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United States–Russian Friction: Implications for the Middle East

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Tension between Russia and the United States has risen recently, following the cancellation of President Obama’s scheduled meeting with President Putin at the G20 summit in Russia in early September 2013. The immediate background to the tension is the Snowden affair: Russia, provoking the United States, decided to grant political asylum to Edward Snowden, who leaked information on the US National Security Agency’s surveillance programs. In fact, however, the two countries are challenging one another in a host of crisis situations on the bilateral, global, and regional levels. Overall relations between the two superpowers have grown colder, and if this tension is not resolved, it can be expected to have negative consequences for the international system as a whole, including the Middle East.

On the global level, which plays a major role on the superpowers' agenda, efforts at positive dialogue continued until recently, though hindered by an accumulation of crises. Russia has long felt pressure from NATO along its borders and in its areas of interest in the former Soviet Union, including NATO eastward expansion, which from Russia’s point of view amounts to existential harm. The dispute on future strategic arms control agreements remains unresolved, along with the American trend toward deployment of a ballistic missile defense system (BMD) despite vigorous objections from Russia, which sees this as a security threat. In addition, Russia perceives the new American deployment in Asia and the Pacific Ocean (the “pivot to Asia”) as directed against Russia – a large scale military exercise conducted recently in eastern Russia was intended to send the US a clear message in this regard. Furthermore, the Russians claim that the Americans are engaging in subversive activity in countries of the former Soviet Union (the “color revolutions”), and in Russia itself (encouragement of protests), and there are other items on the crisis list.

In the Middle East, the Russian-Western competition underway over the past decade, an element in the global competition, has intensified. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the Middle East has become a major focus of friction in the international arena in which the superpowers are working to upgrade their unstable position. Moreover, in the face of pressure from the West on other matters, Russia has chosen to respond in the Middle

East. The parties are working on formulating solutions to regional crises, and thus are competing over the content of the understandings that will be reached and the related leadership opportunities.

The main topic in dispute is Syria, where the superpowers are highly involved – Russia with its thus far successful support of the Assad regime, and the United States and its allies in the West and in the region in support of the rebels, who at this point are having difficulty achieving victory. Indeed, the most immediate Middle East issue on the international agenda is the Geneva 2 summit on Syria, which was agreed on by Russia and the US in May 2013 and subsequently approved at the G8 summit the following month. However, the conference has already been postponed several times in part by the superpower confrontation, as they attempt to promote their respective interests.

Another subject on the superpowers' regional agenda is Iran, with President Rouhani's accession to power perceived as an opportunity to spearhead the process toward dialogue with Iran. Iran is considered Russia's main ally in the Middle East, despite considerable tensions between the two in recent years (following Russia's participation in sanctions against Iran and its failure to supply the S-300 anti-aircraft missiles it had promised). Since the start of the uprising in Syria, cooperation between Russia and Iran has flourished, with the two countries conducting a joint campaign there. In practice, Russia has found itself an active partner within the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah Shiite camp.

The importance of Iran for Russian interests has increased, in part because in Russia's view, the American rush to jumpstart the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations left Russia out. Therefore, what remains for Moscow is to act quickly in the Iranian sector before that too is seized by the Americans, especially considering that for their part, the Iranians have recently sent messages about their ostensible willingness to launch a new dialogue with the West. This has raised concerns in Russia, which believes that the Iran will be forced to agree to concessions because of the serious economic consequences of the sanctions. This perception has prompted them to take advantage of the new situation lest they miss the opportunity and the Americans steal the show once again.

President Putin's planned visit to Iran in the near future, albeit temporarily postponed, is considered of extraordinary importance because of the possible consequences for regional and global issues. It has been agreed that during the visit, two main subjects, the Iranian nuclear program and the Syrian crisis, will be clarified. As to the first issue, Russia intends to promote the process of dialogue between the new Iranian leadership and the international community. The visit by Putin, then, could lead to a new round of talks with the Iranians, which would not necessarily produce the desired results. As for Syria, it is possible that a joint position will be formulated on the issue prior to the Geneva 2 summit, and it is not inconceivable that this would be part of a larger package deal.

Furthermore, a limited number of bilateral issues have been agreed on, including the construction of a new nuclear reactor in Iran and discussion of a solution to the S-300 missiles that were not supplied. As far as is known, the Russians are attempting to offer the Iranians an alternative in the form of Antey-2500 anti-aircraft missiles, a system that is more or less equivalent to the S-300.

Additional issues – some contentious – are connected to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Turkey, and others. On July 31, 2013, Saudi intelligence chief prince Bandar bin Sultan visited Moscow and discussed bilateral cooperation, including large purchases of Russian weapons (a figure of \$15 billion was mentioned). Saudi Arabia has been at the head of the Sunni camp working to push Russia out of Middle East affairs, particularly against the backdrop of Russia's conduct on Syria and Iran, and this visit thus indicates a change in the Saudi approach. There has also been talk of a possible upgrade of cooperation between Russia and Egypt. It is still too early to predict the direction in which this will develop, and there are those who see the Saudi move as an attempt to push Russia away from support of Assad. Nevertheless, there is a positive change in Russia's image in the eyes of the regional players in the Middle East.

Russia recognizes that the United States is losing the initiative and even its interest in the Middle East. Certain actors are interpreting this as weakness by Obama and as a window of opportunity for Russia to push the United States aside to the benefit of Russia's objectives. The Snowden affair only intensifies this feeling.

In the wake of the current crisis between the superpowers, Russia believes, and so, apparently does the United States, that the two countries are at a crossroads globally and regionally. However, the crisis is likely temporary and relations can be expected to recover, because it is hard to believe that it is in the Russian or American interest to stop playing by the rules at the current time. Rather, this is apparently an attempt by both parties to leverage opportunities in order to improve their bargaining positions on topics in dispute. Although the meeting between the presidents was canceled, high level contacts are continuing (e.g., the meeting of foreign and defense ministers in Washington on August 9, 2013). Indeed, it is not impossible that both presidents will nevertheless meet as planned if a suitable formula is found. In any case, even though it is not clear how the crisis will end, it appears that Russia's image is growing stronger, at least in the Middle East, in these contexts. And clearly, all regional developments with Russian involvement can be expected to have consequences for Israel's strategic interests.