

Russia and the Greater Middle East: Partner or Competitor?

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Russia's foreign policy is a complicated issue because Russia is still in transition. Foreign Minister Primakov has succeeded, for the first time, in bringing the foreign policy under the control of the foreign ministry. However, there still remain some important players such as private industry groups and the Ministry of Defense. Unlike the CIS countries and other former Soviet satellites, the Arab countries in the Middle East have lost the importance they once enjoyed with Soviet policymakers. Today, only Iran and Turkey remain prominent in Russian foreign policy. Regarding the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the main actors are Pakistan (for its role in training) and Saudi Arabia (for its role in financing). Contrary to popular belief, Iran is not the key player.

As for Russia's overall Middle East policy, Primakov's main contribution has been to establish a "policy of balances." This should not be interpreted as a challenge to the West. Indeed, Russia is fulfilling all of its international obligations, including the Non-Proliferation Treaty. More importantly, recent cases involving the transfer of technology and/or materials should only be seen as isolated cases of Iranians attempting to acquire these goods. In no way does this constitute official Russian policy. In fact, Russian security services intercepted and disclosed these transactions based on their own information, not on "data brought in from abroad." Indeed, these incidents only serve to prove the seriousness with which Russian agencies are working towards preventing these kinds of deals.

> In general, Russian policy is aimed at using Russia's rich heritage as a mediator in order to play a constructive role in situations where rulers such as Saddam Hussein cannot trust other mediators. Russia's role in preventing a military strike during the last crisis with Iraq benefited the United States and the West in general. This also contributed to the proper implementation of UN resolutions. Russia's contribution was done for the international community, Russia itself had nothing to gain from its intervention.

Russia's policy in the Middle East will be motivated by economic reasons, not by ideological or even political reasons as was the case during the days of the Soviet Union. Iran and Turkey will remain a top priority, whereas Russia's role in the rest of the region will remain limited by poor financial and technical capabilities. Middle Eastern countries are a market for oil, goods and weapons. Many have large debts to Moscow (e.g. Iraq's \$7 billion debt).

> Iran has no nuclear weapons program, and neither the money nor the interest in such a program. Iranians, however, like many other countries, want to develop missile technologies. Iran believes that it is surrounded by hostile states so "naturally" it is seeking these weapons. However, Russia sticks by its obligations and does not sell this type of technology. Indeed, there are no facts that can point to official Russian support for such transfers of technology. Russia is interested in relations with Iran as a very close neighbor and powerful ally. Iranians are interested in a strategic alliance to fend off threats from Iraq and other countries in the south. This idea was also supported by some political figures in Russia. However, this cannot be taken seriously. When such a partnership is mentioned in Russia, it is usually for domestic political reasons.

RAJAN MENON

Russia's domestic context. Generally, the official U.S. prognosis for Russia is "bullish". This consensus rests on three foundations: on America's perennial and infectious optimism; on America's post-Cold War "narcissism"; and on the human proclivity to allow wishes to father thoughts. In defense of the consensus, much has happened in Russia to justify such optimism, but there is another side to the Russian saga. The post-Soviet economic transition has been the equivalent of a social whirlwind. Along with freedom has come inequality and disorder. Russia is a land of robber barons and impoverished pensioners. The contrast between Moscow and the rest of Russia reveals the depth of its social crisis. Indeed, according to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, one third of Russia's population lives below the poverty line, and despite official assurances, its economy continues to contract. Its once proud army has become demoralized, and there is an alarmingly high rate of suicide among soldiers. Workers are not paid for months at a time and when they are paid cannot make ends meet. Since 1990, the average male life expectancy has declined seven years, to fifty-eight. This desolation is not the handiwork of the West, but it is viewed as the result of Western prescriptions. This has in turn soured the mood towards the West especially since the West has not done much to help Russia. The silence of the Russian people should be seen as a silence of sullenness and not a silence of satisfaction.

Russia's foreign policy context. Russia's romanticism with the West is coming to an end. The elite has not voiced

this yet because it has done fairly well. However, in a democratic society such as Russia, this will soon be reflected in the thoughts and deeds of leaders. This has been further accentuated by the fact that ill-advised American policies such as NATO enlargement have succeeded in fueling animosity towards America. In order to reply to Western anti-Russian policies, the Russian elite might seek strategic partnerships with "old friends" such as Iran, Iraq, Cuba and Syria. This explains the growing dissonance between American and Russian perspectives, priorities and policies in the Middle East.

> Russia rejects the role of "bit player in a production entitled 'The World According to America.'" This might seem odd to Westerners who see the erosion of Russian power. However, this strikes a chord with some Middle Eastern countries for whom Russia is not a "parvenu" but a longtime neighbor. Islam is also making a mark in Russia in places such as the north Caucasus. The weak state is now particularly susceptible to parochial institutions such as the military-industrial complex. This dynamic of national pride, security imperatives, and parochial pragmatism is apparent in Russian reaction to American efforts to shape Russian policy towards Iraq and Iran, where compliance with U.S. demands would mean the loss of money and influence.

It is unclear if the transfer of technology and weapons to Iran is a deliberate policy crafted in Moscow for strategic competition against the United States, or whether the Russian state has collapsed and anarchy is masquerading as statecraft. If the transfer is a deliberate policy, it can be dealt with in a conventional manner: dissuaded with sticks and persuaded with carrots. The second possibility is much more troublesome. It would mean that the primary assumption in dealing with Russia--i.e., that a state exists--is wrong. If there is no Russian state, then our task is not one of influencing the state but that of creating one. The latter is beyond the capabilities of U.S. foreign policy.

Russia's strategic position in the Middle East. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia cannot be ally and armorer to the Arab states, and it cannot be a regional peacemaker. Only the United States can assume that role, in part because Israel will only trust Washington, but also because Russia can offer neither reassurances nor rewards, which are the peacemaker's key resources. Russia's recent dealings with Iraq were exaggerated by the media. In the end, it was Kofi Annan's diplomacy and the proximity of U.S. forces which compelled Iraq, not Russian diplomacy. Russia cannot do anything intentionally to harm U.S. interests in the region. Russia, however, is a catalyst in the law of unintended consequences. Saddam, for example, might overestimate Russia's capabilities to balance the United States in the Middle East and refuse to comply with UN demands. The pressure on President Clinton to act forcefully will then be unbearable. The ensuing conflagration would lead to an outcome from which no one would benefit.

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

The U.S. role in the Middle East. A geo-political map of the post-Cold War world contains two main regions. The core--Europe and the Asia Pacific region--is stable and politically and economically important. The periphery includes almost everywhere else, and is less stable, but unimportant for American interests. The Middle East falls into a third category--it is important, yet unstable. The Middle East needs a policeman, and America is the obvious and only candidate.

> America's candidacy for this role is dictated by its two major stakes in the Gulf region of the Middle East--preventing interruption in the flow of oil to the industrial world and preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). These tasks give meaning to two post-Cold War terms often used in American foreign policy discussion concerning this part of the world--"rogue states" and "dual containment." Preventing Iraq and Iran from attacking its neighbors (who can themselves provide oil to the United States) and preventing WMD acquisition by these two countries are vital U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Why should the United States be responsible for fulfilling these objectives, when other countries would suffer more acutely if this role were not filled? Policing the Middle East is a "collective good"--something no one can be prevented from consuming, and therefore the incentive to pay for it is low. Everyone who benefits has an incentive to be a free rider. The existence of collective goods is one of the chief reasons for governments, which have the power to compel people to pay. However, there is no international government, so collective goods are usually supplied by leaders. In the post-Cold War world, the United States is the leader. Thus, matters such as policing the Middle East would not be accomplished if the United States did not take the initiative, even though everyone would benefit. Being the indispensable nation means always having to pick up the check.

Russian policy in the Middle East. To the new post-Cold War Middle East, the United States is central, and Russia is, at best, marginal. The new Middle East (excluding the Caspian Basin region) is central to the policies and interests of the United States, but marginal to Russian policy and interests. While U.S. power is great in the region, Russia's is modest. American aims are fixed, but American means are subject to change, depending on the situation. Russia, on the other hand, has fixed means but ambiguous aims.

Russia is still developing, and therefore its foreign policy is in flux. Russia does not want to position itself in outright opposition to the West, as the Soviet Union did, while at the same time, there is currently a nationalist sweep in Russian foreign policy--the need to show independence from the United States because of the humiliations the Russians feel the United States has inflicted on them.

> Russian economic interests are multifaceted. Russia definitely wants to do business with Iraq, but they might do better with Saddam out of the way, conducting business with Iraq without the opposition of the United States. They do not want neighbors with nuclear weapons pointed at them, but they are interested in maintaining their defense industry by selling weapons to countries that want them for purposes for which the United States does

not approve. Russian firms are interested in participating in energy industries in Iran and Iraq, but as a potential exporter Russia has interests in keeping those countries' oil off the market in order to keep prices up. These are contradictory and not fully formed interests, and it is not clear how they will play out in the foreseeable future.

Russia has relatively little capacity to pursue interests in the Middle East, but its capacity is likely to grow. Already, Russia has the potential to make life difficult for the United States in the Middle East, through its role as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and as a supplier of dangerous technology to rogue states. In general, U.S. interests in the Middle East are easier to achieve in the context of a positive working relationship with Russia.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Amir Nahai and Tahl Colen.