russians and prompted them to support UN Security Council Resolution 1929, the arms embargo, and missile sanctions. In the end, Russia turned out to be a better partner on Iran than many expected, despite disagreements over Ukraine, NGO laws, missile defense, and other issues. The U.S.-Russia relationship deteriorated over time, but Iran was a last area of cooperation. Moscow's position on Iran remained consistent throughout the talks, and the Russians supported constraining the nuclear program so long as they maintained a role in the process.

On Syria, many were overly optimistic that Russia would help the United States depose Bashar al-Assad. Putin was always going to support Assad, and observers should not have been surprised by Russia's deployment of military force. Russia dislikes the notion that people can rise up and secure support from the West if they dislike their dictator. This can be seen in Moscow's reaction to unrest in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Libya. The Kremlin sees a pattern in all these situations and fears its spread to Central Asia or Russia itself. Separately, the Russians are not aiming to construct an alliance to crush Sunnis but are instead trying to expand ties to the Sunni world.

Russia's defense of the Assad regime is based not only on an aversion to regime change but also on the risks of chaos in a post-Assad Syria and the desire to stay relevant, rather than the Kremlin's stated intention of defeating the Islamic State. Russia's withdrawal is consistent with these objectives: Assad will not fall, Syria is not being transformed into Afghanistan or Somalia, and Moscow has kept its seat at the table. The Russians did not sign up for an indefinite occupation of Syria. If the United States could present a plan for a post-Assad Syria that incorporated Russian interests, the Kremlin would accept it. Russia is, as noted, intent on avoiding anarchy in a post-Assad Syria but at the same time does not believe the international community should have the role of choosing the Syrian government.

U.S. objectives should include countering Russian influence in the region, but this cannot be the predominant objective. Instead, U.S. goals regarding Russia have to be weighed against other national interests. Those who perceive Moscow's intervention as undermining U.S. interests should likewise interpret the announced withdrawal as beneficial for U.S. interests -- a successful U.S. Syria policy would not include a Russian quagmire there. The United States should correspondingly maintain the goal of cooperating with Russia on a political solution. On this front, the Kremlin's announcement of a withdrawal simultaneous with the Geneva talks contains a message to Assad that Russia does not support him in retaking the entire country.

No one ever doubted that the United States could use airpower to some effect in Syria, but force may not have enabled Washington to realize its political goals, which are distinct from and more difficult than Russia's. The gamble behind a prospective U.S. intervention leading to a political transition was predicated on convincing the regime and its supporters to accept a transition. As long as Assad enjoys the backing of Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, any U.S. intervention would be costly and significant. The U.S. experience is that intervention on behalf of an opposition force leads not to capitulation but to counterescalation. Applying the Russian approach of achieving political goals through force becomes even more difficult when one considers the Russian military's indiscriminate approach and its killing of numerous civilians.

Washington has much more to offer the Middle East than does Moscow. While Russia can play a regional role, Middle Eastern countries prefer strategic relations with the United States and the terms it provides, regardless of current strains. Moscow also has the potential to be a negative force in instances where it could instead play a positive role. For this reason, Russia cannot be ignored.

This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt. ❖

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