

The Decline of Russian Power in the Middle East

**Stephen
Blank***

Abstract

This article provides a critical analysis of Russia's political involvements in the Middle East, and examines the successes and failures of Russia's policies in the region. The article argues that Russia has recently shown, particularly through its Syrian policy, that it is still a diplomatically skilled and politically powerful state in international politics, and that it continues to define the Middle East along Soviet lines, namely as an area of the world close to Russia's borders. This has led Russia to develop bilateral relations with the countries in the region, and as such, Moscow feels that it must get involved in the problems of individual states. By the same token, Russia maintains a rivalry with the U.S. in building relations with or conducting interventions in regional countries, indicating a continuum of the traditional strategy. The paper then provides an assessment of Russia's failures in its bilateral relations with Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Iran respectively. The article concludes that Russia is failing to convince Middle Eastern states to listen to its advice.

* Professor Stephen Blank is Research Professor of National Security Affairs at U.S. Army War College. The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, Defense Department, or the U.S. Government.

Observers of Syria's seemingly endless ordeal may be impressed by the single-minded obstinacy of Russian diplomatic activity that has frustrated a UN or other foreign intervention in the civil war. Certainly some Russian commentators are impressed by this obstinacy, and deem it a highly successful, even masterful, display of diplomatic ability and of Russia's power in world politics.¹ Indeed, superficially it would appear that Moscow has successfully tied the international community in knots regarding Syria, and demonstrated a commitment to its ally and to its principles that others might envy. But a deeper look might suggest that the absence of foreign intervention in Syria may stem as much from external vacillation, caution about intervention in a murky civil war, the incoherence of the opposition to the Assad regime, and indecisiveness among potential actors as Moscow's intransigence. Furthermore, in Syria's nightmare one may also discern the larger theme of the ongoing retreat of Russian power in the Middle East. In other words, the absence of foreign intervention may owe little to Russia's tenacious opposition.

It bears noting that Russia has consistently claimed not only that it opposes externally induced regime change and insists on a negotiated settlement between Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad and the rebels -which it is willing to mediate, but that it also wants and has advised Assad repeatedly to make concessions and reforms that the opposition had been demanding.² In a recent interview, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev stated his belief that Assad's obstinacy on this point represented a grave mistake.³ More recently, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov angrily denounced the insurgents' "obsession" with dethroning Assad which, allegedly has become the major obstacle to a negotiated peace.⁴ Yet Lavrov and the Russian government have also repeatedly made clear that they not only want Assad to stay but that even if they suggested otherwise he would not heed their advice. Therefore they will not press the issue.⁵ In other words, for all its talk of principle, Moscow has all along insisted on Assad's continuation in power and sold arms to one side in a civil war, a position that precludes its ability a mediating role despite statements of its readiness to

² Ellen Barry and Kareem Fahim, "Russia Calls for Meeting With Syrian Opposition," *New York Times*, December 28, 2012, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/world/europe/russia-urges-assad-to-negotiate-with-his-opponents.html>; Contributor, "Russia's Intransigence," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 5, 2013, at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/russias-intransigence.aspx?pageID=449&nID=38378&NewsCatID=396>

³ "Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Interview With CNN," www.government.ru, January 28, 2013

⁴ Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov's Introductory Speech and Answers to Questions From the Media During a Press Conference on the Results of the Activity of Russian Diplomacy in 2012, January 23, 2013", at www.mid.ru

⁵ Trenin, p. 22.

¹ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, www.carnegie.ru, 2013, p. 16

play such a role.⁶ Equally, Moscow's insistence on Assad retaining power indicates that despite its invocations of principle, the real issue for Russia is power, not principle.

Thus, despite its vaunted diplomatic success at the UN in preventing intervention, neither of the Syrian sides has heeded any of Russia's proposals or demands. Certainly Moscow has failed to persuade Assad to act in this direction, despite providing his regime with arms, money, and according to unconfirmed rebel charges, even tactical direction of some Syrian government operations.⁷ Indeed, even though Moscow will continue to provide Assad with weapons - despite its professed irritation at other states supplying weapons to the rebels—Assad has simply refused to heed Russian calls for reforms and concessions the insurgents. Instead he still considers them criminals.⁸

Neither is this failure of Russian diplomacy confined to Syria. Despite repeated calls upon the Palestinians to unite and upon Israel to stop build-

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁷ Simon Shuster, "Is Russia Running a Secret Supply Route to Arm Syria's Assad?" *Time Magazine*, November 29, 2012, *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty* <http://world.time.com/2012/11/29/is-russia-running-a-secret-supply-route-to-arm-syrias-assad/#ixzz2H9L3F9Pl>; "Flight Records Say Russia Sent Syria Tons of Cash," *Pro Publica*, November 25, 2012, <http://www.propublica.org/article/flight-records-list-russia-sending-tons-of-cash-to-syria>; Julian Borger, "Russian Military Presence in Syria Poses Challenge to US-Led Intervention," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/dec/23/syria-crisis-russian-military-presence>

⁸ "In Rare Speech, Assad Rejects Dialogue With Syria 'Puppet' Opposition," *www.haaretz.com*, January 6, 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/in-rare-speech-assad-rejects-dialogue-with-syria-puppet-opposition.premium-1.492226>

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ing new settlements and negotiate with the Palestinians, neither side has paid Moscow the slightest attention. Certainly the Quartet of powers of which it is a member is distinguished primarily by its inability to get anyone to take it seriously.⁹ Yet Moscow continues to support both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) while also building expanding commercial and political ties with Israel. While everyone benefits economically from these Russo-Israeli ties, none of the parties has heeded Russia regarding security issues. Furthermore, despite its valuable trade relations with Israel, the Israeli government openly views Russia's support for Hamas and Hezbollah - to whom Russian arms are going (surely with Moscow's knowledge and complicity) - as a classic example of a double standard whereby Moscow denounces terrorism but supports its proxies as being some-

⁹ Nathalie Tocci, *The EU, the Middle East Quartet and (In) effective Multilateralism*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2009, www.iai.it/pdf/Mercury/Mercury-epaper_09.pdf; Nathalie Tocci, "The Middle East Quartet and (In) effective Multilateralism," *Middle East Journal*, LXVII, NO. 1, Winter, 2013, pp. 29-44

thing other than terrorists.¹⁰

For example, Russia has consistently maintained that the Palestinians should unite and that therefore Hamas should take part in the discussions leading to the conference and ultimately as a member of the unified Palestinian delegation. As Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov said in 2007, “National unity in Palestine is the main determining condition for an independent Palestinian state.”¹¹ Consequently Moscow has regularly expressed its desire for this unification and its dismay whenever the perennial internecine strife between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas undermines this unity. Accordingly, Russia is constantly urging Hamas to support the PA, but it deals openly with Hamas while advocating Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with the PA and Hamas’ participation in negotiations with Israel.¹²

However, in pursuing this goal Russia has also had to maintain, in open defiance of the facts, that Hamas is not a terrorist organization. Since 2006 when President Putin invited Hamas’ leadership to Moscow after their elec-

¹⁰ Stephen Blank, “Putin Embraces Double Standard, in Middle East Crisis, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, July 20, 2006

¹¹ Marianna Belenkaya, “Russia Hopes Palestinian Unity Will be Restored,” *Moscow, 1 RIA Novosti, in English*, August 1, 2007, *FBIS SOV*, August 1, 2007

¹² Vladimir Radyuhin, “Russia Backs Abbas, Talks to Hamas,” *The Hindu*, August 1, 2007; Avi Isacharoff, “Hamas official: Russia invited us to Moscow in coming days,” *Ha’Aretz.com*, August 3, 2007; *Moscow, Interfax, in English*, January 21, 2008, *FBIS SOV*, January 21, 2008; *Moscow, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Internet Version, in English*, January 23, 2008, *FBIS SOV*, January 23, 2008

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tion victory, Russian authorities have allegedly tried to convince Hamas to renounce terrorism, recognize Israel, and abide by all previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements. Yet they imposed no conditions on the visit and seem unfazed by the fact that Hamas’ leadership continues to express its determination to destroy Israel.¹³ Putin even stated earlier that Russia did not recognize Hamas as a terrorist organization on its list of such groups. This emphasis on getting Hamas and the PA to unite continues to be a key point in Russian diplomacy.¹⁴ Yet nothing has changed Hamas’ outlook or *modus operandi*.

There are also other less obvious reasons for Russia’s steadfast pursuit of engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah. According to the influential Senator and Chairman of the Federation Council’s Foreign Affairs Committee, Mikhail Margelov, the idea that Rus-

¹³ “Moscow Hopes Hamas Will Sign Up To Previous Agreements,” *Interfax*, March 3, 2006; “No Pressure Exerted While Discussing ‘Road Map-Hamas Delegation Member,’” *Interfax*, March 3, 2006

¹⁴ “Turkey, Russia Call for Talks With Hamas,” *China Daily*, May 13, 2010, www.englihs.cri.cn/6966/2010/05/13/189s/569393

sia has good relations with Hamas is merely an illusion. The real reason for opening those ties is that Moscow cannot afford to forego contacts with any potentially important player lest it be deprived of leverage over them, and find itself reacting to other players' initiatives. This posture highlights Russia's regional weakness, not its strength. Margelov stated that,

We are in communication, which is mostly of an informational nature for us. When there is a player on the political arena, it would be just too fantastic for those backing this player if we allowed them a monopoly in using it. Therefore, it is better to speak with HAMAS directly than to depend on the Iranians or Syrians, who will dictate to us their conditions for talking with HAMAS. But we are under no illusion about the fact that HAMAS is heterogeneous: in Gaza, in a more subdued state in the West Bank, and in Syria.¹⁵

But it is also clear that there are factions in Russia who would, if they could, go further in supporting Hamas. In 2006-7 Chief of Staff General Yuri Baluevsky even intimated that Russia might sell weapons to Hamas, only to be corrected by Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, who

¹⁵ Shimon Briman, "Interview with Senator Mikhail Magelov," *www.Izrus.com in Russian*, January 27, 2010, FBIS SOV, January 27, 2010

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stated that Russia would only do so with Israel's approval.¹⁶ Indeed Israel's intelligence community reported in 2010 that despite the 2008-9 war with Israel, Hamas had amassed 5000 rockets and extended some of these rockets that it acquired from Iran. Its report concluded that Hamas has not only rearmed but is looking to extend the range of its missiles and fire multiple tubes from vehicles. Hamas has also acquired Russian SA-7 and SA-14 anti-air missiles and AT-3 and AT-5 anti-tank weapons, either from Iran or Syria. As a result the military assessment was that another war with Hamas in 2010 was likely, but it came instead in 2012.¹⁷ Of course, it is inconceivable that Moscow did not know about these transfers to Hamas or similar ones to Hezbollah.

¹⁶ "Hard Talk Awaits Lavrov in DC", at www.kommersant.com/page.asp?id=654562, March 3, 2006

¹⁷ "Israel Intel: Hamas Has Amasses 5,000 Rockets Since 2009 War", at www.worldtribune.com, January 28, 2010

Meanwhile Hamas has continued to conduct terrorist operations and rocket attacks against Israel despite Russia's urging to desist.¹⁸ But none of this has changed Russia's outlook on Palestinian unity and the need for Hamas to play a role in the talks. After all, its sponsorship of Hamas helps ensure that it has cards to play in the peace process and that its voice will be heard there. The Hamas-Russia relationship within Moscow's overall framework of relations here is quite revealing. Russia regards its contacts with Hamas as its "contribution" to the Peace Process and will continue pursuing these contacts regardless of Hamas' inflexibility on Israel.¹⁹ When President Medvedev met with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in Damascus, he urged not just reconciliation with the PA but also Israeli engagement with Hamas.

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While this may have surprised Israel, it is a consistent point in Russian poli-

18 "Hamas Chief: 'No 'Prospect' of Israeli-Arab Peace Deals", at www.einnews.com, February 9, 2010

19 Moscow, *Interfax-AVN Online*, in English, December 9, 2009, *FBIS SOV*, December 9, 2009

cy.²⁰ And Israeli commentators know it. Thus Zvi Magen observed that what disturbs Russia about Hamas is not its attacks on Israel but its refusal to unite with the PA. Magen observed that Moscow clearly distinguishes between internal terrorism, which it regards as an exclusively internal matter, and groups like Hamas that it wishes to cultivate and with whom it aims to maintain contacts. Therefore, and in order to safeguard its ability to maintain contacts with everyone, Moscow wants to prevent further Hamas rocket attacks on Israel. But this is essentially irrelevant to the issue of terrorism in its eyes.²¹

Russia has advanced numerous reasons for inviting Hamas to Moscow and for, since then, conducting an annual round of meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov and its representatives. In 2006, after Hamas' election victory, Putin said that Hamas had won a democratic election that Moscow was bound to respect, that it had never recognized Hamas as a terrorist movement, and that Russia tries to work with all sides.²² It is more accurate, of course, to say that Putin saw in Hamas' election win in 2005 an American defeat and opportunity for Russia to make gains at Wash-

20 "Israel Slams Medvedev's Hamas Call," www.aljazeera.net, www.einnews.com, May 13, 2010

21 Zvi Magen, "Russia Between Terrorism and Foreign Policy," Tel Aviv, *Institute for National Security Studies*, in English, April 18, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, April 21, 2010

22 Moscow, *Rossiia TV*, in Russian, February 9, 2006, *FBIS SOV*, February 9, 2006; Pavel K. Baev, "Moscow's Initiative: Your Terrorist is Our Dear Guest," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 13, 2006

Hamis is also perfectly willing to call the Chechen insurgency a purely domestic Russian affair.

ington's expense.²³ So today, while Foreign Minister Lavrov has consistently urged Hamas to reconcile with the PA, to adopt a more flexible tone with Israel, and to cease overtly radical acts, he has failed to achieve any of those objectives.²⁴

Meanwhile Hamas understands Russia's game and flatters Moscow's desire to be seen as an important player in the Middle East. Hamas' leaders invariably argue that Russia can play an important role in the Middle East settlement, that Moscow's invitation to talk exposes the bankruptcy of the U.S. position in the Middle East, and most importantly that there is a need for a power like Russia to balance out the U.S. in the Middle East.²⁵ Hamas is also perfectly willing to call the Chechen insurgency a purely domestic Russian affair.²⁶ All this is music to

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Russia to Urge Hamas to Abandon Radicalism-Russian ME Envoy, www.kuna.net.kw, February 10, 2006; "Lavrov Asks Mish'al To Sign Reconciliation Agreement Quickly. PA Rejects Arab Pressure Before HAMA Sings Egyptian Document," *Gaza, Qudsnet in Arabic*, February 9, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, February 9, 2010; *Moscow, ITAR-TASS*, in *English* February 8, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, February 8, 2010;

²⁵ *Gaza. Al-Aqsa Satellite Channel Television*, in *Arabic*, February 13, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, February 13, 2010; *Moscow, ITAR-TASS*, in *English*, February 8, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, February 8, 2010; *Moscow, ITAR-TASS*, in *English*, November 7, 2008, *FBIS SOV*, February 7, 2008

²⁶ "Hamas Leader Says Chechnya Is Russia's 'Internal Problem,' Chechen Rebels Protest," *Associated Press*, March 5, 2006

Moscow's ears. Nonetheless, as Russian journalist Vitaly Portnikov wrote, all Moscow achieved is to show that Hamas can come to Moscow and utter its anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli screed with impunity.²⁷

Russia apparently believes that it has the Hamas card to play in the negotiations around the Peace Process, and that this confers upon it the role and status of a key player. Moreover, its position as a sponsor of Palestinian unity, and a player that can talk to everyone increases its credibility across the larger Arab world. Thus King Abdullah of Jordan has remarked that Russia has an important role to play in creating a Palestinian state.²⁸ But Russia's justifications for this position are incredibly hypocritical and can only make sense in the Realpolitik mentality that it has developed. Thus in 2007, the Russian ambassador to Israel, Andrei Demidov, stated that Israel must talk with Hamas no matter what it does. But when asked about Russia's refusal to talk with Chechen terrorists he stated that this is because the Chechen problem is an internal: "We decide how to settle the problem." Moreover, in complete defiance of the facts, he claimed that Moscow has settled Chechnya by peaceful means and created a government, parliament, and judicial system there. He even recommended that Is-

²⁷ Vitaly Portnikov, "Promises to Palestine," *Moscow*, www.polikom.ru, in *Russian*, January 11, 2008, *FBIS SOV*, January 11, 20-08

²⁸ *Moscow, Interfax*, in *English*, March 10, 2010, *FBIS SOV*, March 10, 2010

rael learn from Russia's success.²⁹

This breathtakingly hypocritical statement reveals the true Realpolitik calculations behind Russian policy along with its implicit belief that Israel is not truly a sovereign state while Russia is. Thus while Russia's sovereignty is inviolable, it can tell Israel to negotiate with terrorists who seek its destruction. Not surprisingly, Israel has replied that Hamas is no different than the Chechen terrorists and just as it supported Russia against them it demands Russian support against Hamas.³⁰ But this line falls on deaf ears in Moscow.

Similarly Moscow's efforts to win friends and influence in Iraq at Washington's expense through large-scale arms sales has seriously misfired. Iraq cancelled the deal it had only just negotiated on the grounds of corruption.³¹ Finally Iran has ignored Russia's calls for Tehran to shut down its nuclear project. Yet Russia continues to act as Iran's defense lawyer in the 5+1 negotiating process and has even announced its willingness to renegotiate energy and arms deals with Iran.³² Meanwhile its government also de-

nies that Iran has a military nuclear program.³³ Iran, for its part, has again indicated its desire for energy, space, and other deals with Russia upon whom it clearly counts to block further international sanctions.³⁴ Meanwhile, Russian relations with Turkey have declined, not least over differences concerning Syria.³⁵

This perspective shows that Russia is subsidizing or rewarding many Middle Eastern governments and movements, yet none of them pay attention to its wishes or advice. This does not mean that Russian power is or has become irrelevant to security outcomes here, far from it. But the appearance of this trend in different milieus and across different agendas suggests a continuation of a long-term and deep structural decline that began over a generation ago. While Russia will still strive toward - and achieve - occasional gains and attempt to enhance its overall capabilities, an examination of trends affecting Russian policy in Syria and the Middle East suggests that it will become increasingly difficult and costly for Moscow to make

29 Herb Keinon, "Interview With Andrei Demidov," *Jerusalem, Jerusalem Post*, in English, February 16, 2007, FBIS SOV, February 16, 2007

30 Barak Ravid and News Agencies, "Israel to Russia: Hamas is Like the Chechen Terrorists," www.Haaretz.com, May 13, 2010

31 "Iraq Cancels \$4.2bn Russian Arms Deal Over 'Corruption'," *BBC News Middle East*, November 10, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20278774>

32 Moscow, *Interfax-AVN Online*, in English, February 8, 2012, Open Source Center, foreign broadcast Information Service, Central Eurasia, (FBIS SOV), February 8, 2012

33 Moscow, *Interfax-AVN Online*, in English, April 28, 2012, FBIS SOV, April 28, 2012

34 Bill Gertz, "The Moscow-Tehran Axis," *Washington Free Beacon*, July 19, 2012, Moscow, *RIA Novosti*, in Russian, September 3, 2012, FBIS SOV, September 3, 2012; Moscow, *Interfax*, in English, February 12, 2013, FBIS SOV, February 12, 2013; Tehran, *IRNA*, in Persian, February 11, 2013, FBIS SOV, February 11, 2013; "Iran Wants to Develop Space ties With Russia," *RIA Novosti*, February 12, 2013

35 Stephen Blank and Younkyoo Kim, "Russo-Turkish Divergence (Part I): The Security Dimension," *MERIA*, XVI, No. 1, March, 2012, www.gloria-center.org April 27, 2012; Idems., "Russo-Turkish Divergence (Part II): The Energy Dimension," *MERIA Middle East Review of International Affairs*, XVI, NOP, 3, September, 2012

these moves, achieve those gains, or, perhaps more importantly, sustain them, or gain genuine local support. Moreover, in several instances it has already begun to fall discernibly short of its objectives.

Even before Syria's civil war it was clear that, as observed by British historian Niall Ferguson, "Russia, thanks to its own extensive energy reserves, is the only power that has no vested interest in stability in the Middle East."³⁶ As one 2004 commentary at the meeting of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries) noted,

When you consider that a large proportion of the OIC member countries are 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."³⁷

This observation also highlights the second fundamental driver of Russian policy, namely the *a priori* presupposition of virtually global conflict or rivalry with the United States. Since Russian analysts still define the Middle East along Soviet lines, namely as an area of the world that is close to Russia's borders (as if nothing happened since 1989 to change those borders), any achievement of the U.S. in helping to provide a legitimate order here is defined as being an intrinsic threat to Russia's interests and status. Thus participation in the Quartet along with the U.S. and European foreign ministers gives Moscow the pretext or foothold it seeks to claim equality with the U.S. and legitimate rights to intervene on behalf of its own interests. Indeed, beginning in 2004 when the U.S. proposed a Greater Middle East approach to bring democracy to the region, but was also visibly in disarray due to the war in Iraq, Russia decided to step up

³⁶ Quoted in Gordon G. Chang, "How China and Russia Threaten the World," *Commentary*, June 2007, p. 29

³⁷ Dmitriy Bagiro, "New World Order: Russian Alternative," *Moscow, Politkom.ru in Russian*, June 17, 2004, , *FBI'S SOV*, June 17, 2004

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its game and occupy at least some of the power vacuum.³⁸

What then does Russia want? What is Russian foreign policy supposed to achieve other than warding off threats? In line with the obsession with *being* a great power, Russia wants to be recognized as such throughout the world, and have a voice in all major international issues, now including the organization of global financial institutions.³⁹ And it wants to compel the U.S. to take its views into account and thus surrender its power in world affairs. To this end it insists upon the concept of multipolarity in world politics. The Syrian crisis embodies Moscow's demands and arguments.

38 Moscow, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, in Russian, March 3, 2006, FBIS SOV, 2006

39 President Dmitri A. Medvedev, *Vystuplenie na XII Petersburgskom Mezhdunarodnom Ekonomicheskom Forum*, June 7, 2008, www.kremlin.ru (Henceforth Medvedev, *Vystuplenie*)

The Syrian Debacle

Moscow has articulated a sophisticated argument to defend its support for Assad's regime. It consists of the following precepts.

- Since this is a civil war, Syrians should resolve it without foreign intervention. Moscow believes that intervention is responsible for the civil war, following an effort to depose Assad and strike at Iran if not Russia.⁴⁰ Therefore while Russian arms sales are a matter of legal interstate agreements, it is outrageous that Arab states and the US are supporting arms flows to the rebels.
- It is even more outrageous to Russia that the West wants to flout international law (which Moscow pretends it is nobly defending) and use the Right to Protect (R2P) to intervene in Syria and remove the government. This builds on the Libya precedent that the West used to attack and unseat Qaddafi and conforms to a general Western policy of imposing "democracies" at gunpoint, especially in areas that threaten Russia's vital interests close to its borders.⁴¹

40 These statements also reflect Moscow's paranoia and habit of projecting onto others what it thinks it would do or what they might do to it. Since it denies that legitimacy or reality of an indigenous opposition movement based on its own experience in stage-managing uprisings and its fear of a domestic one, it attributes all such phenomena to "outside agitators" and powers.

41 Trenin, pp. 1-20

- Putin and Lavrov have repeatedly stated that the only alternative to Assad is Islamic terrorism. Therefore there must be a negotiated settlement that preserves Assad's rule. Moreover, Russia is willing to host and act as the mediator for a conference to this end, i.e. to preserve its influence at all costs. It blames the recent violence in Mali and Algeria on the Western intervention in Libya and weapons transfers to the new Libyan regime (without much proof or regard for the nature of Mali's and Algeria's own Al-Qaida factions), stating that the support for the rebels will only foment civil war and Islamist terrorist regimes as in Egypt and Libya.⁴²

Ostensibly these are principled arguments based on international law. But nobody is listening. In fact they are utterly self-serving, even hypocritical. Putin's admission that the war with Georgia in 2008 had been planned for two years with the conscious use of separatists to foment it should also serve as a reminder that security in Eurasia cannot be taken for granted.⁴³ That Moscow justified its war on the grounds of the R2P and Article 51 on self-defense in the UN charter, while it simply bypassed UN approval for its attack, undermines Russia's declared attachment to the UN Charter.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ "Putin Admits Russia Trained S Ossetians Before 2008 Georgia war - Transcript President of Russia, www.kremlin.ru, August 10, 2012

Putin's admission also should remind us that Russia still refuses to accept the finality of the territorial settlement that occurred in the wake of the Soviet disintegration and perhaps even more importantly, there is abundant evidence that Russia does not really believe in the genuine and full sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. Neither do its strictures against Islamic revolution cut much ice since Russian officials have threatened recalcitrant CIS governments with the forcible incitement of just such a revolution.

On November 15, 2011 Valery Yazev, Vice-Speaker of the Russian Duma and head of the Russian Gas Society, openly threatened to incite an "Arab Spring" in Turkmenistan if Turkmenistan did not renounce its "neutrality" and independent sovereign foreign policy, including its desire to align with the Nabucco pipeline. Yazev said that,

Given the instructive experience with UN resolutions on Libya and the political consequences of their being 'shielded from the air' by NATO forces, Turkmenistan will soon understand that only the principled positions of Russia and China in the UN Security Council and its involvement in regional international organizations — such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Orga-

nization), Eurasian Economic Union – can protect it from similar resolutions.⁴⁴

In other words, Turkmenistan should surrender its neutrality and independent foreign policy and refrain from exporting gas to Europe; otherwise Moscow will incite a revolution on its territory. Other Russian analysts and officials threatened that if Turkmenistan adheres to the EU's planned Southern Corridor for energy transshipments to Europe that bypass Russia, Moscow will have no choice but to do to Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan what it did to Georgia in 2008.⁴⁵ Mikhail Aleksandrov, a department chief of the state-sponsored Institute on the CIS also opined that NATO's Libya operation gave Moscow the right to use force in the Caspian Basin.⁴⁶

What Russia's arguments really reveal is its anger that the West disregards its interests: keeping Assad in power; displaying Russia as a great power capable of playing its old role of thwarting U.S. policies (long desired by Assad and similarly minded factions⁴⁷); and its clear anxiety about

both democratic revolution by a mobilized citizenry, and the prospect of Islamic rule, which could influence trends in Central Asia and the North Caucasus.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Moscow has also failed because despite the superficial sophistication of its arguments about defending principles of international law, in practice it has ended up with no leverage over Assad, despite sending him arms and, according to the rebels, even support in directing Assad's strategy and sending tanks through South Africa.⁴⁹ Indeed, some Russian analysts privately complain that by refusing to listen to Moscow, Assad has held Russian policy hostage and deprived Moscow of the political leverage it has "earned".⁵⁰ Given Moscow's increasing anxiety about the fate of its own regime and US policy, the only way Moscow can show itself as a great power is by obstruction in the UN and displays of force. Thus it has thrice sent its navy into the Mediterranean near Syria, ostensibly for naval exercises, but in reality to pretend to deter a nonexistent Western attack. At the same time, this pattern of gunboat diplomacy ap-

44 "Senior MP Advises Turkmenistan to Stick with Russia to Avoid Libya Fate," Moscow, Interfax, November 15, 2011, also available from BBC Monitoring

45 Vladimir Socor, "Moscow Issues Trans-Caspian Project Warning," Asia Times Online, December 2, 2011, www.atimes.com

46 Vladimir Socor, "Bluff in Substance: Brutal in Form: Moscow Warns Against Trans-Caspian Project," Eurasia Daily Monitor, November 30, 2011

47 For example: "Interview With Dr. Gassan Raslan, Ambassador of Syria to the Russian Federation," Moscow, Pravda Pyat, in Russian, March 5, 21997, FBIS SOV, March

5, 1997

48 Stephen Blank and Carol R. Saivetz, "Playing to Lose? Russia and the Arab Spring," *Problems of Post-Communism*, LIX, No. 1, January-February, 2012, pp. 3-14

49 Trenin, pp. 19-20; and communications with US experts in Washington February 2013

50 Trenin, p. 20

Indeed, some Russian analysts privately complain that by refusing to listen to Moscow, Assad has held Russian policy hostage and deprived Moscow of the political leverage it has “earned”.

pears to have become something of a standard policy response in Moscow to any challenges in the Near East, including Cyprus and Turkey’s threats against Cyprus.⁵¹

But none of these moves has had the slightest impact upon its targets in terms of getting them to change their policies or to take Russia seriously. Similarly, in the case of Iran, it is clear that Iran only appeals to Russia when it needs something, but ignores its advice. Increasingly it appears that in the Middle East Moscow may shout and brandish its naval stick, but the fact is, as Russia knows, it is a weak stick. And meanwhile, despite this noise, Russia is addressing an increasingly empty auditorium while the actors in today’s Middle Eastern narratives are writing their own scripts. Is it any wonder that Moscow’s frustrations are increasingly evident?

⁵¹ Stephen Blank, “Putin’s Agenda: Gunboat Diplomacy,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, December 12, 2011