

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN LIGHT OF CHANGING BALANCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

If Turkey is able to regain the influence she once enjoyed during the period of the Ottoman Empire, this would have negative consequences for Moscow and Tehran in the Middle East. Russia pursues a policy of balancing in the Middle East. In the course of the 2000s, Russia has been trying to weaken ties between Turkey and NATO, as well as Turkish-American cooperation. The revolutionary events in Syria since March 2011 have recently brought about divergence between Moscow and Ankara – however, the divergence may very well remain contained.

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Twenty years have passed since the end of the Cold War and the world powers of the modern post-bipolar reality are once again in competition for hegemony and to gain allies in the Middle East. The reason behind this is the ongoing “Arab Spring” which changed the balance of influence in the region among the global powers. New rules and new players have come about. Russia is rethinking its alliances which were a legacy of the Soviet Union and considering new relations which it was not able to maintain previously.

Russia’s primary interest is to protect those ties which remain as a legacy of the Soviet years and to find new partners. Russia looks to take part in Middle Eastern political processes as a global power with a leverage to influence events. With its pragmatic, multiple-vector foreign policy, Moscow supports its allies in various international organizations with the goal of making its foreign policy more effective.

Russian Foreign Policy and the New Reality in the Middle East

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 20th century, Russia, having inherited the USSR’s relations with the Middle East, began to strengthen and take them to a new level. Reviving the global power previously exercised by the Soviet Union became the Kremlin’s first priority. Analysts have interpreted this issue in differing ways: the majority believe that the new Russian regime looks to restore the influence once held in Tsarist and Soviet times. A statement made by one of the Kremlin’s political advisors Gleb Pavlovsky, reflects this approach clearly: “we want to construct a state with an imperial culture, imperial power and imperial methods.”¹

In order to achieve such an end and regain her imperial ambitions, Russia needed to build a multiple-vector foreign policy in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. These regions constituted Russia’s key foreign policy priorities. In this context, after the year 2000, Russia began to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy in the energy security realm and to pay special attention to military and political cooperation with allies in these regions.

After Vladimir Putin came to power, Russia’s foreign policy has developed in two major directions. One is the advancing of Russia’s international relations as they were inherited from the Soviet period. These relations can be divided into two categories: 1) relations with Iraq (until Saddam was overthrown in 2003), Iran, Syria, and Palestine; and 2) relations with Libya (until the Arab Spring), Algeria, Yemen, Tunisia (until the Arab Spring), and Mauritania. The second involves

¹ “Kremlin Political Consultant Sees Medvedev as Best Choice for 2012,” *RFE/RL*, 21 January 2010, http://www.rferl.org/content/Interview_Kremlin_Political_Consultant_Sees_Medvedev/1936080.html.

rebuilding relations with states with whom there were differences of stances during the Cold War period.

Among what Russia inherited from the USSR were relations with Iran, Syria, and Palestine in the Middle East. Russia supported the theory of Alexander Dugin² when aiming to achieve a more positive foreign policy in this region. In the center of this theory, which refers to the 'Eurasian Triangle', the most important point is the relations between Moscow and Tehran. Moscow has traditionally supported the Shiite geopolitics in the Middle East. And by doing so, Russia simultaneously strengthens its own role in solving the problems in this region.

Relations with Iran

In the mid 1990s, the strengthening of Russian-Iranian relations were primarily a result of the policies of Yevgeni Primakov, who was Foreign Minister after the relatively pro-Western Andrei Kozirev. When Primakov rose to the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 1996, it was expected that he would pursue a more active foreign policy than his predecessor.

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In his book *Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership?*, Galia Golan noted that Primakov's move from the Foreign Intelligence Service to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had an impact on Russian attitudes towards the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.³ This was observable in Primakov's sympathetic stance towards Iran and other countries in the region. Moscow's close ties with Tehran had an equally positive impact on its policies in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The case with Armenia is a good example of the positive results of Russia's policy in the South Caucasus: Armenia is a key partner for Russia and enjoys good economic relations with Iran. It is precisely these economic links between Armenia and Iran which enable the Russian foreign policy concept of a 'Southern Garden.'⁴ Without such strong relations with Iran, Armenia would not be able to fulfill such a role for Russia in the region.

The official visit of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami to Moscow in March

² Alexander Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics: Geopolitical Future of Russia*, (Moscow: Arktogeya, 2000), Part 4, <http://arctogaia.com/public/osnovygeo/geop4-7.htm>.

³ Galia Golan, *Russia and Iran: Strategic Partnership?*, (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998), p.4

⁴ The 'Southern Garden' was the political term attributed to the Caucasus during the Tsarist period.

2001 can be considered as a turning point in terms of the revival of Russian-Iranian relations. The agreement to actualize this important visit had been reached in September 2000 during a meeting between the Russian and Iranian presidents, who met at the 'Millennium Summit' in New York. Khatami's visit to Moscow took place the following year, between 12-15 March 2001. During this meeting of the two presidents, it was asserted that mutual cooperation in economy, politics, trade, culture, and others were in the national interests of both sides and would also help to restore peace and security in the region. Iran and Russia discussed the future of bilateral cooperation, above all, in the fields of air transportation, energy and the oil and gas sector. There is a strand of claims that at the time of Khatami's visits to Moscow that even deals worth around seven million dollars were made for the delivery of modern Russian weaponry to Iran.⁵

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Khatami's visit to Moscow was so successful that Primakov called it "the most significant event in the history of relations between Moscow and Tehran."⁶ Today, Russian-Iranian relations are developing along a similar line, a line laid down by the Iranian president's visit to Moscow in 2001.⁷

From the year 2000 onwards, Iran's nuclear development began to play a central role in Russia-Iran bilateral relations. It was during this period that Russia unilaterally pulled out of

the secret Russian-American Protocol on Iran signed in 1995 (better known as the Gore-Chernomyrdin Agreement), under which Russia had initially committed to reduce, considerably, its cooperation with Iran and assistance in its nuclear programs. Russia took a series of practical steps to complete the construction of a nuclear reactor in Bushehr, Iran; a project which had been frozen under Yeltsin. This initiated the revival of military-technological cooperation of Russia with Iran and offered political support to the Iranian position on their nuclear program. Meanwhile, Russia intends to continue cooperation with Iran on Iran's peaceful, civilian nuclear program. It should be noted that in August 2002, with the agreement on launching a "long-term program for the development of trade, economic, industrial, and scientific-technological cooperation between Iran and Russia up until 2012," Russia's intention to assist Iran in building of six nuclear reactors in Iranian territory had already been discussed.

⁵ Michael Rubin. "What are Iran's Domestic Priorities?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.6, No. 2, p.28.

⁶ Robert Freedman, "Putin and the Middle East," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.6, No.2, p.3.

⁷ Sevak Sarukhanyan, "Russia and Iran: ten years of nuclear cooperation"(Noravank Foundation: Yerevan, 2006), p.87.

After Ahmedinejad's rise to power in Iran, relations between the two countries became far less warm. It was clear that Russia feared that the conservatives that came to power in Iran would pursue a more radical policy on religious issues - as had been the case between 1981-1989. Such changes would not be convenient for Russia's own plans.

At the 2006 annual meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a meeting between Putin and Ahmedinejad led them to come to an agreement and make progress on their discussions. The relations between the two countries developed in a dynamic way in the aftermath of that meeting. The prevailing policy of Russia and the U.S., otherwise known as the 'reset policy', put Tehran and Moscow in a difficult position. In 2010, Russia's delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran was cancelled. However, short-lived difficulties could not spoil these relations. The Director of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation of Russia, Mikhail Dimitriev, announced to journalists in a press briefing on 25 October 2011 that "what is permitted is permitted, and what is prohibited is prohibited. It is more than likely that on those questions which are prohibited, not covered by the revolution, some cooperation will continue."⁸

It is interesting that cancellation of the S-300 deal took place while the U.S. military exports to its major regional ally – Saudi Arabia, in the background – continued. The total worth of the cooperation reached 60 billion dollars with the complete deal on U.S. F-15 fighters' exports to KSA (the deal's amount was 30 billion dollars) being just a part of the whole picture. A U.S. military export to the Saudis in this framework also includes helicopters, missiles, bombs, and night vision and radar systems. For this reason, chances are high that Russians will restore their deal on S-300 exports to Iran, taking into account that Iran is the major rival for the Saudis in the region.

Relations with Syria

Russia's relations with Syria are so closely linked to its relations with Iran: it is clear that for Moscow, Damascus also plays a key role. From Moscow's point of view, Syria is the second priority in the Middle East after Iran. Syria is the seventh largest importer of Russian weaponry, with trade volume reaching 1.32 billion dollars, overshadowed only by Iran (in 5th place with 2.058 billion dollars). The sum of Russian military imports to Iran and Syria between 2002-2009 was around ten percent of all of Russia's military exports over that period. After losing out on trade opportunities in the Iranian market, Russia can not withdraw from the Syrian

⁸ "Iran-Russia military cooperation not halted," Trend Information Agency, 2 November 2011, <http://www.trend.az/regions/world/russia/1952785.html>.

market at the bequest of Israel and the U.S. This would constitute a dramatic loss not only in the Middle East region, but of volumes of Russian military exports as a whole.

Contracts already signed for military supplies to Syria for four years, between 2010 and 2013, are valued at 600 million dollars. Negotiations are ongoing with Syria on a series of projects, such as the construction and export of two diesel-electric submarines, the modernization of the S-125 Neva anti-aircraft systems, the supply of fifty MIG-29 fighters and seventy-five IAK-30 training airplanes. This is on top of the supply of long-distance anti-aircraft systems, 9K720 Iskanders (referred to as SS-26 Stone according to NATO's reporting), T-90 tanks and various types of surface warships and a series of other weapons. When analyzing Russia's relations with Syria, the importance of the Mediterranean port of Tartus for Russia must be taken into account. Tartus is the only functioning naval base the Russian Navy can count on in the Mediterranean coast.

Relations with Turkey

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Another vector of Russian foreign policy is its relations with Turkey, one of the key players in the Middle East. When analyzing Russian-Turkish relations, one must bear in mind the Cold War period, when Turkey and Russia defended themselves against potential military attacks from each other. Only then, it is possible to understand the difficulties faced by these two countries when they were building bilateral relations.

In the post-Soviet period, it is interesting to note that we have witnessed positive neighborly relations between the two countries. Bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow over the past five to seven years have gone beyond economic cooperation and even included regional distribution of spheres of political influence. These changes took place as a result of the joint efforts by both countries. Such cooperation influences the current economic dynamics and stability in the Middle East region positively.

Post-Soviet relations between Russia and Turkey can generally be divided into four periods: 1) 1991-2001: 'cool' period; 2) 2001-2008: beginning of a period of economic cooperation; 3) 2008-2011: a period of political and regional cooperation; 4) 2011: a new period in relations, marked by the 90th anniversary of the 'Treaty of Moscow'.

The initial years of post-Soviet Russian-Turkish relations were cool. Even in 1999, during the visit of then Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit to Moscow, Russian President Boris Yeltsin refused to meet with him; a move that stood as a harbinger of serious problems in their bilateral relations in the following few years. Though Ankara took steps to normalize relations, there was no positive response from the Russian side. Many experts reasoned that the problems were rooted in the continuation of a Soviet outlook among Russian leaders foreign policy objectives. Post-Soviet research indicates that positive changes took place only after the arrival of a new generation of Russian leaders.

In 2000, when Putin came to power in the Kremlin, Russia's relations with Ankara began to change positively. After the Russian Federation entered the Putinist period, and when the AKP came in to power in 2002 in Turkey, economic relations between the two countries gained momentum and their relationship in general began to develop positively. Russia tried to weaken Turkey's relations with NATO and neutralize the growing power of Turkey on the Black Sea coast, in the Middle East, in Central Asia, the Balkans, and the South Caucasus.

Between 2008 and 2011, inter-governmental relations between Russia and Turkey was primarily focused on the following issues:

- The imposition of UN sanctions on Iran and the problem of nuclear proliferation;
- The Arab-Israeli peace process and mutual exchange of views;
- NATO, the U.S. and discussions on the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan;
- Events in Syria;
- Economic and energy security in the South Caucasus;
- The 'Nabucco' pipeline;
- The 'South Stream' project;
- The 'Blue Stream' project;
- The new 'Samsun-Ceyhan' (Trans-Anatolian) project;
- The construction of nuclear power stations;
- The introduction of a bilateral visa-free regime.

The visit of the Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to Moscow on 16 March 2011 strengthened mutual trust between the two countries. In part, a second round of talks began on the construction of nuclear power stations in Turkey by the Russian

state companies. Despite the tragic events in Japan, construction plans were not changed and the Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz stated that Turkey requested “that [their] Russian colleagues are cautious where security is concerned when building the stations.”⁹

Russian "Balance" Policy in the Middle East

Russia's policy towards Iran and Turkey today is similar to that pursued up until 2003 – that is a policy of balance between Iran and Iraq. The similarities in Russian foreign policy, between the past and today, are based on rational logic. It is precisely this sort of foreign policy that allows Russia to actively participate as a player in the region. In the Middle East, the relations between Moscow and Ankara play an important role for Russia, allowing Russia to maneuver within the region and helping to contain Iran.

It is possible to draw the subjective conclusion that after 2000, Russia's main foreign policy priorities were to strengthen cooperation with Iran and Turkey. Getting closer with Turkey, Russia attempted to neutralize Turkish-American cooperation in the region.

In the Middle East, Russia and Turkey have diverged with regard to Syria. Moscow has attempted to take a cautious approach to the revolutionary events which began in March 2011 in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov made the following comments: “We would like Bashar al-Assad to begin discussion with the opposition, as promised.”¹⁰ Russian President Dimitry Medvedev's comments on Euronews channel were also significant:

We do not want to see what happened in Libya repeated in Syria, and we are not pleased with what is going on. I have spoken with Bashar al-Assad several times about this issue and sent representatives to underline our position on the events in Syria. It is important to openly make these statements to all sides. Those people who shout anti-government slogans are not solely supporters of a refined European democracy. For example, some of them are fundamentalists and could even be called terrorists.¹¹

The events in Syria could impact Turkish-Russian relations in the region. Both the

⁹ Orhan Coşkun and Ayla Jean Yackley, “Preview: Turkey's PM goes to Russia with gas in mind,” *Reuters*, 14 March 2011, http://af.reuters.com/article/energyOilNews/idAFLDE72DORN20110314?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0&fb_source=message.

¹⁰ “Lavrov: Repetition of Libyan scenario in Syria can not be expected,” *Russian Union*, 20 September 2011, <http://er.ru/news/2011/9/20/lavrov-povtoreniya-livijiskogo-scenariya-v-sirii-zhdat-ne-stoit/>.

¹¹ “Medvedev: Russia may support different measures to Syria, but not one-sided condemnation authority,” *Partbilet*, 9 September 2011, http://www.partbilet.ru/publications/medvedev_rf_mojet_podderjat_raznyie_meryi_po_sirii_no_ne_odnostoronnee_osujdenie_vlasti_4154.html.

Russian and Turkish governments look to regain their imperial power and influence, therefore, on the Syrian question, Russia is tilted towards Iran, which may be able to curb Turkey's growing power. Syria and Turkey have stronger cultural and ethnic links than Iran and Russia. If Turkey is able to regain the influence she enjoyed during the period of the Ottoman Empire, this would have negative consequences for Moscow and Tehran in the Middle East.

One can make the prediction that once the Syrian question receives a resolution, Russian and Turkish relations will regain a positive dynamic. Russia, against all probability, will preserve relations with various groups from Syria with whom she enjoys close links. If there is a destabilization of the situation, Russia will look to contain her opposition and secure its naval fleet in Syrian waters. Iranian-Russian alignment on these questions will be a guarantee of the security of the Kremlin's interests in the Middle East.