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Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary

Russia's Policy Towards the Middle East

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This is a summary of an event held at Chatham House on 19 November 2012. Nikolay Kozhanov, scholar at the Institute of the Middle East, discussed Russia's approach to the Middle East.

The speaker opened by arguing that it is difficult to determine what Russian strategy in the Middle East is and who is responsible for its formulation and implementation. In comparison to the Soviet or imperial era Moscow's foreign policy towards the Middle East today lacks direction and credibility. Policy priorities towards individual states and the region as a whole are contradictory and ill-defined. Russia refrains from diplomatic initiatives, while its links with regional governments are not used constructively. The Russian government does not have sufficient economic resources to establish substantial economic contacts with the Middle East states and lacks the military capacity for safeguarding peace and stability in the region.

Russian foreign policy-making is fragmented as it involves several policy-making actors with sometimes conflicting agendas - the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade and Economic Development, the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, NGOs, as well as state and private companies and even the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet, it is difficult to determine whether policy-making splits along individual or ideological lines. In the absence of long-term policy goals and priorities, Moscow takes a case-by-case approach.

However, it is wrong to think that the development of Russian relations with the Middle East is completely unpredictable. Russia lacks a unified plan of action and a clear list of top priorities, but the Russian Federation has certain national interests which form the basis of its policies: evasion of tensions with the US which could negatively influence the Russian-American dialogue; ensuring national security; securing Russian dominance in the ex-Soviet territories (such as Central Asia, the South Caucasus and the Caspian region); prevention of nuclear proliferation and protecting the economic interests of the Russian political elite.

Most recently, the rise of jihadist movements has become of particular concern to Moscow as it could spill over into the North Caucasus and increase political instability. Russia also wishes to maintain its 'global power status' even in the absence of efficient economic and political leverage.

Russian policy towards Syria is guided by pragmatic interests. The Russian government acknowledges that the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime is inevitable but would like to reach a solution that will not compromise its national interests. Over the past year Russia has established contacts with

the most moderate members of the National Coordination Council and the Syrian National Council. Yet, relations with the opposition remain difficult as Moscow is concerned about the future radicalization of the opposition and the turmoil that would follow Assad's downfall. According to reports from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), President Assad's removal from power would trigger the expansion of jihad in the Caucasus. In the absence of official guarantees that the jihadists will not export their revolution elsewhere, Moscow will not negotiate with the more radical members of the opposition and will not consent to foreign intervention in Syria.

The formerly close relations between the Russian and Syrian military establishments have failed to influence the peace process in Syria. However, indicative of the relations between the two militaries is the fact that the first Russian delegation to Syria in February 2012 consisted of Sergey Lavrov (Foreign Minister) and Mikhail Fradkov (Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR)). While Russia's support of the Assad regime is undermining perceptions of Moscow as a credible world power, Moscow's policy towards Syria has not changed. The Russian government does not need to justify its policy on Syria to domestic audiences, which gives the Kremlin greater freedom in shaping its policies.

The discussion then moved towards the bilateral relations between Moscow and Iran, which have been at the expense of Russia's relations with the Gulf monarchies. Given the geographical proximity of Iran and Russia, Moscow has considerably more issues to discuss with the Islamic Republic than with the GCC members. Due to their similar approaches towards a number of regional issues, Moscow considers Tehran an important partner in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Caspian region. On the other hand, Moscow is still cautious about some of Iran's regional activities and concerned that the Islamic Republic may be a possible starting point for another conflict. The Russian government therefore opposes the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) by Tehran. Moscow believes that Iran's acquisition of WMDs would change the balance of power in the region in a manner not favourable to Moscow: a nuclear-armed Islamic regime on the southern flank of Russia would be less cooperating in Central Asia and the Caspian basin and could undermine Moscow's influence in these regions. Furthermore, a nuclear-armed Iran could destabilize the situation in the Middle East.

Yet, the Russian position on the nuclear issue is neither pro-Iranian nor pro-Western (namely, pro-American). Moscow balances between the US, Europe and Israel on one side, and Iran on another. Russia insists that the nuclear

issue be settled diplomatically because it wants to prevent the emergence of a new zone of conflict and instability near the Russian borders. Furthermore the Russian government and experts do not have iron-clad proof that the Iranian authorities made a decision to build nuclear weapons; all statements by Iranian officials are considered nothing but bravado to bargain for better conditions with the West. Extreme pressure on Iran is considered harmful to the aspects of the Russo-Iranian relationship in which Moscow needs Tehran's support (or at least neutrality).

Russo-Iranian relations are influenced not only by the development of Russian contacts with Washington, but also by Iran's attempts to establish contact with the US. A rapprochement between the Iran and the United States would constitute a serious threat to Russia's presence in Iran. Furthermore, the Russian authorities believe that the establishment of a dialogue between Washington and Tehran would lead to the formation of another broadly anti-Russian coalition with substantial capabilities to influence the situation in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This is not acceptable to Moscow - Russia's neighbours have traditionally had an impact on the political situation as well as crime and migration rates in the country.

Russian relations with Israel and Palestine are complex. Moscow has repeatedly used the Palestinian question to emphasize its engagement and active interest in global affairs, but a permanent settlement of the Palestinian issue has never been one of Russia's foreign policy priorities. Russo-Israeli relations improved after President Putin assumed office in 2000. Economic and cultural relations between the two countries' elites surpass the diplomatic relations between the two governments. Russia and Israel share a long history of diplomatic, political and cultural interaction, as well as a common concern about the interpretation of their distinct foreign policies by the West. Still, Russian attempts to balance relations with Israel on the one hand and Palestine and Iran on the other, hinder Moscow's relations with Tel Aviv.

Russian government responses to the Arab spring have been inconsistent and confused. The outburst of Arab uprisings was unanticipated and Moscow was late in responding to local developments. The prospect of the 'Arab spring' turning into a 'Jihadist autumn' is considered a key threat. Ahead of the 2011 military intervention in Libya, Russia agreed to abstain rather than veto the UN resolution authorizing a no-fly zone over Libya. However, when the no-fly zone turned into a full-scale military attack, Russia realised that its leverage over developments in the Middle East was limited.

Although the West remains Moscow's primary geopolitical adversary in the region, China's influence in the Middle East is underestimated.

In light of recent developments, the West should not abandon dialogue initiatives with Moscow. Intelligence sharing between Russia and Western governments can improve policy-making towards the region and enhance bilateral cooperation. Moscow is particularly sensitive to Western attempts to remove Russian influence from the Middle East. Therefore case-by-case cooperation over the Arab World is a better model for improving Russian-Western relations.