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Russia:

Janus-Faced Middle East Policy

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Since the end of the Cold War, Russia's influence in the Middle East has been greatly undermined and its policy has changed in emphasis and intensity. While during the clash between the two superpowers – the US and the Soviet Union – the Middle East was part of its ideological battlefield, Russia nowadays often merely reacts to US policy in the region, after shrinking from a superpower to a middle power.

The post-Soviet era was marked by a struggle between the Russian Atlanticists and Eurasians. The former were in favour of a closer partnership with the West, in order to accelerate Russia's democratic transformation. But the latter considered China, India and the Middle East as the country's natural allies and rejected a more pro-Western policy, as it is the case up to the present.

After the September 11th, 2001 atrocities in the US, most Western countries offered their support and embraced a policy of counter-terrorism in the Middle East. Russia on the contrary, despite its rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the attacks and its problems with Chechnya, has been an obstacle rather than an asset in the fight against global Islamic extremism.

Russia's policy in the Middle East is inconsistent and ambivalent. Firstly, Russia's goal is to oppose, sabotage and boycott US foreign policy in the region, in order to counter American hegemony. This is mostly achieved through diplomatic channels, as for instance by vetoing US resolutions in the UN Security Council, or through arms trades with rogue states, as in case of Iran and Iraq.

Secondly, Russia's Middle East policy is strongly shaped by strategic calculations, especially in respect to Chechnya. Arguably, no other security concern influences Moscow's terrorism and Middle East policy more than the situation on the northern Caucasus. Against this background, Russia sought membership in the Organisation of Islamic Conference and was successfully granted observer status. The idea behind it was to gain de facto immunity from

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criticism of Russian policy in Chechnya.

Thirdly, Russia is determined to profit from economic partnerships in the Middle East. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country no longer self-restrained itself in its arms sales to the region as long as financial arrangements were beneficial for the Russian defence industry.

Although Russia and the United States arguably have a common enemy in radical Islamism, the former nevertheless deliberately undermines the strategy of the latter. Further, although Putin deploys a zero-tolerance policy against Islamic extremism at home, he maintains close relationships, mostly because of political and economic considerations, with countries in the Middle East, which represent similar ideologies.

Russia's Decline in the Middle East

From the mid-1950s onwards to its dissolution in 1991, the Soviet Union played an essential part in providing the weaponry of many Arab states. Almost 90 per cent of military equipment in Syria and Libya was coming from the Soviet market. For the country, this was one way of protecting its influence in opposition to its rival, the US, and to help shaping Middle East policy in its own national, strategic interests.

But even during the Cold War, especially towards the end, the Soviet Union was not in a position to compete with the military and financial aid offered by the US. Many of the Arab states became increasingly aware of its domestic economic problems, and sided with the Americans, as for instance Egypt, which cut all ties with the Soviet Union in 1972, and instead turned on the US to enhance its military capabilities.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s was a fatal blow. The country's influence in the region significantly suffered and the newly emerging Russia found itself in a disastrous position. Now incapable of proving the Arab states with large-scale arms sales, it lost almost all of its allies, except of Iran and Iraq, which were boycotted by the US and most Western countries for political reasons. But even these two countries escaped Russian influence more and more, as they were aware of Moscow's desperate dependence on strategic and economic partnerships in the region and used it for their own advantages.

As a result, Russia's policy in the Middle East changed from an offensive to a defensive one. Moscow is now primarily concerned with countering US hegemony, containing Islamic

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extremism on the northern Caucasus and enhancing the country's influence through economic channels.

The Russian- Iranian Relationship

After the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the hostage crisis, the US cut all ties with the Islamic Republic, which has become the leading anti-American force in the region. Up to the present day, the US has not opened an embassy on Iranian soil again.

Russia, on the other hand, has been a long and traditional partner for the Iranians. Since 1995, Russia has also been Iran's sole partner in the nuclear field and Iran is the third largest importer of Russian weapons, after India and China. Russia signed a deal with the Islamic Republic, worth \$800 million, over the construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant, for which they sold reactors and turbines.

After it was revealed in 2002 that Iran runs a secret nuclear programme, the country has come under more and more scrutiny from the international community, in particular the US and its Western allies, as many question that Iran plans to use it for peaceful means only. This concern is fuelled by Ahmadinejad's repeated threats against Israel and some of Iran's Arab neighbours.

Several UNSCRs have already been issued against the Islamic Republic. UNSCR 1737 was passed in December 2006 and prohibited financial and technical assistance for "Iran's enrichment, reprocessing, heavy water and ballistic missile programmes". Four years later, the country was still in breach of previous resolutions and failed to cooperate with the IAEA inspectors. The Security Council imposed further sanctions on the regime and again called on Teheran to completely suspend its enrichment activities.

Despite supporting some of the diplomatic manoeuvres against Iran, Russia has not significantly altered or downgraded its relationship with Teheran and is arguably in breach of the international community's sanctions against the Islamic Republic. For instance, Putin finally agreed in 2005 to provide the Bushehr plant with Russian nuclear fuel.

The reason for Russia to maintain close ties with Iran at such a high price are threefold . Firstly, Russia and Iran perceive US hegemony and Western influences as a common threat. Both were particularly concerned by the Bush administration's attempt to expand NATO's sphere of influence on the Balkans and the Caucasus, areas of strategic importance for both

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Moscow and Teheran

Secondly, Russia is struggling to contain Islamic extremism at its backdoor, especially in Chechnya, which is why Moscow needs allies in the Islamic world. In return for supporting Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Islamic Republic has, at least officially, refrained from actively supporting the Chechen rebel, as any Middle Eastern government which seeks Moscow's support must either side with their struggle against Chechen separatists or, at a minimum, not protest.

Thirdly, Russia's alliance with Iran has been highly beneficial and proves that Moscow is prepared to risk its relationship with the West, in particular the US, for economic reasons.

The Russian- Iraq Relationship

As with Iran, economic considerations and political opposition to the US guided Russian policy toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq. This became strongly apparent in the run up to the 2003 Iraq invasion. At the time, sanctions were crumbling and the no-fly zone over the northern and southern part of Iraq was no longer working. Furthermore, Saddam's regime was able to smuggle prohibited items in and out of the country through its neighbouring borders.

Consequently, the US and its allies pushed for new and stronger sanctions in the UN Security Council, aimed at restoring the no fly zone over the Kurdish region and to seal off the borders to stop illegal trade. This however was strongly opposed by Russia. Moscow was the leading force in trying get sanctions lifted and Putin's government threatened to veto any UNSCR of that kind.

As the UK's former ambassador to the UN, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, recalled "Russia had its own direct relationship with Iraq and was talking with Iraq probably more than any other country". He also stated that Iraq's debt to Russia "was in many billions of dollars resulting from the Iran/Iraq war purchases" and the country "wanted sanctions to be lifted so they could get some of their money back". At some point, the US and UK even discussed to pay parts of the \$8 billion owed to Moscow to gain the country's support.

Other economic reasons for Russia to oppose a stronger sanction regime and the invasion of Iraq was that Saddam offered them lucrative contracts in return and Moscow wanted to preserve the cashing-in from the UN's oil-for-food-programme.

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But the country also opposed the US-led policy towards Iraq for political considerations. The reasons given by Moscow were highly dubious. While on the one hand, Putin stated that he opposed the war in Iraq because of the strong opposition of Russia's Muslim, he never displayed much concern about their opinion on Russian policy toward Chechnya.

Another piece of evidence which suggests that the Putin administration actively tried to wage public opinion against the US is that many of the 20,000 protesters, who went on the streets against the war, were given favours in return.

Russia's relationship with Iraq is a further example of the country's troubled Middle East policy and unlike in case of Iran, Moscow has not gained a lot from boycotting the toppling of the Baathist regime. In fact, it can be argued that Saddam, by offering Russia lucrative contracts in return to opposition to the US, influenced Russian policy as much as vice versa, which again is an indicator that Moscow's Middle East policy is defensive rather than offensive.

Further, with Saddam gone, Russia has lost yet another ally in the region and Putin's decision not to support the removal of Iran's arch-enemy, also put Russia's relationship with Teheran under strain.

Russia's Janus-faced Middle East Policy

Especially on the issue of Islamic extremism, Moscow's approach has been Janus-faced. While determined to brutally crushing down those movements at home and on the northern Caucasus, Putin's administration at the same time maintains close ties with regimes, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, which represents a similar ideology.

Although Teheran has officially refrained from condemning Russia's policy in Chechnya, Putin is playing with the devil and Iran continues support for organisations like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza. It proves where Iran's solidarity ultimately lies. Also, despite having been granted observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Conference, many Arab states are still publicly condemning Russia's approach to Chechnya. Thus, in the short-term, Moscow maybe succeeds in containing the situation on the northern Caucasus with its purpose alliances in the Middle East, but in the long-term it will hardly solves the problem.

Moreover, even though Russia experienced a limited surge of influence when the US and allies were under severe pressure in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia failed to sustainably

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increase its influence in the region, and consequently Moscow's Middle East policy remains defensive rather than offensive. Additionally, Russia did not effectively boycott and sabotage decisive policy decisions of the US and its Western allies, as for instance in case of Iraq. Also, with Saddam's regime gone, Iran under tremendous pressure from the international community and Assad, another ally of Russia, on the brink in Syria, the country has to expect further backlashes.

The only of the three objectives Russia fulfilled was to enhance its economic partnerships in the region. Especially its support for Iran's nuclear programme has brought in a lot of money for Moscow. In recent years, in particular under Putin's leadership, Russia has also successfully intensified economic relationships with Israel and other Arab countries, which were not traditional trading partners of Russia.

In sum, Russia has failed to make priorities in the Middle East and got caught up in many conflicts of interest and policy dilemmas. Instead of focusing on specific goals, Moscow has often pursued opportunistic ends, resulting in inconsistent and ambivalent decision-making processes.

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