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The official Russian media depicts Moscow's approach to the Syrian crisis as a peaceful one in its means and aims as opposed to the Western (in particular, the US) approach which is depicted as militarized and aggressive. Therefore, the very fact of convening the Geneva-II conference in Switzerland was presented in the Russian media as a victory for Russian diplomacy. In line with this view, the failure of the conference was attributed by the media and officials to the Syrian opposition's "excessive demands" and to a "lack of willingness to reach an agreement."

From Moscow's perspective, the event was designed to confirm Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's readiness for a negotiated solution to the crisis and to emphasize the lack of similar desire on the opposition's side. The Geneva-II process, it was believed, could improve Assad's international legitimacy as he begins to engage in the re-election process for the Syrian presidency.

Russia's leadership seems to be betting more and more on the incumbent Syrian president. On November 14, 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin personally spoke with President Assad for the first time since the outbreak of the uprising in Syria, in what was seen as an attempt to push the Syrian President closer to accepting the Geneva-II process. Until this point, it had been the task of the Foreign Ministry and was not considered to be a matter at the presidential level. It may be remembered that Putin himself remained silent on the eve of Geneva-I in 2012.

What is the motivation behind this attempt to break the international isolation of Assad and promote his partial legitimization? It could be suggested that with such a move, Putin could demonstrate his personal influence, being directly involved in the possible resolution of the crisis in Syria. Or does the move go beyond this to

demonstrate publicly the relevance and viability of Putin's line in the region, to see the return of Russia 34 years after the break with Egypt or, additionally, to emphasize the failure of the American policy in the region?

In recent years, Russia's Middle East policy has begun shifting back to the Soviet model, in which the region was regarded primarily through the prism of the strategic, geopolitical views of Russia, specifically in relation to its strategic competition with the United States. Under this model, economic interests are sidelined, being perceived as secondary and subordinated to the greater political goals. The basic logic of the Soviet model is to achieve geopolitical goals at any financial or economic expense. This is in contrast to the period under President Boris Yeltsin during the 1990s, when economic objectives in the Middle East were deemed as more important than geopolitical ones.

The Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis have given further impetus to Russia's policy toward such old Soviet logic. The Arab Spring itself is perceived by the ruling group in Moscow as a triumph of Political Islam, and is seen as a "conspiracy plotted in the US and the West at large," an "essentially anti-Russian" phenomenon, hampering Russian policy in the region and threatening Russia's security for the foreseeable future. Following this reasoning, Russia will be the next country to join the Arab Spring, as a series of "color revolutions" are orchestrated, as the propaganda suggests, by the US to "destroy Russia's sovereignty." The real anti-authoritarian nature of the Arab Spring is sometimes mentioned (often with irony) on an official level (sometimes as a diplomatic gesture), but normally it is sharply criticized, especially on popular television channels controlled by the authorities. The ruling group in Russia is openly concerned, in principle, with the process of democratization in any part of the world. This is an element of the broader anti-US angle of Russia's so-called "State-ideology" which defines the guidelines for its foreign policy. This element has grown in intensity since 2004.

It is worth noting that the turning point for such a policy shift proved to be the events in Ukraine in 2004 which, termed as an "Orange revolution," resulted in the electoral win of the pro-western politician Viktor Youtchenko instead of Viktor Yanukovitch, who was strongly supported by Moscow and imposed to some extent. Putin's entourage hurried to publicly explain the outcome of the elections as a "conspiracy inspired and carried out by the Americans" with the aim to distance Ukraine from Russia. The same explanation was offered, previously, by the Kremlin in relation to another important event of that year – the terrorist attack in Beslan (in South Russia) on September 1 – which resulted in the killing of approximately 300 schoolchildren. Since that time, a sense of anti-Americanism has been gradually

incorporated into the core of Russia's dominant ideology, primarily intended for domestic consumption, but with some meaningful implications for foreign policy (although this was not always clearly visible in the day-to-day functioning of the foreign ministry).

Against the backdrop of those events, President Putin attempted to strengthen the geopolitical positions of Russia against the US, primarily in the Middle East as the majority of conflicts in this part of the world are, at the very least, viewed differently by Moscow and Washington. At the same time, one should not underestimate the strong domestic motive behind such a move – to divert the attention of Putin's base electorate from domestic issues to the "outside threat." This threat is portrayed as being capable of undermining the Kremlin's efforts to stabilize the situation in Russia and in its near neighborhood. For example, in the Beslan attack "some circles in Saudi Arabia" were quickly pointed to by Moscow as the key outside sponsors to blame.

In contentious areas such as Syria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Libya – unlike other regions such as Venezuela and Cuba, which are seen as too far from Russia – Moscow is able to clearly show its political behavior as being different from that of the US even if this risks an escalation in the local conflict. The intent behind such behavior is to force Washington to recognize the strategic weight and influence of Russia as well as take into account any future role Moscow will want to play in the Middle East. It does not matter if this role is seen as positive or negative.

While in the early years of his presidency Putin was believed to be rather skeptical of the value of safeguarding and promoting Russia's interests in the Arab world, since 2005 he has considered the benefits of broader relations. Before this, his policy focused on a special relationship with Israel, particularly in a counter-terrorism context. As part of his new approach, he has visited Israel, Egypt, Palestine, Algeria (in 2006), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Qatar (in 2007) and Libya in 2008. In 2006, Syrian President Assad paid a visit to Moscow. This is signified as "Russia's return to the Middle East" after a prolonged absence. From the outset, the return was predominantly aimed at penetrating some of the Gulf markets. However, it was accompanied by an attempt to increase Russia's political influence by relying on traditional Soviet clients such as Syria, Libya, Algeria, Palestine and, to an extent, Egypt. President Putin did not conceal his positive perception of the political system in the Gulf Arab monarchies – the oil-rich countries capable of investing their immense revenues in the economic development and socio-political stability of their own countries – which was seen as a model both economically and politically for Russia as well.

The Syrian Case

Moscow's approach to the Gulf countries changed following the Arab Spring and, in particular, with the escalation of the crisis in Syria. Moscow portrayed those events as being provoked by the US and some Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar (and to a lesser extent by the rest of the GCC countries). The recent terrorist acts in Volgograd and a number of explosions in the Northern Caucasus have been largely attributed by Russian propaganda to the "outside Wahhabi centers," primarily in Saudi Arabia. This alleged "outside feeding of terror in Russia" is one of the arguments advanced by the Russian counter-terrorism services. To maintain this picture in the eyes of its citizens, the Kremlin was in need of a convincing image of an "outside adversary/enemy." Saudi Arabia and Qatar appeared very suitable for this role, along with the US.

Since the outset, the crisis in Syria has been used by Moscow as a tool in Russia's domestic politics. A closer look verifies this assessment: the escalation of the Syrian conflict coincided with the outbreak of the protest movement against Putin's rule in Russia in late 2011 and early 2012. The protests were a result of the perceived rigging of parliamentary and presidential elections. In response to the mass protests, the Kremlin rushed to blame the US for plotting a conspiracy against Putin's return to the presidency of Russia. The Syrian case has also been used to display and confirm "US aggressive intentions" (to be able to say that "today Syria is besieged by the US, tomorrow Russia will be the victim") and to mobilize and consolidate Putin's electorate in the context of resistance to an "outside threat." This is evidenced in the slogan "We'll never let America defeat Assad's regime – the old and reliable friend of USSR/Russia."

As the protests started to ease, Moscow's approach to Syria began to look more flexible. Russia established contacts with opposition groups in Syria and even tried to convince Assad to be open to compromises. This was followed by efforts to strengthen the dialogue with the US regarding Syria and coordinate with Washington. Those efforts, however, failed in light of the West's perceived failure to support the Syrian opposition in order to establish a military balance between the two belligerent sides. Within this context, Moscow decided to side with the Assad regime, portraying the opposition as "totally radical Islamist pro-al-Qaeda jihadists." This line was then supported by the Syrian chemical weapons deal brokered by Russia and the US last September.

The chemical weapons deal seems to have been initially conceived by the Kremlin, long before September 2013 and the actual use of chemical weapons in late August. The deal had perhaps been designed to salvage the Assad regime, assuring its survival

and re-establishing its legitimization in the world.[1] However, the deal was only implemented after the dramatic events in Ghuta on the outskirts of Damascus on August 21, when the Assad regime was suspected of employing chemical weapons on a large scale. For Russia, possible American and French military intervention at this point that would jeopardize Assad's military advantage and its capability to withstand the rebels' offensive was a worrying prospect. American airstrikes, in particular, could turn the tide of the civil war in favor of the rebels. Given that such a move would clearly underline the resolve and commitment of the West to the rebel cause, it was seen as likely to produce mass defections from the Syrian army ranks as well as result in deepening internal dissent in the Assad camp. The days of the Assad regime would be numbered.

With the hesitancy of the West, however, that scenario was never tested. Instead, due to the immediate response by the Syrian government toward disarming its chemical arsenal, the military advantage held by Assad's forces was quickly restored. The fact that the regime was also the main actor in the implementation of the deal and, as such, the partner with the other world actors (US, EU, UN), meant that the Syrian regime also re-acquired some international legitimization. [2]

Moscow seems to be willing to sacrifice its relationship with the Gulf monarchies for geopolitical benefits, namely, the current success in Syria, the survival of the Assad regime and its partial international legitimization. The legitimization of the Assad regime is regarded as an important propaganda point – used to ensure internal stability in Russia – to show that "Putin's regime is strong and capable

1. The unusual activity of the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov supports this assumption: early in 2013, he appeared very insistent on the UN-led investigation of some minor cases regarding the alleged use of chemical weapons by the rebels. Once proven, such cases could compromise the rebels in the eyes of the world community, as well as re-brand the Assad regime - from "bloody", as it was perceived, to a "peace-loving" one. The next step could be a "voluntary offer" by the regime to get rid of the CW arsenal. In such a context, the Assad regime had a good chance of allaying the fears about proliferation and being perceived as a viable partner of the world community.
2. Even if the CW liquidation process is completed and verified successfully, it would not necessarily mean that Assad had sacrificed the regime's most precious war weapon. While Syria's chemical arsenal could be effective as an instrument of deterrence against outside aggression or in a war against another country, the utility of such material in the case of a civil war is less valuable. For example, the CW stocks could be captured by the rebels who could then employ these weapons against the Assad forces in order to provoke the world community and force an outside intervention. In this context, the chemical deal has largely been perceived as a successful step by Damascus, providing some breathing space and turning the tables in favor of Assad and his allies (Moscow, Tehran and Hizbollah). At the same time, it encouraged an accelerated radicalization process within the rebel camp, in turn weakening the moderate camp of the opposition.

to rebuff any outside threat to Russia and its friends." Additionally, Moscow's anti-Islamist line is reinforced by the recent change in the political situation in Egypt (with portraits of Putin beside Field Marshall Abdul Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo's streets, as well as El-Sisi's visit to Moscow in February 2014). The Moscow line highlighted the weakness of the US and EU policies in the region, which were more focused on the efforts to stop the Iranian nuclear program.

Iran and the Nuclear Issue

In terms of Russia's approach to the P5+1 group's interim nuclear deal with Iran, three clear motivations can be identified. Firstly, Moscow continues to perceive the Iranian regime as a friendly ally, a stance that has in part encouraged Iran's continued hostile attitude towards the West in general and the US in particular. Secondly, the majority of Russians are convinced of the need to maintain access to Iran's promising market for various Russian companies, particularly those related to the export of arms. Thirdly, Moscow continues to embrace the notion of a peaceful Iranian nuclear program – the notion that Tehran is pursuing a military program is highly contested by the Russian establishment. Meanwhile, with regard to the alleged militarized nuclear program in Iran the views in Moscow diverge radically: while some in Moscow argue that the development of an Iranian nuclear program has negative consequences for Russia and should therefore be seen as a threat, others tend to minimize the potential of such a threat and suggest that such negative assessment should come second – at least for the time being when Moscow's rapprochement with Tehran, based on Iran's anti-American platform, is underway.

Given the reasons mentioned earlier, the nuclear deal of the P5+1 group with Iran is seen as a positive step in Russia. There is the assumption that the process of negotiation will freeze but not significantly scale back the Iranian nuclear program. There is no talk, for example, regarding dismantling the Iranian centrifuges or shutting down the Arak research center. With P5+1 approval, the Iranian nuclear infrastructure remains intact and is capable of resuming operations at any time which would create instability in the Gulf and, as a direct result, push up global oil and gas prices – something viewed positively by Russia with its vested interest in high oil prices. At the same time, the negotiation process with Iran is a matter of some concern for Russia. With Iran having to be more forthcoming and flexible in an attempt to have the sanctions lifted, Russia could find itself sidelined as a second power by some Iranian leaders, who would instead pursue relations with the West at the expense of Moscow.

Overall, Russia continues to enjoy the position as a member of the P5+1 group and receive attention from states in the Middle East and beyond. The same is true for the Russian role as far as Syria is concerned. Moscow sees itself as a center of political gravity for the major regional actors, including the Arab Gulf countries, a role that is sustained despite Russia's continued pro-Assad line. Not only has Russia succeeded in underlining the West's weakness and inconsistency with regard to the Syrian crisis, it has also aligned with many of the Gulf States regarding the interim deal with Iran, as the Gulf States have similar reservations. For Russia, the fact that a number of high ranking Gulf functionaries hurried to Moscow in recent months to discuss regional issues – among them the Head of Saudi Intelligence Prince Bandar bin Sultan (in August and December 2013) and the Crown Prince of the UAE Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan (in September 2013) – suggests a change in Gulf attitudes towards Moscow. During the visit of the UAE Crown Prince, Russia and the UAE agreed to go ahead with a previously concluded drone deal. There was also an impressive Russia-UAE business forum held in Dubai in February 2014.

The visit of Saudi Prince Bandar was focused on the possibility of striking a deal over Syria, with Moscow showing a higher degree of flexibility. In recent months, Riyadh has voiced its displeasure over US policy in the Middle East. It also appears to be ready to fill the emerging political and military vacuum in Syria by taking a more assertive regional stance in addition to combating the threats which it sees as risking the security of the Kingdom. Thus, despite some deep differences over Syria, there is recognition that a key to the resolution of that conflict might lie in Moscow. The same can be said as far as Iran is concerned. While the details of Prince Bandar's talks in Moscow have not emerged, it appears clear that he was not able to achieve any visible change in Putin's approach to the Syrian issue. Moscow insisted until the very last moment that Iran should be included in the Geneva-II conference, something Saudi Arabia vehemently opposed. The only thing that Moscow has been willing to support is the creation of a WMD free zone in the Middle East and the Gulf, a Saudi project. Moscow is further prepared to offer its services in the nuclear energy field as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies contemplate the use of civilian nuclear power. Of course, there is also Russian interest in exchanging intelligence with the Saudis, particularly counter-terrorism intelligence.

Overall, we can see a special, two-level model emerging in the Russia-Arab Gulf relationship: the political level reflecting agreement and disagreement over various matters and the business level where, to some extent, business deals prevail over politics.

Conclusion

To summarize, with domestic considerations in mind, Moscow's policy toward the Syrian crisis is likely to bring some advantages to Putin, not only in regard to Russia's domestic politics, but in terms of influence in the Middle East region as well. However, it is a risky policy - if it focuses too much on the survival of the Assad regime, and the regime falls, the future of Moscow's policy is doomed to collapse. In this sense, the chemical weapons deal is viewed as a partial sacrifice with one aim: to help the Assad regime survive and, thereby, for Moscow to triumph.

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