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**Ukraine and Operation Protective Edge:
Two Sides to Russia's Foreign Policy Coin
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Throughout Operation Protective Edge, Russia, in an unusual display of restraint, barely related to the conflict. Moscow's few comments were carefully weighed, creating the impression that Russia embarked on a mission to promote its image as an unbiased mediator. At the same time, Russia tried cautiously to offer its services to both sides, publicly as well as in private conversations with Israeli and Hamas representatives. To this extent, President Vladimir Putin spoke with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on July 23, 2014, while on July 29, 2014, Hamas, via its high rank official Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzouk, appealed to Russia, asking that it assume an active mediating role in the ceasefire negotiations. This was hardly unprecedented, as in recent years Hamas has approached the Moscow leadership on various occasions. To the best of our knowledge, this particular request did not have any effect on the ground, and it seems it was, from Hamas' perspective, mainly intended as propaganda, challenging the West and in particular the United States. For Russia, which is fighting radical Islam in the North Caucasus, Hamas remains a less promising partner than Fatah and its leader Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, who is regularly received with great respect in Russia (Abbas last visited Russia on June 25, 2014).

Russia, which maintains positive relations with Hamas and Hizbollah as well as other non-state actors in the region, gained positive political standing following Hamas' appeal, at the very least strengthening its image as a "light heavyweight" regional actor. This is in line with Russia's decade-long policy of restoring its stance in the Middle East as a power equal in standing to the West, although the upheavals of the Arab Spring damaged what Russia had previously achieved.

In light of Russia's efforts during the Gaza campaign to maintain its image as an impartial player as well as the exchanges of ideas regarding its practical integration into the negotiations, Russia's approach to Israel stands out: Russia has maintained a low profile toward Israel. The President's official website states that all conversations between President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu – with the exception of Putin's

call on January 13, 2014 – were initiated by Israel. Russia's new policy is atypically restrained, diverging from its usual practice in dealing with Middle East issues and in particular the manner in which Moscow positions itself vis-à-vis Israel (the tone most often taken, even when objectivity is attempted, leaves little doubt that Israel is perceived as the problems' underlying cause). Under these circumstances and given past experience, Russia's conduct cannot be construed as anything but supportive of Israel, even if this support is of a very cautious nature, given the sensitivity of relations that Russia has developed with its current and prospective partners in the region. These relations are influenced by Russia's perceived global contest with the West, as well as by operational considerations that include lowering Hamas' profile, since the latter acts a destabilizing element in Egypt – Russia's recently reestablished economic and strategic partner.

Thus, the main question refers to Russia's motives behind the change in tone. Israeli-Russian bilateral relations have been good and stable for years, and although there is always room for improvement, this cannot be taken as a sufficient rationale for change. One possible explanation is Israel's stance on the Ukrainian crisis. Israel was careful not to criticize Russia during the crisis and has maintained this policy despite fairly heavy-handed pressure from the West. It is not at all unreasonable to assume that Russia is returning the favor, reinforcing Israel's determination to maintain neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine confrontation.

Recently, Russia has found itself in the center of an international crisis over Ukraine, as fighting between Russia-supported proponents of "Novorossia" and Ukrainian security forces alongside local militias are resulting in growing number of civilian and military casualties. In addition, there is growing concern that Russia is massively expanding its involvement in the conflict, although to date, its involvement has been mostly covert. Consequently, Russia is subject to significant Western pressure, despite the official denial of its being a part of the crises (including the downing of the Malaysian aircraft in July 17). The pressure includes increased economic sanctions and a growing diplomatic isolation of its leadership.

Though Western democracies are not unanimous when it comes to economic sanctions, especially within the European Union, the West's official position regarding the crisis is generally negative; first, the crisis is viewed as grave and potentially dangerous for European collective security. The United States and Europe are engaged in efforts to halt Russia's support of separatists in eastern Ukraine and stabilize the deteriorating situation. In addition to political pressure, the West provides humanitarian aid, military consultants as well as some intelligence support, and – according to sources in Russia – even a covert military presence. Among these possible steps, economic sanctions remain a major leverage over Russia, having the potential to undermine Russia's economy, inevitably

weakening its political system and society. Some believe that this is precisely the US administration's objective.

Russia's political doctrine views Eastern Europe and the Middle East as related regions. This logic results in a necessary shift in the international community's focus, turning it away from the Ukraine to other regions, especially the Middle East. The current crisis in Gaza provided a good opportunity for reframing international public attention. However, this time the United States along with its Western and Asian partners showed no intention to shift their focus from the Ukraine to the Middle East and to Russia's attempts to expand its presence in the area. Moreover, the United States seems determined to maintain its role in handling the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, while also retaining its stance in other parts of the region.

These various considerations guided the Russian position with regard to the operation in Gaza, with the underlying rationale remaining steadfast: Moscow's attempt to become a significant player in the Middle East is part of its global competition with the West. As such, Israel's stance on Ukraine is crucial to Russia, as it eases some of the pressures on the Kremlin from the West over the issue. In addition, being a sympathetic party is likely to make it easier for Russia to realize its potential as a regional player. It seems that Operation Protective Edge is perceived as the next opportunity to promote these objectives.

In light of the challenging reality developing in the international arena, one should view Russia's sympathetic trend as an Israeli political advantage.

