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## #- Contemporary challenges in Russian foreign policy in Middle East WhatsApp Round Table

*In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and, in particular, in the mid-2010s as a result of and the various “Color Revolutions” experienced in the former Warsaw Pact countries and the 2010 Arab Spring, a renewed Russian interest in the Middle East emerged. A geoeconomic, geostrategic, and geopolitical interest, dedicated to the regaining of a historic point fixation identified in Russia as a great power in the international order. Indeed, the consolidation of a non-dynamic economic system coupled with the guarantee of national security from external threats turns out to be the primary objectives pursued by the Russian leader in the Middle Eastern quadrant. Yet, contemporary challenges - from the Covid-19 pandemic crisis to the ensuing economic and oil crisis, as well as the growing strength of regional and international players with a marked influence in the region - could prove detrimental in the middle and long-term.*

*The future of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. A talk with some experts in international politics.*

**V&GT:** How important is the Middle East for Moscow from a geostrategic point of view?

**V&GT:** To what extent has or will the pandemic crisis have a negative impact on Putin's geopolitical and geo-economic objectives in the Middle East?

**V&GT:** How is the Russian foreign agenda affected (if it will be affected) by the increasing Chinese presence in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf area?

**V&GT:** What about American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the recent dramatic developments? Despite the intention not to legalise the Taliban, indeed, Putin seems willing to conclude new agreements and accords with the newly born Islamic Emirate.

**V&GT:** Will there be changes in 2024 once Putin finishes his presidential term? If Putin decides not to run again, is there a possibility that he will follow the same path as the former Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, by ruling the country's Security Council, continuing to shape Russian foreign policy in the Middle East?

*Alexander Rahr – historian and political scientist*

The Middle East has always been a geostrategic target of Russia. After the demise of the Ottoman and British empires, Russia gained strategic influence in the Middle East. The USSR competed on par with the US over that region, which became globally even more attractive in the era of oil. After the demise of the USSR, Russia needed a quarter of a century to return as a key player to the Middle East. Russia is today's key ally of Iran and Syria, Moscow has informally joined OPEC as the world's leading energy power. The main challenge for Russia in the Middle East is not so much the cooperation with OPEC, but the containment of Islamic terrorism. The latter threatens the countries of Central Asia, which are allies of Moscow.

Russia carefully observes the dramatic changes in the Middle East after NATO's departure from Afghanistan. Russia understands that the West has completely lost out in the region. The US is no longer an active factor in the Middle East, and the EU lacks the means and political will to become an actor of its own in the region. Russia's global strategic interest has always laid in confronting NATO and US hegemony in the world. So, the losses of the West are celebrated in Moscow. On the other hand, Russia must be worried by China's growing dominance in the Middle East. Afghanistan is falling under Chinese control. China does not consult with Russia on its plans for the region. Russia is also not happy about the growing Islamism, the emergence of a new fundamentalist Islamic State structure in the region. Since the West left the Middle East, it is now up to Russia to build a multinational alliance for containment of terrorism and extremism from the region.

Now, let me take a look into the future as I did when publishing my book „2054. Putin decoded“. I could well imagine the manifestation of an anti-Western Pact between Russia, China and a future broad Islamic states' coalition. The Middle East is going to change faster than we can imagine, and surely not to the benefit of the West. The West has to hurry up in altering its relations with Russia. Instead of the present confrontation over Ukraine, the West has to approach Russia as a potential strategic partner in the growing North-South conflict. But unfortunately, the present liberal Western elites won't listen to this advice.

Putin has not yet decided whether he wants to run for presidency in 2024. The chances for him to continue ruling Russia in the second half of the 2020ies are 60:40. We will know about his decision not earlier than 2023. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu may be a suitable successor. He recently presented his plan of modernizing Siberia. That may be a signal to everyone that he is soon starting his presidential campaign. Another candidate for the top job is Mikhail Mishustin, who performs well as head of the government. But we should also observe some of the leading governors in Russia, many of them gain more and more experience and influence.

*Emanuel Pietrobon – Geopolitical Analyst*

The Middle East is to Asia what the Balkans are to Europe: a powder keg. No one has enough power to prevent this powder keg from exploding, but several actions can be carried out to mitigate the effects in case of detonation and to neutralize some explosive threats. Russia has historically entered the Middle East to counterbalance the Western presence – at first it was the British, then came the Americans –, it never had truly hegemonic ambitions over this region.

Perhaps, not even the US has ever had ambitions of complete hegemony in the Middle East, being more interested in exploiting the so-called Arc of Crisis than in solving the geopolitical problems deriving from the region's sectarian, ethnic and religious divisions.

The Middle East, indeed, cannot be controlled at all. In any case, it is more than important to build spheres of influences within this region in light of its geostrategic location: it is the heart of Brzezinski's Arc of Crisis. In more practical terms, everything that happens here affects the rest of the super-continent.

In the past, that is during the Cold War, the Soviets bet on Arab nationalism and the Palestinian liberation movement. They weren't driven by the utopian goal of turning the Middle East Communist. Their goal, much more realistic, was to counterbalance the strong influence of America's Twins (Iran & Saudi Arabia) by playing the “my enemy's enemy is my friend” card.

Today's Russia is driven by the same goal – disturbance, sabotage, and contrast –, with the big difference that the game is no longer played with the United States, but with a set of powerful and largely autonomous players, most notably Turkey, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China. Almost each of these players is tied to the US by a policy alternating cooperation and confrontation – Israel itself is more autonomous than commonly believed – and, accordingly, each one of them is seen by Russia in purely pragmatic terms: a means to an end. That's why Russia can work simultaneously with Israel and Iran, with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and so on.

Acting as a “good neighbour”, who only intervenes when strictly required – like in Syria – and who doesn't interfere in one's internal affairs, is also helping Russia achieve other relevant goals, like the oil market's control – the rising partnership with Saudi Arabia must be read into this context – and the incorporation of key nations into the Greater Eurasia project.

The pandemic hit the foreign agendas of every country; Russia is no exception. Russia is a vulnerable country from a geoeconomic viewpoint – and so it will be until it has a fully diversified economy – but it is a diplomatic superpower and a humanitarian great power.

Some projects experienced a slowdown – I'm thinking about the talks with Saudi Arabia – but, after all, humanitarian cooperation helped the Kremlin be active and present in several theatres, in

particular Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. And a separate chapter should be dedicated to the Sputnik V, which allowed Russia to recover the ground lost in the first phase of the pandemic.

We are going to see the true effects and impact of Russia's vaccine diplomacy in the next future, for the moment it is enough to remember that the Sputnik V has been approved for use and is being used in Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, and UAE. Sowing has been extensive; the harvest is likely to be of a similar size.

Russia and China, in this historical moment, are working together because they share the goal of accelerating the multipolar transition. It doesn't mean that they always work in concert, it means that the overall result of their actions, very often, is similar if not the same.

In the Middle East, for instance, they keep acting in a different way, using different means, but despite this their presence is contributing to the disintegration of the Western-designed regional geography of power.

Let's only think about Syria. Russia intervened militarily to save Bashar Assad from a highly likely fall, whereas China opted for a softer intervention focused on economy, investments, and reconstruction. And something similar is occurring in Turkey, where Russia is using the defence industry to court the country's élite – against the background of a divide et imperia policy extended from the South Caucasus to North Africa – and China is exploiting the country's endless hunger for money to put the New Silk Road forward. Different designs, different means, but similar if not the same result.

In conclusion, Russia can only benefit from a Chinese-shaped Middle East because its own historical goal in the region has been the contrast of the West. Not hegemony, but contrast: two very different things. And considering that China prefers quiet to storm – for investment reasons –, a Chinese-shaped order in the region could only be warmly welcomed by Russia, for which a quiet Middle East means a quiet South Caucasus and a quiet Central Asia.

Russia still remembers the Afghan trauma and is not going to fall into the Biden administration's trap. The United States hopes that the Graveyard of Empires curse may strike again, mortally wounding Russia, China, Iran, and all other regional powers interested in the multipolar transition – including Turkey, but there is no room for deepening this topic here.

Will it work? I don't know. No one knows. Afghanistan is still chaotic and the only winner, right now, is Pakistan. All the other powers are waiting, observing, and hoping that today's Taliban are not yesterdays, that one can discuss constructively with them and, above all, can do business.

Regarding Russia, the Afghan trauma is still fresh, sore. The élite does know that the USSR collapse was ultimately determined in this God-forgotten place, and, in my opinion, rash moves are unlikely. We should ask ourselves: is recognition a rash move? I think not. Frankly speaking, why shouldn't Russia recognize the new government? Whether we like it or not – and almost everyone doesn't like it – the Taliban represent today's Afghanistan and are the clear and definite winners of the twenty-year war.

Russia and the Taliban could work on several dossiers, starting from the pandemic – the former government expressed interest in the Sputnik V – and infrastructures – let's not forget that Afghanistan borders with the Eurasian Economic Union –, and together they could build a richer and safer nation.

Moreover, and this is not a small thing, let's not forget that Russia is not alone in this game. These are not the 80s, these are the 20s of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Russia is not the alone and surrounded Soviet

Union. Russia can count on the fundamental support and intermediation services of former rivals – China, Pakistan, and Iran – and new allies – such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Putin's era is coming to an end and that end is likely to be 2024. The current president is quickly exhausting his historical function – he took care of a new-born Russia, making it grow and accompanying it throughout its adolescence, the age of identity formation – and, after all, he did everything he was chosen for by the deep state: he saved Russia from an apocalyptically annihilating implosion, he gave the Russian a new-but-old identity with which to face the battles of the new century and he slowed down the Western agenda for the post-Soviet space.

He could not prevent the West from gaining new positions in Eastern Europe, nor he could do much in Ukraine, but he acted greatly in Central Asia – let's only think about the perfect timing of the Eurasian Economic Union – and deserves credit for the return to Africa, the Karabakh triumph – we defeated the West without lifting a finger – and many other events.

If he would ever decide not to run again – and this depends only on a single factor: the discovery of a valid, reliable, and far-sighted heir – a Nazarbayev scenario cannot be completely ruled out. Indeed, not running again would not mean retiring from the game but continuing to play from behind the scenes.

*Côme Carpentier de Gourdon - Convener of the Editorial Board of the WORLD AFFAIRS JOURNAL - Author*



The Middle and Near East are important for Russia from various perspectives: Culturally, as the cradle of Judain, Christianity and Islam, three officially recognised religions in the Russian Federation the region attracts since centuries pilgrims and travellers from the Russian lands and many settlers (particularly in Israel and Syria). Geographically the Middle East is located under the Caucasian and Caspian borderlands of Russia and has strong and ancient connections with the Central Asian and Caucasian Republics which were formerly within the Russian Empire, the USSR and are now members of or inked with

the EEU, the CSTO and the SCO that the RF belongs to. Strategically and culturally the situation in the Middle East can directly affect the inter-ethnic and inter-religious coexistence in several Muslim-majority republics of the RF and in the RF as a whole, while the influence of extremist violent organisations and inimical foreign powers can also be detrimental to Russia's internal stability. Finally, regarding economics, the energy production levels, and policies of oil and gas exporting Middle Eastern states have a decisive impact on oil and gas prices and thus bear direct consequences on Russia's economy.

It is difficult to quantify the impact of the COVID pandemic on Vladimir Putin's strategy and objectives as it seems to be affecting many countries across the world more or less equally. The



long-term impact is still to be assessed but, overall, the last two years have seen the rise of Russian influence globally (together with the expansion of Chinese power) and an accelerating decline of the great western powers, the US, and the EU.

So far there is a synergy between the PRC and the RF diplomatically, strategically, and economically as both have benefited from their bilateral cooperation. However China's rising profile in Central and West Asia can diminish Russia's influence in those regions and the opening of central/Middle Eastern corridors for trade and investment from the Far East to the West could result in a marginalisation of Russian territory in the Eurasian continent unless the two great powers are able to ensure a mutually advantageous 'job sharing; in keeping with their complementary strengths, on the one hand Russia's natural resources, advanced scientific expertise, military power and diplomatic experience and on the other China's huge commercial network, industrial productivity and financial muscle.

Afghanistan after the US departure is a critical piece on the Eurasian chessboard as it is both a source of unrest and militancy as well as a potential bridge between Central Asia, the Far East and the Gulf/Mediterranean region. It is important for Russia to try to keep Afghanistan as independent as possible from the radicalising control of the Pakistani religious/military deep state which retains expansionistic designs and hegemonic aims in South Asia and the Middle East, inherited from the claimed Mughal legacy.

Any statesman with a long-term vision wishes to retain some influence over his successors if only to make sure that his life work and achievements are not forgotten and cancelled out by his successors. In the very difficult and uncertain era we live in drastic reversals of policies are being witnessed when a change of regime or head of state occurs. It has been the case in the United States, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and in several smaller nations. Continuity and consistency are probably the key factors that President Putin and his collaborators are concerned about in Russian foreign and domestic policy. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, along with 'training' and promoting a capable successor the Russian President intends to remain in an advisory capacity with power over certain critical areas of decision-making. We all remember that certain choices made by then-President Medvedev regarding international affairs caused some dismay in the ruling circles of Russia and it would probably be a desire of Vladimir Putin to prevent untoward changes in certain fundamental aspects of Russia's global positioning and management of its diplomacy and defence preparedness.

*Ksenia Tabarinzeva-Romanova - Ural Federal University, Russia*

The Middle East, given its territorial proximity to Russian borders, has been an important area for Russian geopolitics over the past two hundred years. As we know, for the USSR, the countries of this region were the object of close attention. Today this region is a source and centre of international terrorism and drug trafficking, and it is vital for the Russian Federation to maintain influence in this region in order to ensure national security. This is evidenced by the military participation of Russia in Syria, participation in the defeat of ISIS. Meetings of the Russian Foreign Ministry with representatives of the Taliban in Afghanistan may also be related to this. Therefore, there is no doubt that the Middle East will remain in the orbit of geostrategic



The pandemic crisis has equally damaged the economies of almost every country in the world. The development and expansion of vaccines to foreign markets have become the object of political manipulation and disputes between leading countries and international organizations. For the rest, it cannot be said that the pandemic did not radically change the geopolitical and geo-economic objectives in the Middle East.

Between the leaders of China and Russia since the beginning of the XXI century, rather constructive bilateral relations are being built related to joint developments in the military-industrial complex, the oil and gas industry; there are also joint plans for the development of the northern sea route. Nevertheless, the expansion of China's economic expansion in the traditional zones of Russian presence raises certain concerns in the expert community. It is possible that the development of the Middle East will become the subject of discussion and future agreements between the countries. At the same time, one should hardly expect a "cold snap" in Russo-Chinese relations in the medium term.

With regard to the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, undoubtedly, this opens a new page in history for Afghanistan and for the countries that border on it. There is an extremely high likelihood of a sharp destabilization in the country associated with the coming to power of the Taliban, who are recognized as a terrorist organization in many countries of the world. Many experts tend to be sceptical about the assurances of the country's new leadership about civil liberties. Nevertheless, a series of meetings between Taliban representatives and Russian diplomats suggests that Moscow intends to build political relations with Afghanistan in order to reduce the risks of destabilization in Russia's underbelly. It cannot be ruled out that Moscow may want to use a unique chance and regain its positions in Afghanistan, which it lost in the late 1980s. last century.

Indeed, V. Putin's current presidential term expires in 2024, but the Russian leader has shown himself to be a master of unexpected and unpredictable political decisions. According to the new version of the Constitution, Putin has the opportunity to take part in the elections. Among other things, he can use the remaining time to prepare a successor. In recent years, experts have been trying to compile a rough list of possible candidates for the presidency. For all their differences, few doubts that their views on foreign policy will be radically different. Therefore, one should not expect dramatic changes in foreign policy after a legitimate change of president. Back in 2020, when the amendments to the Constitution were discussed, several experts voiced suggestions that Putin could head the State Council, whose powers were expanded.

*Maurizio Vezzosi - Freelance geopolitical Analyst*



It's crucial. Russian presence and influence are actually a key-factor for the security and stability of Mashrek, the Maghreb and, logically, for the connected areas (as Sahel). Considering the potential threats coming from the South, for Moscow the Caucasus is an indispensable security belt. Moscow has made every necessary effort to preserve – and increase – its presence in Syria: to have a solid presence in the M.E. gives Moscow access to the warm seas, such as the Mediterranean. European countries, especially the Southern ones, should fully consider Russia as a Mediterranean power.

In general, Russia's domestic economy suffered fewer pandemic consequences than the Western European countries. The Russian - state-led - pharmaceutical industry had powerful growth with the anti-Covid 19 research and production. After some months of uncertainty in 2020, the oil and gas price levels are actually positive for Moscow. One of the main markets for Russian exports in the M.E. is the defence one: this market is not expected to be impacted in a negative way by the pandemic crisis. In summary, Kremlin's geo-politics towards the M.E. appears solid enough to be not put in crisis by any potential new pandemic shocks.

It's not possible to exclude some contrasts in the Russian-Chinese relations, in the M.E. 's affairs as well. But at the same time, we should keep in mind that Moscow and Beijing are attached by a strategic connection. So, neither Russia nor China is going to put in crisis their strategic security by reacting to some occasional frictions between them. Afghanistan is a high-level potential threat for Moscow: for this reason, the Kremlin has to find its security guarantees, building agreements with the Taliban, and with Pakistan as well. The Taliban actually see Russia as an important interlocutor and also see China as one. Washington and London are clearly unhappy with that, and they would

like to change the Taliban's attitude: it's consequently very difficult to imagine a peaceful and stable scenario in Afghanistan within the short or medium-term.

Relevant social and political changes are already ongoing in the Russian Federation: millions of Russians are unsatisfied with their social conditions and their life's perspective, especially in some regions of the Federation: according to social research by the Levada Center the majority of Russians want a return to a state-led economy as well as an increase in public investment. The Duma's elections in September confirmed this social orientation: probably, this element is going to affect even the post-Putin transition and its developments. Likely, the Vladimir Vladimirovich era will not end in one act, but it will be a gradual process: a "Kazakh scenario" is among the possibilities for Moscow. The same is true for Minsk.



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