



Moscow in the Middle East and North Africa

Anna Borshchevskaya

Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Testimony submitted to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

May 9, 2019

Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, Honorable Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa. I will address Moscow's overall strategic objectives and regional activities, describe how they hurt U.S. interests by sowing instability, and address what the United States could do to limit the Kremlin's influence. To end, I will touch very briefly on China.

With a combination of aggression and diplomacy, Russian president Vladimir Putin has ensured Russia's long-term prominence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Washington must now take Moscow into account in the region to a degree it hasn't had to for years.

Moscow's September 2015 military intervention in Syria was a game changer, but it's important to remember that, prior to the intervention, Putin had worked methodically and consistently for at least fifteen years to return Russia to the Middle East—a region that has historically mattered to Russian rulers. While he had achieved considerable influence by as early as 2010, the Syria intervention officially restored Russia's place as a critical regional player and helped position Putin as a regional powerbroker.

Moscow courts every major player in the region. Access to the Mediterranean gives the Kremlin greater leverage over NATO's southern flank (a long-time Kremlin aspiration), and opportunities to push further into the region and south into Africa. Putin demonstrated a commitment to his partners, all the while expanding ties, formal and informal. In spite of its economic weaknesses, Moscow has staying power in the region. It projects power without incurring significant costs as it continues to improve Russia's military capabilities, boost arms sales to the region, and develop economic ties in energy and other sectors. Meanwhile, Washington's overall commitment to the region remains ambiguous.

MOSCOW'S GOALS AND WHY THEY UNDERMINE U.S. INTERESTS

The Kremlin, driven by anti-Americanism, is primarily concerned with its own survival, which it views as intrinsically connected to its relationship with the United States, and more broadly with the West, in its search for great power status.

Putin has multiple goals in the Middle East, but fundamentally, his Syria intervention was about challenging the U.S.-led global order. Kremlin activities across the region share the same aim: to undermine the United

States and bolster Moscow's position in the region by deterring the West. Indeed, the Kremlin believes it is under attack from the West.¹ The Kremlin sees the hand of the West behind anti-regime protests such as the color revolutions, the Arab Spring, and protests within Russia itself.

Moscow seeks to expand political, economic, and cultural ties in the region as it positions itself as a regional powerbroker and covets a position of its arms supplies of choice.² Fundamentally, Moscow's approach is asymmetric. It understands it cannot match the West in resources and knows it doesn't have to. It aims to expend few resources and get high return for low investment, as it often resorts to indirect methods such as electronic warfare and use of private contractors for plausible deniability.

BENEFITS FROM INSTABILITY

For all of the Russian officials' talk about the need for stability in the Middle East, Moscow's efforts at peace-making are aimed at projecting great power status, but not taking on the responsibility this role entails. Russia has no resources to invest in long-term stabilization, nor does it possess the ability to bring about genuine reconciliation between conflicting parties. But Moscow can live with low-level conflict in the region as it puts Moscow in a position of manager. It necessitates Moscow's presence, elevates its importance, and affords opportunities to gain leverage over all players and foster dependence to the Kremlin—but not to achieve a genuine resolution. This situation echoes frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space that Moscow created in the first place and has no interest to resolve.

Arms sales have long been a critical component in the Russian foreign policy toolkit. To give some recent examples, at a meeting of the Commission for Military Technology Cooperation with Foreign States in July 2012, Putin said, "We see active military-technical cooperation as an effective instrument for advancing our national interests, both political and economic."³ In December 2013, Russian deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin said more bluntly that the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation, which leads the country's arms sales abroad, is Russia's "second foreign policy agency."⁴ Arms sales tie with Moscow's interests in the Middle East and how Russia benefits from instability. Sergei Chemezov, chief of the powerful state-owned industrial holding conglomerate, Rostec (under U.S. sanctions) said in February 2015, "As for the conflict situation in the Middle East, I do not conceal it, and everyone understands this, the more conflicts there are, the more they [clients] buy weapons from us."⁵

Beyond arms sales, Syria is the most visible example of Moscow's overall destabilizing influence. By saving and empowering Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian conflict continued to take innocent lives and sew regional instability through terrorism and refugee flows that affected not only the Middle East and North Africa but also Europe. Iran continued to grow emboldened. Moreover, Syria brought Russia's partnership with Iran to unprecedented heights. Distrust undercuts their relationship, but mutual opposition to the United States in

¹ Stephen Blank, *Moscow's Competitive Strategy*, July 2018 <https://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/7.25.18-Moscows-Competitive-Strategy.pdf>

² Indeed, for years, Moscow's arms sales have been second only to the United States, and in recent years, the MENA region has emerged as the second most important for Russian weaponry after Asia

Anna Borshchevskaya, "The Tactical Side of Russia's Arms Sales to the Middle East," Jamestown, December 20, 2018 <https://jamestown.org/program/tactical-side-russias-arms-sales-middle-east/>

³ President of Russia, "Meeting of the Commission for Military Technology Cooperation with Foreign States," Kremlin.ru, 2 July 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15865>.

⁴ "Рогозин: ФСВТС сегодня является вторым внешнеполитическим ведомством," RIA Novosti, 11 December 2013, https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20131211/983472868.html

⁵ "Глава "Ростеха" сообщил о росте продаж: 'Чем больше конфликтов, тем больше у нас покупают вооружения'" Newsru.com, February 23, 2015 <http://www.newsru.com/russia/23feb2015/chemezov.html>.

the region and the pursuit of trade keep Iran interested in working with Russia. The fact of the matter is that the latter two countries' governments have not been so close in the last 500 years.⁶ It is therefore wishful thinking that Moscow has any ability or desire to restrain Iran in any meaningful way.

Meanwhile, Moscow's efforts in the Astana talks produced no tangible results with regard to achieving peace. Yet these efforts elevated Moscow's image as a powerbroker while marginalizing the Geneva peace talks and the genuine anti-Assad Syrian opposition. Recall that Assad's regime has been responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths in Syria and encouraged radicalization in the first place.

Another example is Lebanon. Last July, Moscow launched an initiative with Lebanon to repatriate Syrian refugees. The agreement reportedly included facilitating conditions for their return to Syria, and a small token number began to return. However, reports suggest that Syrian authorities have been ignoring Russia's safety guarantees, even killing or detaining many returnees. As I have written with my colleague Hanin Ghaddar, the slow repatriation pace allows Russian officials to consolidate ties with Beirut, gain diplomatic leverage, and keep pressing for further involvement. Most importantly, a genuine resolution to the refugee issue is nowhere in sight.⁷

A possibility of war between Israel and Hezbollah has grown in recent years. Should that happen, Moscow would aim to position itself as the arbiter that prevents each side from doing too much damage to the other and, as Dmitry Adamsky wrote, possibly come out the winner.⁸ It is doubtful that Moscow has any interest in such conflict escalation, but this situation shows how Moscow positioned itself to potentially benefit even when conflict can escalate beyond the Kremlin's comfort level.

In Libya, Moscow had always seemed to favor Haftar somewhat, but has built contacts with all major players on the ground.⁹ As tensions continue to escalate there, Moscow is well-positioned to play a mediator role, especially when the United States is absent, or appears to side with Russia.¹⁰ The Kremlin has been careful and holds its cards close when it comes to its ultimate intentions in Libya, but Russia's presence in the country is real: it has a number of strategic interests there, such as energy and port access, and its track record is less than encouraging when it comes to genuine stabilization.

A2AD STRATEGY AND WARM WATER PORTS

The weaponry and equipment that Moscow brought into the Syrian theater from the very beginning signaled a clear intent for a long-term presence, while Russian operations suggested a strategy to deter the West and protect Assad and Russian assets, rather than consistently fight the Islamic State, as was Putin's proclaimed

⁶ Michael Rubin, "Iran-Russia Relations," July 1 2016, Operational Environment Watch, <http://www.aei.org/publication/iran-russia-relations/>

⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya and Hanin Ghaddar, "How to Read Lebanon's Acceptance of Russian Military Aid," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 7, 2018 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-read-lebanons-acceptance-of-russian-military-aid>

⁸ Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Russia and the Next Lebanon War," *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2017-10-06/russia-and-next-lebanon-war>

⁹ Anna Borshchevskaya, "After Syria, Putin's next move could be Libya," The Hill, February 13, 2017 <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/319272-after-syria-libya-could-be-putins-next-move>

Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Growing Influence in North Africa," Atlantic Community, February 26, 2019 <https://atlantic-community.org/russias-growing-influence-in-north-africa/>

¹⁰Michelle Nichols, "U.S., Russia say cannot support a U.N. call for Libya truce: diplomats," Reuters, April 18, 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-un/us-russia-say-cannot-support-a-un-call-for-libya-truce-diplomats-idUSKCN1RU2ML>

reason for going into Syria.

Moscow's actions showed it sought to methodically create an antiaccess/area-denial (A2AD) layout. Thus, Moscow deployed advanced weaponry such as the Pantsir short-range air defense system and the Almaz-Antey S-400 high-altitude surface-to-air missile (SAM) system to the Khmeimim airbase and later to the northwestern city of Masyaf, along with the KRET Krasukha-S4 ground-based electronic warfare system. It has also deployed the K-300P Bastion P coastal defense missile and the 9K720 Iskander ballistic missile system. Moscow's control of Syrian airspace complicates the U.S. ability to maneuver and makes Israel's freedom of action dependent on the Kremlin.

Moreover, a January 2017 agreement with Damascus expanded Russian naval facility in Tartus, allowed Russian ships access to Syrian ports and waters for at least the next 49 years, and gave Moscow rights to use the Khmeimim airbase indefinitely.¹¹ A long-term military presence on the Mediterranean appears to be a critical component of Moscow's goal to deter the West and weaken NATO. Indeed, Crimea increasingly plays an important role in Moscow's plans for Syria, from building connections between their ports, to a wide range of commercial ties, including energy and phosphates.¹²

As Russian military expert Roger McDermott writes, the Krasukha-S4 deployment also mattered with regard to field-testing the system in operational conditions.¹³ Indeed, McDermott writes that, since 2009, Moscow has consistently invested in modernizing its electronic warfare capabilities, with the overall aim of asymmetrically challenging NATO on Russia's periphery "and maximiz[ing] its chances of success in any operation against NATO's eastern members." Moscow's most recent and controversial transfer—of the S-300 to the Syrian Arab Army¹⁴—sent a political message: an assertion of Russia's regional dominance. The S-300 also fits within the overall A2AD strategy and potentially gives Moscow more leverage over the West and its allies.

Russia's maritime and naval doctrines meanwhile set the goal of expanding Russian naval capacities from regional to global blue water.¹⁵ At best, these ideas are years away from becoming a reality but aspirations matter. More to the point, Moscow continues its long-sought port access (rather than investment in building new ports) in the MENA region on the Mediterranean beyond Syria where it now has a long-term presence, along with greater deployment capabilities in the Black Sea and the Caspian.

To date, Moscow has achieved partial success with its overall A2AD layout. The United States and its allies are still able to operate, but Moscow's presence complicates these operations. In addition, Moscow boosted Russia's arms sales by using Syria as a testing and advertising arena for its weaponry, and improved military capabilities

¹¹ Reuters, "Russia establishing permanent presence at its Syrian bases: RIA," December 26, 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-bases/russia-establishing-permanent-presence-at-its-syrian-bases-ria-idUSKBN1EK0HD>

¹² Ridvan Bari Urcosta, "Russian Proxy Diplomacy in Syria: Crimea and Sevastopol," Jamestown, April 24, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-proxy-diplomacy-in-syria-crimea-and-sevastopol/>

¹³ Roger N. McDermott, *Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025: Challenging NATO in the Electromagnetic Spectrum* (Estonia: International Center for Defense and Security, 2017), https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2018/ICDS_Report_Russias_Electronic_Warfare_to_2025.pdf; Roger McDermott, "Russia's Network-Centric Warfare Capability: Tried and Tested in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 154 (October 30, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-network-centric-warfare-capability-tried-and-tested-in-syria/>.

¹⁴ Roger McDermott "Moscow's S-300 Double Bluff in Syria," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 142 (October 10, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/moscows-s-300-double-bluff-in-syria/>.

¹⁵ Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 20.07.2017 № 327 "Об утверждении Основ государственной политики Российской Федерации в области военно-морской деятельности на период до 2030 года" <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201707200015?index=0&rangeSize=1>

by providing live combat training for its military. More to the point, Moscow's activities demonstrate consistent commitment to deter the West and project influence across the Mediterranean. Russia's long-term military presence in Syria puts it in a good position to collect intelligence on the U.S. coalition, Israel, and the rest of the region. Appetite comes with eating, and the Syria intervention created additional opportunities Moscow likely had not planned for from the beginning. Syria and Moscow's overall position created a springboard to project power into the rest of the region.

INROADS BEYOND SYRIA

Putin has developed pragmatic ties with every government and major opposition movement in the region—an approach that has proven more successful than the Soviet Union's ideological blinkering.¹⁶ Moreover, Putin offers a clear narrative that finds much resonance in the region dominated by rulers who tend to eschew democratic values.

The region's leaders feel comfortable dealing with Putin, who appeals to their self-interest. They covet Russian weaponry and hedge their bets in the uncertainty of U.S. policy. Moscow doesn't ask Middle East leaders to improve the human rights situation in their countries. And Middle East officials do not worry about a Russian equivalent of a Foreign Corrupt Practices Act or Leahy vetting on training and military purchases when dealing with Moscow.

American allies in the region, from Egypt, Turkey, Israel, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Morocco, to one degree or another, have come to see Putin as a necessary reality and a more reliable partner than the United States—a mediator who can talk to all sides. Many in the region have come to respect Putin, even if some did so begrudgingly. Key areas of cooperation are political, diplomatic, and soft power-focused. Other key areas are military, energy, and economic cooperation.

Not only has the Kremlin courted every major government and opposition movement in the region, but increasingly, they conversely court the Kremlin. Senior regional leaders routinely pay their respects to Putin in Moscow. To give a few examples, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made more trips to Moscow than to Washington during both Obama's and Trump's presidencies. Israel has broadened its outreach to Russia, even as the Jewish state retains the United States as its number one ally. Israel has come to accept Russia on its doorstep as a necessary reality it can do little about. Netanyahu hoped that through engagement with Putin, Russia would ensure Israel's freedom of action, even as Russia held control of Syrian airspace. And indeed, Israel has been able to continue with airstrikes in Syria after Moscow entered the Syrian theater. Iran presents an existential threat to Israel, and many Israelis hope that through developing good relations with Putin, Moscow would curb Iranian ambitions.

Saudi Arabian King Salman made a historic visit to Moscow in October 2017, which demonstrates Moscow's accepted prominence in the region. Riyadh too hopes that through engagement and investments in Russia it can distance Moscow from Iran. Overall, the region perceives Moscow as critical when it comes to a peace settlement in Syria.

Turkey has long since come around to Putin's position on Assad, partly because of Erdogan's anti-Western sentiment but also out of fear of Kurdish nationalism. This latter concern, of course, is ironic given Moscow's long-standing ties to the Kurds that predate the Soviet Union but is illustrative of how many regional states

¹⁶ Mark Katz, "Moscow and the Middle East: Repeat Performance?" *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 7, 2012, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Moscow-and-the-Middle-East-Repeat-Performance-15690>

O. Freedman, Robert. (2018). From Khrushchev and Brezhnev to Putin: Has Moscow's Policy in the Middle East Come Full Circle? *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*. 5. 234779891876219. 10.1177/2347798918762197.

give Russia a free pass on past Russian actions.

In 2016, Morocco's King Mohammed VI came to Moscow for the first time since 2002. Rabat's policy may have been motivated by Moroccan frustration perceived sympathy from both the Obama and Trump administrations toward the Polisario Front's position with regard to both the human rights monitoring component of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) as well as a lack of enthusiasm for Morocco's position on the Western Sahara. Ultimately, the Polisario Front's role as a Soviet Cold War proxy is an ironic twist but has not been an insurmountable obstacle in Moscow's outreach to Rabat.

Arms and nuclear deals play an important role in Egypt's increasingly closer ties to Russia. Putin has managed to pull Cairo closer to its orbit through arms, nuclear energy, and economic deals. In September 2016, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu described Egypt as Russia's most important partner in North Africa.¹⁷

Moscow is also building Turkey's nuclear power plant. Erdogan's ongoing discussion about the purchase of S-400's from Moscow would have been unthinkable even a decade ago but increasingly appears to reflect reality rather than mere posturing. Should this sale go through, it would have major implications for U.S.-Turkey relations and Turkey's relationship with NATO.

Morocco has grown closer to Russia in terms of Moscow's support for Morocco's nuclear energy.¹⁸ In Iraq, Putin has made relatively few inroads since Nouri al-Maliki's premiership, but has had more success with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) through Rosneft's Spring 2018 agreement to construct a gas pipeline to Turkey. In general, the perception of Russia as a more reliable ally than the United States permeates the thinking of many in Kurdistan. Moscow has also been solidifying its role in OPEC.

Economic outreach and soft power also play an important element in Moscow's regional activities. Russian tourists make a highly significant contribution to the Egyptian economy and the two countries now have signed an industrial free trade zone. Though its primary purpose is likely political, the economic dimension is worth mentioning. Erdogan also understands Putin's leverage in this regard: Russia can always turn the flow of Russian tourists on and off, which would be critical to Turkey's economy. Indeed, Turkey is falling deeper into Putin's sphere of influence, and the ongoing S-400 discussion is only part of the story, albeit an important one. The Gulf is increasing its investments in Russia, and more broadly, the financial aspect is a critical aspect of Moscow's approach to the Gulf.¹⁹

Moscow's large Sunni majority is also possibly related to Riyadh's outreach to Moscow, whose own Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov has been a useful tool in courting the region and presenting Russia as a country that understands Muslims and Islam better than the United States.²⁰ His messaging appears to have resonance

¹⁷ "Defense Ministers of Russia and Egypt held the III session of the joint Russian-Egyptian military cooperation commission," September 5, 2016, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12094751@egNews

¹⁸ "Russia and Morocco sign agreements to inaugurate military and security cooperation," Middle East Monitor, October 12, 2017 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171012-russia-and-morocco-sign-agreements-to-inaugurate-military-and-security-cooperation/>

"Morocco and Russia to Sign Nuclear Deal," The North Africa Post, October 5, 2018. <http://northafricapost.com/25700-morocco-russia-to-sign-nuclear-deal.html>

¹⁹ Theodore Karasik, "Russia's Financial Tactics in the Middle East," Jamestown, December 20, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-financial-tactics-middle-east/>

²⁰ Anna Borshchevskaya, "While Mo Salah Sleeps in Grozny," The Moscow Times, June 12, 2018 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/06/12/while-mo-salah-sleeps-in-grozny-op-ed-a61765>

despite Russia's continued mistreatment of its Muslim minority. Russians sometimes point out that their country's officials, unlike American ones, make the Hajj.

Lastly, Russian propaganda outlets in Arabic, mainly RT and Sputnik, play an important and often unnoticed role in the region as part of Russia's broader soft power efforts. RT and Sputnik also increasingly partner with local media outlets to enhance their legitimacy.²¹ Moscow's efforts mainly target social media and the region's large youth bulge—and these efforts seem to be paying off. A most recent Arab Youth Survey found that 64 percent of young Arabs see Russia as an ally, while only 41 say the same about the U.S. Moreover, the perception of the U.S. as the enemy has nearly doubled since 2016.²²

Many point to Russia's declining economy. Yet this decline can stumble on for years and will not prevent Russia from pursuing its objectives because the Kremlin is conscious of the dangers of overextending. Moreover, Russian weakness can necessitate Putin to pursue further aggression. The Russian military meanwhile has reformed since 2008; its improvements are real and significant. Nor have sanctions alone compelled Putin to change behavior.

Moscow cannot replace the United States, but it is not seeking that role. It has no resources to that end, nor a desire to take on the responsibility. Russia does not need to replace the United States to do serious damage to U.S. interests; it is often enough to be present when the United States is absent or ambivalent. Putin's plans may not always pan themselves out, but until this situation changes, Moscow will continue to wield influence in the region to the detriment of its peace and stability, which can only undermine U.S. interests.

CHINA

China's involvement in the Middle East has been primarily economic so far, with a military and political component. China imports approximately half of its oil from the region, which is also major destination for Chinese investments. China's demand for the region's energy will only grow. Beijing has established a military base in Djibouti, is participating in Arabian Sea anti-piracy efforts, and by some account is interested in leveraging political and security advantages out of the major infrastructure projects it funds across the region as part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Indeed, last year, China promised the region \$23 billion in a package of loans, aid, and development funding. China funded the Duqm port in Oman and invested in facilities that could provide Beijing with leverage. For instance, the Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG), whose majority stake owner is the Chinese government, is set to construct and manage the civilian port in Haifa, Israel. Other Chinese companies have signed memorandums of understanding with Iran on railway construction and modernization.

Moscow and Beijing are increasingly working together. These authoritarian regimes share a perceived threat to themselves from the U.S.-led global order and, in this context, call for a multipolar world. Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping have developed a close personal relationship. As early as October 2015, days after Moscow's Syria intervention, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Our cooperation and coordination [with

²¹ H. Akin Unver, "Russia Has Won the Information War in Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/21/russia-has-won-the-information-war-in-turkey-rt-sputnik-putin-erdogan-disinformation/>
"Sputnik, UAE Official News Agency Wam Sign a Memorandum of Understanding," *Sputnik*, March 21, 2019 https://sputniknews.com/agency_news/201903211073424082-sputnik-uae-news-agency-memorandum/
Anna Borshchetskaya and Catherine Cleveland, "Russia's Arabic Propaganda: What It Is, Why It Matters," *Policy Note*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2018 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-arabic-propaganda-what-it-is-why-it-matters>

²² ASDA'A, Arab Youth Survey, *A Call for Reform*, The 11th Annual ASDA'A Youth Survey 2019, pp. 31 and 33. <https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/pdf/downloadwhitepaper/download-whitepaper.pdf>

China] in the international arena are one of the most important stabilizing factors in the world system. We regularly coordinate our approaches to various conflicts, whether it is in the Middle East, North Africa, or the Korean peninsula.”²³ Three years later, Putin described the relationship as a “privileged strategic partnership.”²⁴

In the Middle East, China has sided with Russia politically on Syria and other issues, and also has appeared comfortable with Moscow taking the overall lead in this region. Beijing’s economic sway holds major strategic implications for the Middle East, though China has yet to express a desire to be a powerbroker or a security provider there—aspects that in the Middle East, as Steven Cook observed, matter more than economic strength alone when it comes to great power status.²⁵

Beyond the Middle East, the Russia-China dynamic is more complex. Beijing appears less interested in Moscow’s outright direct hostility to the United States. Despite the shared disdain for its global primacy, perhaps China benefits more than Russia from this situation. In addition, Moscow often has to adjust to China but not the other way around. And by some accounts, Russia is turning into a raw materials supplier to China and a ‘junior partner’²⁶—a long-held Russian fear. It is difficult to image Moscow happy in a junior partner role to anyone, yet it is also hard to imagine Putin, who prioritizes anti-Americanism, to move closer to the West to challenge China.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As Washington increasingly realigns towards great power competition, it should embrace a strategy that includes the following:

- **Compete for the Middle East.** The current and previous U.S. administrations, unlike the Kremlin, have yet to engage in competition in the Middle East and North Africa. However, this region is strategically vital. It straddles Europe, Asia, and Africa. What happens in the Middle East rarely stays in the Middle East. This region will continue to matter due to issues such as refugee flows and terrorism. Some may view engagement as a distraction from the broader great power competition, but allowing Russia to gain a deeper foothold in the Middle East will only hurt U.S. interests in this regard. Moscow’s ambition may outweigh its resources, but Western resources diminish in importance when the West has little interest in utilizing them. The United States must demonstrate a credible and consistent commitment to the region, to both our allies and adversaries.
- **Don’t substitute sanctions for strategy.** The U.S. National Security Council clearly names Russia (along with China) as top adversaries, but we have yet to craft a comprehensive strategy to counter Russia. Sanctions have caused pain but fundamentally have not compelled Putin to change his behavior in a way that is more aligned with U.S. interests. Sanctions are an important tool we should continue

²³ Embassy of the Russian Federation to the Republic of India, “Press release on Sergey Lavrov’s press conference following Russia’s Presidency of the UN Security Council,” October 5, 2015 <http://rusembindia.com/home/foreign-policy-news/138-foreign-policy-news/7540-press-release-on-sergey-lavrov-s-press-conference-following-russia-s-presidency-of-the-un-security-council>

²⁴ “Путин: Связи России и Китая развиваются впечатляющими темпами,” Regnum, November 15, 2018 <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2519794.html>

²⁵ Steven A. Cook, “The Middle East Doesn’t Take China Seriously,” Foreign Policy, September 13, 2018 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/13/the-middle-east-doesnt-take-china-seriously/>

²⁶ Georgy Kunadze, “Россия – Китай: горизонты сотрудничества,” Echo Moskvy, April 30, 2019. https://echo.msk.ru/blog/kunadze/2417225-echo/?fbclid=IwAR1lkUQE36hRzsBt_FvRD2-P2V4-BWgtFPbPARJm3iN8ZAmCbLhNuCkxhI

utilizing but primarily as part of a broader strategic vision, where sanctions are one of multiple tools. It is ironic that while we often cast Putin as a mere short-term opportunist, we have yet to craft our own strategy to counter his malign activities and are instead only reactive.

- **Craft a clear narrative to counter the Kremlin.** Moscow has much appeal in the region on multiple fronts. One reason for this is because it offers a clear, simple narrative that resonates in the region, and one that runs counter to democratic values. The United States has yet to counter it effectively, especially in the context of our own internal polarization and self-doubt. Indeed, the growing prominence of RT and Sputnik in the region highlights our own broader narrative problem. We should invest greater resources in countering the Kremlin narrative more effectively.
- **Recognize there is no easy fix and settle in for the long haul.** Putin has been committed from the beginning to undermine the United States overall and return Russia to the Middle East. He is playing the long game. He has been in power for nineteen years now and does not have to constrain himself to timelines of democratic leaders. Putin's Achilles heel is exposed when U.S. policymakers reclaim leadership with strategic and moral clarity.