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**Russia and the
US in the Middle East:
Policies and Contexts**

Prof Stephen Blank

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Key Points

- * Russian Policy in the Middle East is increasingly driven by a determination to check American power and influence there.
- * This determination is equally driven by a fierce desire for global power status and recognition, and even though it is couched in the language and ideology of multipolarity, is essentially no less unilateral than is US policy.
- * Russia's competition with America is no less a contest over values than one over interests.

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Introduction

America's invasion of Iraq and efforts to establish a Pax Americana throughout the Middle East have created major difficulties for Russian President Vladimir Putin and his foreign policy. Indeed, America's actions, in the contexts of contemporary world politics and of Russia's development within that environment, have enmeshed Moscow's Middle Eastern policy in multiple contradictions. These contradictions are most basically expressed in Russia's reaction to this Pax Americana, namely its simultaneous efforts to build a structure of international partnerships with other major powers against US unilateralism while also proclaiming that is America's partner in the war against terrorism and, most importantly, retaining at all costs a free hand in the CIS. Indeed, the three dimensions of foreign policy sum up what Russia means by the concept of multipolarity in its foreign policy, a concept that has resurfaced since the US invasion of Iraq. The concurrent efforts to conduct policy along all these lines ensures that Russian foreign policy will be enmeshed in constant and multiple contradictions whose nature and consequences this paper explores.

For example, Russia strives for global partnership with Washington and more broadly the West on international issues of common concern, e.g. terrorism, proliferation to some extent, and the Arab-Israeli conflict where it is a member of the so called 'quartet' with Washington, the EU and the parties to that conflict. At the same time Moscow wants this partnership to be based on mutual respect for each other's interests so that its interests on key questions will be considered. In other words Moscow expects to be and insists upon being consulted, respected, and on taking part as an independent actor in all major issues of world politics, not least Middle Eastern conflicts. At the same time, American unilateralism and seeming disregard for Russian interests in the Gulf, CIS, and the UN as well as the democratization campaign of the Bush Administration are unacceptable to Russia which, in response, proclaims itself an exemplar of multipolarity in world politics against this unilateralism.¹

Moscow's newest initiatives: the attempt to make a separate agreement with Iran, the Russian invitation to Hamas, and its current rapprochement with Turkey on the basis of suspicion of US policies show that Russia is increasingly pursuing an independent line in the Middle East.² Its third key goal was and is to utilize the enhancement of its ties to key actors in Middle Eastern policies to strengthen its claim to dominance in the CIS and its war against Chechnya. Indeed Moscow was prepared to accept Saddam Hussein's ouster provided Washington took account of Russian interests in Iraq and more broadly the Gulf, (e.g. if Washington guaranteed its debts and future energy earnings from the new Iraq, and gave it a free hand in Georgia).³ In the event Washington spurned Russia's offers at no visible cost and

invaded Iraq anyway. But meanwhile Iraqi suspicions of Russian policy led to a loss of existing oil contracts which have yet to be made up.⁴

The difficult necessity of navigating between these two policy poles exerts a decisive influence on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Russia increasingly presents itself as an open rival of American ambitions in the Gulf and Greater Middle East. Indeed, the most recent Russian initiatives, an invitation to Hamas to Moscow to discuss its opposition to dealing with Israel and its nuclear initiative vis-à-vis Iran, fully reflect its desire for maintaining an independent, even somewhat anti-American profile in the Middle East. As a Russian diplomat told the author in November 2005, Russia will not be the fourth wheel of the EU-3 vis-à-vis Iran.⁵ And that visceral attachment to freedom of action and independent status is a deeply rooted element of Russia's overall foreign policy, not just in the Middle East.

Until at least 2004 the official line was that partnership with America superseded disagreements over e.g. Iraq.⁶ However that line has changed recently, largely due to the outbreak of "coloured" revolutions in the CIS, as seen in the documents coming out of the July 2005 summit of the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) in Astana.⁷ Certainly Russian observers viewed Russia's push for multipolarity and its overall Middle Eastern policies as signifying visible rivalry with America. As one 2004 commentary at the meeting of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) noted,

When you consider that a large proportion of the OIC member countries is actually situated in the territory that George Bush described as the Greater Middle East, rivalry between Russia and the United States for influence in the region is patently obvious. It is a striking fact that both the United States and Russia (as successor to the USSR), in building relations with the Islamic world, generally stick to the old strategy. The United States is seeking new ways of exporting cheap democracy, while Russia is still talking about the principles of equality and cooperation. So it was that Sergei Lavrov (Russia's Foreign Minister) assured the OIC foreign ministers in Istanbul that Russia is prepared to "create an order that is truly collective and is built not on the basis of demonstration of the supremacy of a particular religion or system of particular world views, but on the basis of mutual understanding and a joint quest for ways of combating new threats and challenges".⁸

In the Middle East, this multipolarity is supposed to restrain Washington either from acting unilaterally in, e.g., its threats against Iran, directing the Arab-Israeli peace process, or from being able to enlist states like Turkey on behalf of US policies.

The Concept of Multipolarity

We can break the doctrine of multipolarity into three guiding concepts following the scheme laid out by R. Craig Nation of the US Army War College: global multipolarity, preservation of Russia's integrity and primacy in the CIS, and regional engagement that cultivates new partners or allies. These three concepts guide that policy in reaction to the enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic security zone and American unilateralism in the Gulf and elsewhere. Multipolarity means that no one state, including America, can act alone. Even Washington must coordinate with other states. It is believed that NATO has already declined in significance in the absence of a common enemy. Thus new ad hoc groupings will form to constrain the

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US' unilateralism. Russia can and should utilize that trend to play a leading role between or among those blocs while retaining a free hand, especially in the CIS. America's decline and the rise of fissures within NATO are taken as a long-term given which Russia must exploit.

Similarly it is sometimes asserted that possibly Japan but certainly India, South Korea, and China also are more independent than before and can constrain American policy in Asia. Multipolarity denies that there are winners and losers in the Post Cold War world. Hence this concept aims to minimize Russia's diminishment and make it equal with America.⁹ Thus the doctrine of global multipolarity actually represents an effort to maintain a great power concert or duopoly with Washington that simultaneously constrains US policy.

Russian definitions imply a clear preference for cooperative great power management and collective security options as global security models. They demand a rejection of unipolar or hegemonic alternatives however they might be packaged or phrased. They refuse to accept integration with a Western community that is pledged to perpetuate US leadership or partnership models that relegate Russia to the status of junior partner at best. According to the multipolarity scenario, US preeminence is neither a desired nor a sustainable alternative. One of the key challenges for a new Russian foreign policy must therefore be the search for leverage to block or frustrate US pretensions.¹⁰

Logically this entails ensuring Russia's integrity and securing its role as undisputed hegemon of the CIS. Several corollaries flow from this. They all negate cooperative solutions in the CIS and undermine possibilities for cooperative security elsewhere in favour of openly hegemonic spheres of influence and zero-sum games, all within a context of traditional Realpolitik. Paradoxically these precepts make genuine multipolarity harder to achieve with regard to the CIS and the Middle East. Denying this reality, many Russian scholars and officials in the mid 1990s repeatedly proposed a binary structure where NATO and the CIS, led by Washington and Moscow respectively, would constitute two equal pillars of Eurasian security.¹¹

This suggested that Moscow accepts only NATO as a serious security provider in Europe and cares chiefly about its military-political significance for European and Russian security. We may also extrapolate that Russia, therefore, does not take European ambitions in the Middle East too seriously except for the degree to which Russia may exploit them to restrain US unilateralism, hence its attempt to associate itself with Europe as well as local governments on all issues of the contemporary Middle Eastern security agenda.¹² Here multipolarity entails free riding as well as enabling Russia to pretend to multilateralism while again seeking a free hand. Thus Russian observers and officials miss much of the current Western thinking about security and invoke anachronistic ideas about security in the present world.

The second part of the multipolarity concept, Russian hegemony in the CIS or former Soviet Union, clearly aims not only to save Russia from its most pressing threat, its disintegration from within, it also proposes to do so by reintegrating the CIS around Russia. Russia demands reintegration as much because that will supposedly preclude its own dissolution. Russia's ambitions for an exclusive hegemony in the CIS relate very much to its policies for the Middle East. Indeed, Russian officials continue to justify Russian policies by reference to its proximity to

that region. The CIS was intended, with Russian leadership, to become an integral regional security organization like NATO or a unique structure capable of playing, under Moscow's guidance, an independent role in world affairs. Hence Russia's penchant for creating new formations like the CSTO and the SCO, the former looking distinctly like the stepson of the Warsaw Pact. Once that status is achieved it would undoubtedly serve as a jumping off point for greater Russian demands to a place in shaping Middle Eastern destinies as an adjacent region, a geopolitical claim that has long served to justify and motivate Russian calls for a greater place in the Middle Eastern sun.¹³ This policy linkage is visible in Moscow's broader programme of calling for a network of centres in Russia to process uranium from nuclear and other countries, besides Iran. This programme also aims to gain control over Uzbek and Kazakh sources of nuclear energy in order to gain for Russia the energy it needs and to have foreign governments subsidize its need for a large number of new nuclear power plants.¹⁴

The third element of multipolarity is regional engagement. Here Moscow seeks to cement partnerships or alliances with key states like France, Germany, Greece, Italy, in Europe; Iran, Syria, and China in Asia, and Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Armenia in order to balance American and NATO ambitions and to reassert its own independent prerogatives up to the point where a fundamentally competitive relationship with the United States begins. Moscow also seeks to leverage those relationships so that Western Europe will acquiesce in a Russian sphere of influence in the East.

Thus there is talk not just of a strategic partnership with China, but of coordination of policies in regard to the UN, the Gulf, and the entire Asian security agenda.¹⁵ Iran is another candidate for an expanded strategic relationship. Indeed, Iranian and Chinese leaders have long made no secret of their desire for trilateral partnership against Washington.¹⁶ While Russian relations with Iran and China do not need NATO enlargement as a spur to military partnership since they have their own regionally based logic, the logic of multipolarity as a response to enlargement buttresses those relationships' importance for Russia.

Allegedly this multipolarity doctrine and its conceptual structure affords Moscow significant points of leverage with which to react to and limit the threats posed by enlargement of the US sphere or American unilateralism. Moscow's responses fit neatly into Nation's three concepts of multipolarity: distancing from the United States, seeking hegemony in and around the CIS, and regional engagement with other major states. For example, these categories include, among other possible responses to enlargement, the policy of selling conventional weapons and dual-use technologies, if not dual-use weapons, to Iran and Syria. Moreover, it recently announced a major sale of Tor anti-aircraft missiles to Iran, clearly to deter possible Israeli or American air strikes against its nuclear programme.¹⁷ We can surely expect a similar offer to sell arms to Iraq in the near future, provided that Iraq can pay for them, in order to enrich the Russian defence industry, and weaken US influence in Baghdad. This became likely once Putin ended the embargo on arms sales to Iraq.¹⁸ Further proliferation gambits cannot be ruled out as Egypt wants Russian aid for its nuclear programme, about which questions remain.¹⁹ Finally Russia can use its present positions in the UN Security Council and the Permanent Joint Council to obstruct Washington or NATO in the Gulf or elsewhere.

Russia and Iraq

As noted above, Russia's immediate objective is to ensure that it is present as a player on all key issues. Second, it aims to preserve its ties to Washington even

though it was unhappy over plans for the invasion in 2002-03. Russia's policies before the US war with Iraq in 2002-03 already exemplified all these contradictions. It simultaneously sought partnership with Washington, a free hand at home and elsewhere against terrorists, and friendship with Iraq. It was prepared to look the other way if Washington took account of Russian interests in the Gulf and the CIS because those interests were both economic and political, because they served to enrich key political elites in Moscow and to validate Russia's stance as a legitimate actor with respect to Iraq's destiny beyond its membership in the Security Council. Those interests included large debts of \$7-8 billion, large-scale energy contracts to develop Iraqi oil fields, large-scale trade in Russian goods under the notoriously corrupt oil for food programme that, as we now know, enriched members of Russia's elite and others. Beyond that the Gulf states in general were and are regarded by two of Russia's most prominent lobbies, the defence industry and the Ministry of Atomic Energy, Minatom, as fertile hunting grounds for large profitable sales.²⁰

Not surprisingly, Russia still advocates its long-standing and infeasible programme for a collective security system in the Gulf, undoubtedly with itself as one of the guarantors.²¹ It has done so mainly so that it can be invited to play a formal role in these fora, not because it has anything positive to contribute to them.²²

But Russia also feared and fears being excluded from partnership with Washington and its ensuing isolation.²³ Hence its ultimate willingness to sell out Saddam Hussein provided Washington recognized and accepted its interests there.²⁴ However since Washington ultimately refused to acknowledge Moscow's interests or offer and proceeded alone, Moscow has since sought at every turn to find new partners or to try to bring the UN into play as the ultimate authority to which Washington must harken in regard to its occupation of Iraq and that country's future trajectory. This includes advocating that any solution to Iraq's destiny involve not only all of Iraq's citizens, but also neighbouring states.²⁵

Consequently it is not surprising that since the invasion of Iraq Putin has consistently sought to subject as much as possible of American activity in Iraq either to UN supervision or to the will of the emerging Iraqi state.²⁶ That stand aims at reviving Russia's ability to deal bilaterally with the new Iraqi state, it also aims to uphold the power and authority of the UN, and by extension of the Security Council where Russia has a veto. So while Putin has said that it is not in Russia's interests that America be defeated in Iraq, he refuses to concede to Washington a free hand to arrange matters there to its liking. Russian diplomats dragged out negotiations for the recovery of Iraq for a year.²⁷

This strategy also forced Putin to reinvoke multipolarity with France and Germany after 2003, calling the invasion illegal and a mistake, and led Russian commentators to make strong attacks on American unilateralism reminiscent of Kosovo in 1999.²⁸ Since then we have seen a consistent Russian effort to retain both the ties to Europe and America but also to elevate the UN as ultimate authority of Iraq's destiny. Yet Russia has as yet little to show for its efforts in regard to the acquisition of energy contracts, influence over Iraq's future, or markets for arms sales. Thus it is not surprising that Putin now says that differences among states over the issue of Iraq should remain in the past.²⁹

In fact, Russian observers see the invasion of Iraq as the paradigm of American disregard for the UN and Russia and of its readiness to use force in violation of international law and norms. Therefore Russia's new policies aim to reduce

Washington's opportunities for acting in what they consider to be disregard of Russian interests.³⁰ They argue that America must be resisted through multipolar avenues like coalitions of states and by reinstalling the UN as the sole legitimate source of the decision to use force in cases other than self-defence.

This policy direction is not altruistic in nature. Russia wants to be regarded as America's equal and would be happy to shut out other states if it could do so and achieve that status. For example a foreign policy think tank close to the Russian Administration produced a 2004 strategy for Russo-American relations calling for a strategic objective of a US-Russian alliance where Russia would receive the status of non-NATO ally equal to that of South Korea, Australia and Israel. Russia and America alone would set up jointly recognized criteria for the permissive use of force, including preemptive strikes when the Security Council is blocked. Russia would also obtain recognition of its priority in the CIS, including US help for protecting Russian minority rights in the Baltic. Russia would be invited to participate in a programme of close cooperation to revitalize Iraq's economy, infrastructure, health, education, and military forces, along with "maximum consideration to the interests of Russian oil companies in the development of Iraqi energy resources". This would ensure "close cooperation of a future Iraqi government export oil policy with the Russian Federation". Russia would also be invited to participate in a Persian Gulf security system. Agreement should be sought with the US not to obstruct the participation of Russian energy companies in Iran (including nuclear energy). Neither should Washington object to certain kinds of conventional arms sales to Iran which would also be guaranteed rights to a full nuclear fuel cycle.³¹

Obviously this is not a programme Washington could even begin to think about adopting. Consequently it is not surprising that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned in May 2005 that if thwarted in Iraq Russia would seek to enhance its interests throughout the Middle East, most notably in the Palestinian-Israeli process and the overall Arab-Israeli peace process.³²

Multipolarity, Moscow's chosen mantra, looks like more than a policy aiming at constraining American policy. Russia clearly also seeks a veto over it while postulating a kind of inherent state of siege in world politics. Russia's and China's emphasis on the United Nations Security Council, as well as statements such as 'mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefit' and 'the establishment of mutual understanding', imply the desire for both states to have a veto over US unilateralism - something which would be unnecessary if power was more evenly distributed in the international system. In fact, the concept of multipolarity implies a virtual veto over the unilateralist impulses of any great power: other powers align against any aggressive power in an effort to preserve the status quo and to ensure that any major changes in the international system require consensus.³³

Logically this should entail support for multipolarity in the CIS too, but here Russia insists on a free hand. Indeed, the demand for multipolarity in the Gulf and Northeast Asia (e.g. Korean proliferation) is contradicted by the demand for an exclusive sphere of influence in the CIS. These inconsistencies validate what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said about that concept:

Multipolarity was never a unifying idea. It represented a necessary evil and supported a condition without war, but it never contributed to the victory of peace. Multipolarity is a theory of competition, a theory of competing interests -- and worse still -- competing values.³⁴

The Contradictions of Russian Foreign Policy: Iran and Saudi Arabia

Not surprisingly, Moscow finds it increasingly difficult to simultaneously keep ties with Washington while increasingly seeking to carve out an independent space for asserting or advancing its own interests. For instance, the policies of its potential partners do not make life easier for Russia. Iran's clear desire for nuclear weapons, constant practice of "in your face" diplomacy, and overtly expansive interests and rising military capability in the Caspian Sea, as well as its abiding potential for inciting violence throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia oblige Moscow to keep a watchful eye on it even as it tries to promote a partnership against Washington with both Tehran and China.³⁵

Iran's long-standing desire for such a partnership certainly accords with Russian interests but right now, at any rate, Russia will not practise Iran's brand of diplomacy against Washington or openly stand on the wrong side of Iranian proliferation. Moreover, Iranian proliferation has begun to disturb Moscow to the point where Putin came out categorically against it even though Russia clearly regards Iran as the key state in the region with whom it must maintain close ties.³⁶ Moscow upholds Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear programme as stipulated by the NonProliferation Treaty that Iran broke.³⁷ But it also simultaneously strongly urged Tehran not to break with the EU and the IAEA and resume uranium enrichment.³⁸ Meanwhile it also has speeded up construction of the Bushehr nuclear reactor and hopes to build up to six more reactors, while cautioning Europe and the United States against "taking hasty steps" against Iran.³⁹

More recently it has proposed to create a joint venture with Iran and possibly China to supervise enrichment of Iran's nuclear cycle and return the spent fuel to Russia; on February 26, 2006 both sides announced an agreement in principle to create such a joint venture, though further negotiations are still required.⁴⁰

But this hardly solves the problem, it merely postpones the final reckoning. Iran's efforts to gain a weapons capability may well be no more than two years away under the best of circumstances.⁴¹

Since Moscow's main motive is to avoid having to be forced either to protect a nuclear proliferator or abandon it, it came up with a "compromise proposal" that revealed its fundamental disregard for both the UN and unity with Europe if its independence and standing in Tehran could be enhanced thereby. This proposal would have Iran temporarily suspend all uranium enrichment at its Natanz facility but allowed "limited research activities" of uranium enrichment. Iran would have to agree to a moratorium on producing enriched uranium industrially for 7-9 years, ratify the Additional Protocol of the NonProliferation Treaty allowing IAEA inspectors to conduct intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities, and create a joint venture of enriched uranium with Russia on Russian soil.⁴² Less overtly, Russian diplomats also stated that Iran should not only be allowed peaceful nuclear technology but also given a voice in the settlement of regional conflicts in Iraq and between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs.⁴³

While in fact Iran has agreed to nothing substantive Russia has sought to break Western unity so that it can assume an independent mediating position among the parties. This line of policy, whether toward Iran or Israel, clearly evokes Soviet efforts to position itself as an opposing interlocutor to America in the Middle East.⁴⁴

At the same time there is evidence that Moscow sought to link continuing provision of materials for the nuclear reactor at Bushehr to support for the joint venture project in order to gain Iran's acceptance of this, in its own way trying to twist Iran's hands.⁴⁵ This is not a deal done out of altruism. Iran apparently waived sanctions against the Russian contractors in the amount of \$40 million for contractual failures to make deadlines in the construction of Bushehr (perhaps these were deliberate failures, to keep leverage upon Iran) and proposed using Atomstroiekспорт to create another 2 gigawatts of capacity at Bushehr, i.e. 2 new power units there.⁴⁶

It is hard to disagree with German foreign Minister Frank Steinmeyer's assessment that this agreement really aimed to split the united front of the EU and the United States⁴⁷ and there is no reason to believe that Iran will stop enrichment, as it is convinced that China and Russia will neutralize any action that the Security Council might take.

Neither should anyone think that this agreement in principle will actually take place as long as Iran insists on its right to a full nuclear fuel cycle at home. Only if Russia can prevail upon Iran to abandon this stance will there be movement towards a genuine solution to this problem.⁴⁸

Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia also illustrate Moscow's approach and the instruments of power and policy available to it in the Middle East. Russo-Saudi relations have materially changed in the wake of the Iraq war and the continuing price rise in oil and gas. As the price of oil soared above \$50 a barrel, both governments began to approach each other to increase cooperation in stabilizing oil markets. Moscow's Ambassador to Riyadh, Andrei Baklanov, cited Saudi approaches to Moscow to cooperate in regulating energy prices and to foster joint policy coordination through the International Energy Forum that could go so far as joint measures to ensure the safety of gas and oil production, transportation and supply.⁴⁹

Similarly, as Saudi-Russian economic and political relations improved, Riyadh's ambassador to Russia stated that his government wants this cooperation in energy affairs to increase.⁵⁰ Although Russia is not a member of OPEC, new reports suggest that its oil reserves may actually be twice or three times as large as the previously listed proven 70 billion barrels. On the other hand, its ability to explore these new holdings has fallen and by destroying Yukos, that industry's most efficient producer, Russia has foregone the foreign investment and transformation needed to impose efficiency on the industry. Therefore those deposits may not materialize as marketable oil to anything like their true capacity.⁵¹ Consequently, both states have a compelling interest to collaborate in regulating energy prices to ensure their market share and prevent other energy producers from expanding production to grab that market share and thereby touch off a process that would lower prices and their revenues.

We can also explain this harmony of Russo-Saudi interests in terms of a mutual economic interest that could foster steps to create a second, albeit possibly informal, oil cartel. Both governments share a common interest in ensuring the safety of their exploration platforms, pipelines, refineries and other energy infrastructures that are favorite targets of terrorist attacks worldwide. Therefore a partnership that goes beyond a cartel could eventually emerge.

At the same time both states also have common interests in combating terrorism, as they are prominent targets of al Qaeda and other homegrown terrorists. This

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rapprochement has evolved over time due to the fortunes of both states' own anti-terrorist campaign and the vagaries of the oil market, as well as the US presence in Iraq. Due to the war in Chechnya Moscow has taken a prominent role in the global war on terrorism, called terrorism the main threat to its domestic and foreign security, and virtually destroyed Chechnya. Because of Saudi funding and continuing support for Wahhabist Islam going to Chechnya, throughout 2003 Moscow continually hammered Saudi Arabia for its support of terrorism.⁵² But that later turned around as the interaction of the Iraq war, the rise of terrorism within Saudi Arabia, and the continuing fighting in Iraq led both sides to a rapprochement, culminating in a deal whereby Saudi Arabia agreed to subsidize the reconstruction of Chechnya's education system under Russian leadership. However, this deal also represents considerable mutual cynicism on the part of both states.⁵³

As part of this deal Saudi banks will allocate funds to Chechnya on the basis of a Saudi delegation's investigation of local conditions, even though previous subsidies to Chechnya have vanished without any accounting.⁵⁴ Saudi banks will also discuss joint collaboration with Russian banks for the purposes of humanitarian reconstruction and possible investment in the local petroleum industry. This collaboration and Moscow's brazen demand for subsidies lest it threaten to the Saudis in the global oil market indicates not just both governments' profound cynicism, with the Saudis abandoning Chechnya and the Russians showing their true interests, it is also fully consonant with the Saudi way of meeting threats.

Indeed, based on our knowledge of Russian banks and funding to Chechnya we can be sure that very little of this money will actually go to any humanitarian projects, be they reconstruction, revival of the oil industry or rebuilding the school system. Rather both the Saudis and Russians must view this as a bribe, to keep Russia from threatening Saudi energy interests in OPEC. This has clearly been part of the new Saudi-Russian rapprochement since 2003 and owes much to the fact that Russia can now challenge OPEC for market share in the US and Europe. Another motive may be that since al Qaeda's May 2003 attacks in Saudi Arabia the Saudi government has moved more vigorously than before to suppress al Qaeda there and no doubt feels that support for the Chechens is now a risk.⁵⁵ Saudi Arabia must also be anxious about the growing number of Arab "alumni" of the Chechen wars, including Saudis who participated in the war and in acts of terrorism. They are linked to al Qaeda and thus constitute a standing threat to Saudi security.⁵⁶

This episode shows that Moscow's claims about the threat to its security from Wahhabism and from terrorism are actually much less serious than advertised. Indeed, Russia's participation in the war on terrorism is less substantive than might be imagined. In 2001 FBI investigators alleged that Russian spy Robert Hanssen had sold or transmitted electronic software programs and equipment to Russia which then sold them to bin Laden. This equipment let him monitor US efforts to track him down.⁵⁷ In similar vein, assessments have made a plausible case that Moscow has a direct link to Bin Laden's number two man, the Egyptian terrorist Ayman Zawahiri, and thus a source of leverage at the very top of al Qaeda.⁵⁸ Likewise there have been more than occasional reports of Russian gun running to the Taliban or of ex-KGB officers training terrorists in Iraq.⁵⁹

We also know that the war on Chechnya has proven to be extremely lucrative for many members of the Russian bureaucracy and armed forces who have been given virtual carte blanche to rob the country blind and to appropriate for themselves funds earmarked in Moscow for the supposed reconstruction of Chechnya. There is

little doubt that both Moscow and Riyadh know that the funds the latter will earmark for similar purposes will encounter the same fate.

There is good reason to argue that Moscow's war on terrorism has always been an instrument to serve larger or more private interests.⁶⁰ Certainly Moscow opposes labeling Syria and Iran as sponsors of terrorism despite the overwhelming evidence to support that fact. Indeed it sells weapons to Syria despite Syrian-based funding for the Chechens and support for terrorists inside Lebanon and against Israel.⁶¹

Perhaps we should be glad that the Saudis have finally awakened to the threat posed by the ideology that they have so assiduously propagated over the years. There are clear signs of possible cooperation among police, intelligence, and maybe even military forces of both governments. At the same time Saudi Arabia continues to support a substantial expansion of the dissemination of its brand of Islam, Wahhabism, Moscow's stated nemesis in Chechnya, among Russian Muslim communities.⁶² Saudi money goes to build schools, mosques, and to send Mullahs to teach at these institutions.

For the West, undoubtedly the potential collaboration in energy is the most critical element of this developing relationship because it has the potential to create a new, even stronger cartel than OPEC with permanent capabilities for affecting and even dislocating the global economy. But the potentially combustible mix of strong Saudi support for the propagation of its version of Islam among Russian Muslims and the ever-present terrorist threat might make it impossible to sustain this relationship beyond its present limits. It is clear that the dynamics of the Russo-Saudi relationship bear greater as well as careful scrutiny. But it is also clear that their current cooperation is tactical and instrumental, not strategic, and could certainly be derailed because both sides are juggling so many balls in the air at the same time.

This relationship duly illustrates domestic-foreign linkages in Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, the importance of energy, and the complex relationship of terrorism and the alliances which a struggle against it impose upon Russian policy. But the relationship with Riyadh, like that with Baghdad, Tehran, and with key external players like the EU and Washington, also illustrates one of the many contradictions that bedevils Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Russia's policies have the goal of creating a mechanism by which Russia's right to be seen as an important player is ensured. Yet it is clear that Russia has no programme to offer to deal with outstanding issues other than trying to be equally friendly with everyone. Thus Russia still craves "status, but not responsibility."⁶³ Not surprisingly these policies often fall short of their goals and paradoxically contribute to the widespread belief that Russia remains "a risk factor" in world politics, not an autonomous pole of world politics upon which too much hope can be placed.⁶⁴

Russia's Middle Eastern policy suffers from multiple contradictions because of American and regional actors' policies as well as its own. Russia's own policies engender these contradictions. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Russia's foreign policy in its various dimensions likes to play a balancing act between Western, Eastern, Southern, and Northern countries."⁶⁵ Russia seeks partnership with America but also with other key actors to counter American policy. But these quests for partnership are themselves inherently contradictory. Russia seeks partnership with Europe on its terms which means resisting European integration and a European-inspired normative consensus on world affairs thereby raising European suspicions about Russian policy. Yet with China Russia does not even try to impose its terms, let alone enforce them. We see this weakness in Russia's

concessions on energy shipments to China, its association with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, its continuing and increasing quality of arms sales to China, and in regard to manoeuvres with China's armed forces like those that took place in August 2005. Such concessions seem to corroborate the many warnings that the Sino-Russian strategic partnership that Moscow now claims ultimately subordinates Russia to Chinese goals.⁶⁶ As then Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said in 2002, "The creation of favourable external conditions for the successful internal development of Russia is the main criterion for the effectiveness of our policies."⁶⁷ The pursuit of those policies often exposes Russia's weakness rather than its strength.

Seeking Regional leverage, Multipolarity and the Middle East

Despite partnership with Washington in the war on terrorism, Moscow has increasingly invoked the concept of a multipolar world order as its desired outcome. And yet, Moscow's emerging tactic is to deploy the instruments of power it possesses: mainly its geographic location, proximity to key actors, energy assets, and arms and/or technology transfer to attempt to leverage regional security actors and thus create blocs.

Accordingly Moscow's Middle Eastern policy cannot be understood without reference to its larger global policy, as it is part of a general strategy to leverage regional actors against US policies. Russia has defined its Middle Eastern priorities. The key geographical actors for Russia: Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, the so called Northern Tier, are important because of their proximity to the Caucasus and Central Asia and because Moscow discerns opportunities to exploit each one of those states' tensions with America. Moscow has exploited its burgeoning energy trade with Turkey, shared unease about US policy in Iraq and over the EU's demands upon both of them in order to forge a visible entente with Ankara that has ramifications for policy in both the Middle East and the Caucasus.⁶⁸ Similarly it seeks to obtain a greater foothold, primarily in the Northern tier, through the judicious use of diplomacy, energy sales to Turkey, Israel and Iran, and arms sales to Syria, Iraq, Iran, the Palestinian Authority, and potentially Turkey.

Russia's efforts to simultaneously improve its ties with both Israel and the Palestinians epitomize its overall tactic of seeking to exploit conflicts by leaning one way and then another.⁶⁹ Although it is a member of the Quartet of powers that are seeking to ensure fulfilment of the road map between Israel and Palestine, it is also selling arms to the Palestinians and Syria and urging a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflicts to include both Syria and Lebanon.⁷⁰ Meanwhile Putin is apparently personally favorably disposed to Israel.⁷¹ Russia also engages in large-scale trade, energy shipments, intelligence sharing against terrorism, and defence sales jointly with Israel to third parties, e.g. India and South Korea.⁷²

Almost everyone who has written or spoken on the war on terrorism has stated that international unity is an essential prerequisite of victory. Nobody has been louder or more insistent on this point than President Putin and the Russian government, who have regularly insisted that they are fighting international terrorism in the form of extremist Islamist terror groups in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. They have insisted that these groups are linked to al Qaeda, pose a mortal threat to the integrity of the Russian Federation, and that therefore Russia merits the unanimous and unwavering support of the international community.

Russian officials have also equally regularly and equally loudly denounced what they call double standards abroad, by which they mean any sign of moral or material support for Chechen terrorists or urgings that Russia negotiate with them. Russia's government has also regularly and successfully sought to insulate the war from any external commentary, influence or intervention, claiming it is a matter of Russia's internal sovereignty in which nobody has a right to interfere. Therefore it has quite successfully resisted criticism of its brutal tactics in this war by invoking arguments about the mortal threat posed by terrorism to its security and integrity, and these mantras of its unquestioned sovereign rights and other actors' double standards.

Immediately after the Palestinian elections in January 2006 the United States and the EU announced that no aid would go to a Hamas government as long as it openly called for the destruction of Israel. Nothing that Hamas' leadership has done since the election has justified reversing this position. Although it has refrained from violence for avowedly tactical reasons during the current period of Hudna, i.e. a truce, not a peace, its leaders openly state that they are engaged in a long-term struggle to destroy the state of Israel by violence among other means. In other words, they pose a threat to Israel equal to if not greater than that posed by the Chechens to Russia. Nevertheless Russia's immediate reaction after the election was to claim that Hamas is not on its list of terrorist organizations, leaving the door open to discussions with and even assistance to them.⁷³

Therefore Hamas' invitation to Moscow must be seen in the light of Russian strategic considerations to enhance Moscow's interests in the Middle East at the expense of Israel and America. But the negative implications of this invitation go further. This invitation convinced other terrorist groups and Iran that they have no reason to believe or fear European and Western statements of unity against them. Russian support for forces wishing to maintain the instability that pervades the Middle East, as in the old days, will fortify their belief that no serious action will be taken against them. Moreover, they will have Russian arms, either from Iran or Syria, to help them.

This is another blow to the vaunted Russo-American partnership in the war against terrorism. While there have been some instance of collaboration, e.g. in Afghanistan, in fact there is growing rivalry. In Central Asia and the Middle East Russia has shown its readiness to weaken the battle against terrorism to advance its interests against American interests and its own putative partnership with it. It is clear that while Russia faces a genuine and spreading terrorist threat and insurgency in the North Caucasus, it will not follow its own advice and cement the unity of the anti-terrorist coalition or alternatively negotiate with its enemies. Washington and its allies will have to realize that for Russia, as some analysts like Pavel Baev have written, antiterrorism is part of a campaign that is really about the domestic legitimization of Putin's authoritarian project.⁷⁴

The Global Context of Multipolarity

More recently we can observe an apparent decisive turn in Russian policy, toward an increasingly overt effort to assert independence from and against Washington and Europe, to gain allies to compel a retraction of America's global influence, particularly in areas critical to Russia. This strategy continues and extends earlier efforts to advance a uniquely Russian concept of multipolarity that originated during Boris Yeltsin's era.⁷⁵

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We can call this strategy “soft balancing”. It represents an effort by the weaker party, Russia, to increase its influence with Washington or even to block the realization of American policy goals by strategic non-cooperation on issues it regards as central to its interests. This is supposed to raise the costs to America of ignoring Russian interests and oblige it to return to greater engagement with Russia.

This balancing on the basis of efforts to create a multipolar world where Moscow is a recognized pole should also enhance Russia’s bargaining position and freedom of action.⁷⁶ Thus Russian efforts to push multipolarity transcend issues arising out of America’s invasion of Iraq, and involve Europe, the CIS, and the Persian Gulf. These regions are engaged as part of the overall strategy of maximizing Russia’s geographical location as a way to leverage regional coalitions forcing Washington to heed Russian interests.

Nevertheless it remains to be seen just how much effect Russia’s rhetorical and diplomatic sallies against America actually have. Hitherto Russia’s quest for multipolarity and a leading role as one of those poles has primarily confirmed its continuing regional and global weakness as an international actor. That outcome is unacceptable to Russia’s elite and only rekindles its frustration with Washington and the West. Indeed, Russian elites now believe that Russia is under political and ideological siege from the West and at risk of falling apart.⁷⁷

While resistance to America stems from these commingled domestic and foreign policy impulses, the perception of this new ideological threat, rooted in the Bush Administration’s democracy agenda, has hardened the desire to resist American pressures, because Russian elites now believe that not only are Moscow’s security interests at risk from US policies, Russia’s very ability to function as a state, and more prosaically, their power and wealth, are also seen to be in danger from these policies.

Arguably then the demand for multipolarity stems from deeply rooted beliefs within Russia’s domestic political culture. John Loewenhardt reported in 2000 a former member of the Presidential Administration as saying that the perception of Russia as a great power “is a basic element of the self-perception of high bureaucrats.” If a political leader were to behave as if Russia was no longer a great power, there would be “a deeply rooted emotional reaction in the population”.⁷⁸

Five years of Putin’s invigoration of authoritarianism and of Russia’s imperial mystique have inevitably strengthened those tendencies, making them even more prominent in officialdom’s mentality. And this ideological-political reinforcement has also created the basis for the perception of ideological and domestic threat. Since Russia still cannot accept its reduced status, its military-political elite still harbours unwarranted assessments of Russia’s status in world affairs. For example, an article published in 2005 in the General Staff’s journal, *Military Thought*, states that “Russia’s geopolitical situation enables it not only to effectively develop its own national economy but also to form a kind of geoeconomic region comprising the world’s largest nations -- Japan, China, India, and other countries”.⁷⁹

Conclusions

Undoubtedly the imperatives of Russian domestic politics, security against terrorism at home, continuing high prices for oil and gas, and hegemony in the CIS will continue to drive much of Russian foreign policy because these objectives are intimately bound up with the maintenance of the Russian elite's self-perception as a great power. But in fact all three of these goals are highly tenuous. Energy prices will recede sooner or later and maintaining hegemony in the CIS will be problematic at best, given the fact that Russian forces are now retreating from Georgia and the entire North Caucasus is on fire. At the same time Russia is caught between the dangers of supporting America and the risk of supporting its enemies who are often purveyors of an agenda that is also anti-Russian, e.g. Iranian proliferation and increased visibility in the Caspian. And it increasingly is opting for a course at variance with American and European preferences.

In foreign policy the pursuit of the free hand and of neo-imperial control or leverage without responsibility in the former Soviet empire is far beyond Russia's real capabilities and prevents others from renouncing their former suspicions of Russian policy as is the case with Germany and its neighbours. Freedman noted in 2004 that Russia, like France, is now a competitor of the United States. But where as France competes on the basis of competing interests, Russia does so on the basis of rival values.⁸⁰ At the same time, Russia alone, or even with Europe or China, cannot enforce its writ on the Middle East. Indeed, historically local actors have habitually taken Russia's largesse and then gone their own way.⁸¹ So Russia's unilateralism advances only its short-term interest, not its medium or long term interests or the causes of regional and global security.

Indeed, such unilateralism only aggravates local trends because the area remains structurally volatile. Far more transformation is needed before the Middle East becomes like Europe. In Iraq the Shiites want dominance, not equality; Syria shows no signs of letting go of Lebanon and Iran's nuclear programme continues apace. The Palestinians show no signs of being capable of forming a state that can live in peace with anyone, so settlement of their conflict with Israel appears to be no closer to resolution than before. Nor is Islamist terrorism or political agitation in retreat.

Ultimately if Russia wants to be a major player in the Gulf and Middle East it will have to make a decisive choice between allies, at the risk of foregoing some of its beloved freedom of manoeuvre. It cannot be both a unilateral proponent of multilateralism and an exploiter on other people's foreign policies or conflicts. The answer to these questions is also bound up with its domestic trajectory, for until it makes what is now called a European choice it cannot have genuine multipolarity with Europe. And leaning to China's side advances Beijing's interests more than Moscow's. Thus in the Middle East and elsewhere Russia's effort to dance simultaneously at everyone's wedding is reaching the limit of its possibilities. Moscow has to face up to the responsibilities as well as the joys of being a superpower. And if it cannot or will not do that, failure will cruelly expose its unsustainable pretensions to a status it cannot realize. Whether the new turn will come under Putin or its successor cannot be determined, but Russia's possibilities and policies in the Middle East are likely to be reaching a turning point. Exploiting contradictions only has provided only meagre returns to date, and the returns on those policies, particularly in regard to Iran and to terrorism, may soon magnify the risks to Russia rather than reducing them.

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