



Six Shades of Grey? Increasing Pragmatism in Russian Strategy in the Islamic World

David Gioe and Jeremey Parkhurst, Jan 27th

Despite the popular quip that, when it comes to geopolitical grand strategy, Russians play chess not checkers, the reality has not always reflected this ideal. While Cold War Soviet strategists always envisioned themselves playing a rather more complicated game, the predictable Russian moves were more reminiscent of straightforward checkers than of the multifarious choreography of kings, queens, knights, and bishops. Have times changed? Has Russian strategy found a checkmate?

Russian diplomatic engagement in the ever-bloodier Syrian civil war provides a timely rationale to assess the increasingly complex and nuanced strategy of Russian President Vladimir Putin and his wily Foreign Minister, Sergey [Lavrov](#). According to *The Telegraph*, “Lavrov has emerged as probably the most formidable foreign minister in the world.” Indeed, the recent deal between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Lavrov to remove chemical weapons from the Bashar al-Assad regime, under UN auspices, is the most notable Russian diplomatic triumph in recent years.

It has always been clear that Russia, as a foreign policy doppelganger of the Soviet Union, would deal firmly, even harshly, with those who did not acquiesce to its wishes. This was especially true of the post-Soviet states, referred to by Russians as the ‘near abroad’. Recent Russian heavy handedness in Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, and even European energy negotiations, seemed more in the vein of Khrushchev and reinforce the view that the Russian legacy of Soviet *realpolitik* continues unabated in these areas. Nonetheless, this article seeks to move beyond depicting Russian action as the extension of Soviet policies examining its overtures in the Middle East and South Asia.

Since September 11th 2001, The United States has let the Pentagon play an outsized role in the foreign policy process while minimizing the role of the State Department. By contrast, Russia has added several layers of depth and complexity to its foreign policy arsenal, allowing what is essentially a large regional power to effectively counter the world’s only super power in the Levant. At least with regard to the Middle East, the tried and true formula of brute force and power politics underlying Russian and Soviet strategies in the past has been challenged.

Most notably, although Russian foreign policy investment in the Middle East is now bearing fruit, Russia’s ongoing commitment to the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war may not indicate a growing presence in the region generally. The UN resolution indicates a clear diplomatic victory for Russia which, since the end of the Cold War, has been a stagnant regional power that almost certainly employed force as its opening (and often only) gambit. Russia has longed to regain lost international prestige and relevance for over two decades. Although Russia still lacks the economic, conventional military, and diplomatic strength to recapture its Cold War standing, through clever and pragmatic strategy it is increasingly able to affect international issues when national interests are at stake. Much of this is due to Putin and Lavrov: under their watch, Russia has learned the lesson of Teddy Roosevelt; namely, that talking softly and carrying a big stick projects international power. With brilliant timing, tactical diplomatic flexibility, and a superficial nod toward international law, Russia checked and eventually co-opted US and French threats of military force in Syria.

While Putin has relied on the threat – or real application – of brute force domestically and with the post-Soviet states,

Russia during his presidency? has answered events in the Middle East and South Asia with a broad variety of responses. Putin's stance on Syria does not necessarily signal a willingness to foray into Middle Eastern politics as much as a continuation of Russia's more pragmatic (and less ideological) approach. During Putin's years as Russia's strongman, several distinct Russian reactions to Middle Eastern and Central Asian issues can be discerned:

First, Russia entertained limited cooperation with the US where Russian interests align, as in trying to enhance the stability of Afghanistan and addressing the giant opium exports from that country. Despite cooling relations with Washington and a general mistrust of a US military presence in Central Asia supporting NATO operations in Afghanistan, Russia has dependably provided supply routes into Afghanistan and continues to support US and NATO training efforts as well as drug interdiction measures. While Putin remembers the humbling Soviet experience with that country – exacerbated by American covert action to arm the Mujahideen – he likely sheds no tears for the bleeding of American power and treasure. He is pragmatic enough to cooperate to some degree where discernible Russian interests can be found. Indeed, the Russians have a strong interest in a stable Afghanistan, especially considering the active Islamist groups with influence in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, states considered by Russia to be its buffer zones.

Second, a duplicitous Russia has displayed, even trumpeted, ostensible compromise with the United States while seeking to blunt US diplomatic initiatives. Iranian nuclear proliferation illustrates this tactic most clearly. Russia's willingness to support limited UN sanctions and to participate in talks between US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany with Iran (the 'P5+1') provide the Putin regime influence. Russian cooperation has helped set the agenda and tone of US and European powers seeking a united front against Iran's nuclear program, while at the same time retaining the ability to undermine aspects of any final deal not appealing to Russian preferences.

Third, Putin has engaged in hollow electoral rhetoric, echoing Cold War catch phrases for domestic public consumption such as announcing Russian opposition to US military efforts in Iraq. Despite these popular sound-bites, after the US invasion in 2003, Russia retrenched and quickly lent its support to the US-installed government. As a reward, Russia is now the second largest supplier of military arms to the Iraqi government. Again, Russia adopted a pragmatic approach that saw inexpensive victory in the domestic sphere and lucrative returns in the international arena.

Fourth, Putin and Lavrov have been willing to abandon tangential Russian interests when the political costs become too high. This willingness to fold on a bad hand was exemplified by not stopping UN authorization of coalition operations against Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi in 2011. Although Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, not Putin, was partly responsible for Russia's non-response in Libya, it should be noted Lavrov's public statements reflect a pragmatic acceptance that blocking Western-led military operations in Libya risked undermining Russian standing.

Fifth, the incremental and flexible response to developments in Egypt during the Arab Spring demonstrates that Russian leadership can employ measured, limited scope responses when core interests are not threatened. Russia's varied reaction to the Arab Spring may be viewed as tactical maneuvering on quickly shifting strategic sands – a relatively new phenomenon for the formerly plodding and ideologically driven power. Calculating risks and reading tea leaves, Russia remained largely on the sidelines during the fall of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and then the subsequent removal of Muslim Brother Mohamed Morsi. Only now is Russia asserting its prerogatives in Egypt thanks largely to the growing distance between the Egyptian military and the diffident US after Morsi's ouster.

Lastly, the sixth response is the standard Russian stock-in-trade, inherited wholesale from the Soviet Union, strong opposition – both regionally and in the UN Security Council – backed with security, defense, and intelligence resources, when key interests are threatened. Namely, this has manifested as unwavering Russian support for Assad and his Ba'ath party, loyal allies providing the Russian Navy key basing access in the Mediterranean and a toehold in the Levant.

It is premature to assume Russia's response to the next global crisis will select from this pragmatic menu of strategy options, but Putin and Lavrov have shown a surprisingly deft hand at increasing the number and tone of responses Russia now can draw upon in its post-Soviet diplomatic arsenal, as this analysis of six discernible approaches reveals. Putin and Lavrov deserve credit for knowing when to not needlessly confront the US for purely ideological reasons and for being able to maximize energy resources and diplomatic levers. They complement this flexibility with an effective domestic and international messaging campaign against US power projection generally, but in the particularly in the

Middle East. Taken together, Russia's foreign policy maneuvers are largely able to offset a significant delta between Russian and American power and capabilities.

Taking a longer historical view, over the last half-century Russian/Soviet opposition to US efforts in the region was common, and expected, in the context of contesting every international area. What is uncommon is Russian success in blunting US efforts through judicious and flexible strategic pragmatism, particularly in the adroit navigation of international institutions, long vilified as mere extensions of Western hegemony. Despite almost blind American support for Israel and facing a Shia backlash due to partnership with the Shah of Iran and ham-fisted incursions into Lebanon, the US was able to maintain a strong influence in the region largely based on its strong alliances with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The US ability to broker deals with the major players in the region relegated the Soviets/Russians to seeking influence with weaker Middle Eastern nations like Syria. Russian influence hit a low point in the 1990s: the Soviet Union was forced to stand on the sidelines as the US and its allies routed the Soviet-equipped and trained Iraqi military and during the Yeltsin years, Russia was too wracked by internal issues to play any role in the region.

On the other hand, what could go wrong? Despite recent successes, Russia may still lose its footing in the region for several reasons. Among them is the fact that continued overt support to both Assad and Iran is not an effective way to endear oneself to the majority Sunni Arab world, a region historically suspicious of Russian involvement, especially in the context of the heated proxy conflict between Tehran and Riyadh. Further exacerbating Russian tensions with the Islamic world is the ongoing brutal crackdown against separatist efforts within the predominately Muslim areas of Chechnya and Dagestan. Heavy-handed security efforts in the run-up to the 2014 Olympics in Sochi may further rile Arab public sentiment. The recent terrorist bombing of public transportation nodes in Volgograd recalls the simmering terrorist danger and may indicate that a preemptive quasi-military campaign against regional militants will not follow Putin's preferred script for Sochi security. Continued internal terrorist attacks could divert Putin's focus back to near abroad and domestic security matters. Compounding domestic concerns is the economic house of cards on which the Russian economy is built. In particular, Russian Government budget and spending assumptions are based upon continued high prices for energy exports, something far from guaranteed.

Even if Russia is able to make continued inroads within the Islamic world while still closely supporting Assad and Iran and also cracking down on its Muslim minority, simmering issues within eastern Europe may force Russia to redirect and expend finite resources defending influence closer to home. Potential NATO expansion further east, specifically into Georgia, would almost certainly elicit a strong Russian response in both overt policy adjustments as well as other sub-rosa efforts. Additionally, the US-led effort to build ballistic missile defense sites within Eastern Europe is a continued irritant for Putin. Lastly, there are long-term factors likely limiting Russian influence in the Middle East: continued birth-dearth in Russia, growing domestic opposition to Putin by centrist Russians since his return to power, and economic calculations overly dependent on the fossil-fuel energy sector.

Just as the United Nations Resolution on Syria is significant in showcasing effective, pragmatic and surprisingly nuanced, Russian policy, the resolution further highlights internal US disputes hamstringing America's ability to project power internationally. The Obama administration's tepid Syrian strategy reflects a nation racked by a deepening political divide currently unable to determine how to marshal its potentially waning power in the coming decade. Increasing Russian involvement and apparent diplomatic power must therefore also be understood in context as a by-product of a – largely self-induced – weakening of American appetite for continued involvement in the Muslim world generally and thus the corresponding corrosion of its ability to dictate policy in the Middle East.

When faced with American policy paralysis it is only natural for Russia to step in to the degree that its interests dictate. This is the nature of the international system. Absent an imminent and existential threat to Israel, observers should expect to see a continued US response to future flashpoints in both Syria and the larger Islamic world that is incoherent and often stunted. Although the US maintains numerous interests in the region: preventing a nuclear-armed Iran, supporting Iraqi stability, ensuring unabated global access to oil, continued pursuit of al-Qa'ida and its associates, it appears increasingly unsure how best to pursue these goals. In contrast, Russia, enjoying the laurels of a more coherent strategy, and embracing a variable pragmatism more expertly calibrated to the intersection of national interest and the international system than ever before, may seize upon its success in Syria and thus endeavor to press its advantage

beyond the Islamic world as well. Another game of chess awaits the West.

Jeremy Parkhurst is a former US Air Force Officer and a current Department of Defense analyst. **David Gioe** is a former CIA Officer and a current PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge. This article is an expression of their personal views alone.

Something to add? Please comment below or tweet your response to [@Kings_review](#).

↑

Like Share  28

Tweet  5

Here

[Home](#)
[Blog](#)
[Contribute](#)
[About](#)

Elsewhere

[Twitter](#)
[Email](#)
[King's College](#)

About

The King's Review is an online magazine publishing academic journalism, based in King's College, Cambridge.

© King's Review 2014