



European Assessments and Concerns About Russia's Policies in the Middle East

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Summary

European perspectives on Russia's proactive policies in the Middle East are diverse across countries, political forces and public opinions, and tend to become less compatible with one another. Moscow is perfectly aware of these disagreements, so intrigues in the Middle East, and the Syrian intervention in particular, have become a major instrument for Russia's policy of simultaneously building bridges with and putting pressure on the European Union (EU). In the great variety of views, it is possible to distinguish four key European perspectives:

- Russia's power projection in Syria is a part of the evolving confrontation between the West and Russia and aims at exposing weaknesses in the US strategy in the Middle East. At the same time, Russia's entanglement in the Syrian war puts heavy pressure on its military and diverts capabilities from the task of establishing dominance on the Black Sea theater;
- Russia could be a useful partner in the struggle against terrorism, and the intervention in Syria opens opportunities for cooperation. At the same time, Moscow's initiatives in joining efforts against the threat of terrorism are mostly self-serving, and Russia's track record in counter-terrorism is dismal;
- Russia is a big part of the humanitarian problem in the Middle East and has no interest in being a part of any solutions. Moscow can claim a role to play in the region only as long as there are violent conflicts; and as the work proceeds to post-conflict reconstruction, this role evaporates;
- Russia expands its involvement in oil and gas projects in Iraq and the Eastern Mediterranean, and delivers on its part of the cartel agreement with OPEC on production cuts. At the same time, its main interest is in preventing new volumes of gas from coming to the European market and in ensuring an increase in the oil price.

What hampers significantly the development of EU responses to Russia's steps and intrigues is the disappearance of US leadership aggravated by increasingly typical opposition in Europe to Trump's gestures and initiatives.

Introduction

Russia's ambitions to turn its military intervention in Syria into a powerful lever for strengthening its positions and influence in the wider Middle East have generated strong and various responses in Europe, which remains unable to generate a coherent policy in this conflict-rich region. The countries more directly exposed to Russian military pressure, like Poland, tend to perceive Russia's activities as an element of global confrontation and interpret them as hostile advances against Western interests. Countries less threatened by Russian military power, particularly in Southern Europe, are inclined to see Russia as a stake-holder in conflict management and put emphasis on possible cooperation in counter-terrorism. There is a wide and strong disapproval, particularly in the left-leaning part of European public opinion, of Russia's disregard of the humanitarian problems in the region, exemplified by the airstrikes that decided the outcome of the battle for Aleppo. There is also a significant business interest to the deal-making of Russian oil and gas corporations in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Iraq, as well as to the cartel arrangements between Moscow and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). These different perspectives are often in conflict with one another, and the Russian leadership has space for maneuvering between European political positions and actors, while at the same time struggling to ensure sustainability of its own policies. Aggravating discord in Europe and disagreements between the United States and the European Union (EU) is in fact one of the key goals of Russia's policies in the Middle East.

This paper aims to evaluate the scope of differences in European views on Russia's policy in the Middle East by juxtaposing four key perspectives: a) traditional security perspective focused on the military aspects of Russian intervention in Syria; b) modern security perspective concerned with the threat of terrorism and avenues for cooperation with Russia in counter-terrorism; c) humanitarian perspective narrowing particularly on the problem of refugees; and d) the business perspective exploring the opportunities for joint projects in the oil and gas industry. The main proposition is that as these differences deepen, Moscow redoubles its efforts to exploit them, looking for additional opportunities created by the erosion of US leadership.

Intervention as a Part of Confrontation

The assessment of Russia's maneuvering in the Iraq-Syria war zone as an element of its strategy of confrontation with the West is prevalent in those European circles that put the focus on the task of containing the Russian threat. There are, indeed, good reasons to see the exercise in power projection targeting Syria as a manifestation of Moscow's preference for using military force as a key and indispensable instrument of policy. Every doctrinal document issued by President Vladimir Putin in the last two years, from the Military Doctrine (2014) to the "Basic Principles of State Naval Policy until 2030," defines US and NATO policies as the main source of threat to Russia and directs efforts and resources to countering them.¹ The proposition on confronting and defeating the US and NATO policies in the Middle East is spelled out in many mainstream

commentaries in Russian media.² For that matter, Moscow's tentative involvement in the chaotic civil war in Libya is interpreted by many European experts as attempts at sabotaging the EU efforts at bringing this violent mess to an end.³

The main clash of Russian and Western interests is certainly happening in Syria, where Moscow's massive support for President Bashar al-Assad's regime forces European states, including France, to moderate their stance on removing it from power. The Russian intervention was launched partly with the aim of distracting attention from the deadlock in the Donbas war zone, but has, during two years of non-stop airstrikes, turned into a self-propelling enterprise, which shapes rather than serves Moscow's aims in the region. The first direct contention happened in November 2015, when Turkey requested and received support from NATO in the course of the crisis triggered by the lethal intercept of a Russian Su-24M bomber.⁴ Tensions eased as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan opted for reconciliation after the failed coup in July 2016, but several new spikes were registered in April 2017, for instance, after the US missile strike on the Shayrat airbase.⁵

These spasm of tensions involved Russia and US, and European states generally preferred to express only cautious support to US actions.⁶ The introduction of new sanctions against Russia by the legislation initiated by the US Congress and signed into law by President Donald Trump on August 2, has raised the level of confrontation and upset many Europeans.⁷ At the same time, there is a peculiar twist to the intrigue as Syria now turns out to be the only place where military cooperation between US and Russia continues to function.⁸ The new US sanctions regime covers Russia as well as Iran, and European politicians seek to preserve the parameters of the July 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran while at the same time discouraging a deepening strategic partnership between Russia and Iran.⁹

Changeable current European responses to the mutating Syrian disaster add color to the basic strategic picture of NATO building up capabilities for containing Russia's aggressive behavior in the Baltic Sea and Black Sea theaters. In this perspective, the grouping of Russian forces deployed in Syria is a major challenge to NATO's goal of enhancing stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁰ More importantly, however, the open-ended operation in Syria makes it necessary for Moscow to divert resources and attention from the two main theaters on the Western "front," so that the Black Sea Fleet cannot concentrate on the task of establishing dominance in its area of immediate responsibility and has to deal with the hard task of servicing the sea line of communication from Novorossiysk to Tartus via the Turkish Straits.¹¹ Russia's "victory" in Syria turns into a costly and high-risk entrapment, which lessens the pressure on such European states as Romania, which is committed to the plan of building the European missile defense system.

Elusive Cooperation in Counter-Terrorism

The start of the Russian intervention in Syria coincided with a wave of terrorist attacks in Europe, including the coordinated multiple-casualties attack in Paris on November 13, 2015. That deterioration of domestic security prompted many European politicians to reconsider Putin's invitation to build a "broad anti-terrorist coalition," spelled out in his September 2015 UN General Assembly speech. French President François Hollande made a visit to Moscow and sought to establish practical military cooperation in the air attacks on Islamic State targets in Syria.¹² Yet, NATO support for Turkey during the sharp escalation of tensions with Russia caused by the downing of the Russian bomber that November effectively undercut that fledgling cooperation.

And the management of that emotionally charged crisis gradually made it clear that Moscow can hardly be a reliable partner in the struggle against terrorism.¹³ The Brussels bombing on March 22, 2016, for that matter, failed to produce any new initiatives on developing cooperation with Russia.

Reconfiguring and coordinating their policies in countering terrorism, major European states encountering this threat, including Germany, directed their expanded efforts on two interconnected goals. The first one was suppression of terrorist networks created by their citizens returning home after partaking in fighting in the Iraq-Syria war zone and facilitated by radical Islamic propaganda. The second goal was defeating ISIS in its core territory in Iraq and Syria; and European states directly and mostly indirectly contributed to the war efforts of the US-led coalition. Russia has been of no relevance in the struggle on European domestic fronts, and of some but dubious help in Syria.

The work on exterminating the terrorist networks in Europe was seriously complicated by the evolving problem of migration, which reached crisis proportions in late-2015–early 2016, but has been only partly mitigated by the EU deal with Turkey reached in spring 2016.¹⁴ Russia attempted rather awkwardly to play on that problem, which backfired badly in the European public opinion, even if the accusations of Moscow “weaponizing” the migration problem were rather inflated.¹⁵ More important was the difference in dealing with the traffic of potential volunteers for the Jihadist cause in Iraq and Syria. European states, in particular France and Belgium, focused their efforts on preventing their citizens from traveling to the war zone and on investigating the recruiters for ISIS.¹⁶ Moscow, to the contrary, saw no reason to check the flow of rebels from the North Caucasus to the Middle East and even facilitated it via FSB channels, expecting that this emigration would improve domestic security.¹⁷ This encouragement of departure has started to backfire, but Moscow remains reluctant to admit it. For that matter, French President Emmanuel Macron had expressed his condolences regarding the knifing in Surgut in August 2017, several days before the Russian authorities admitted that it was indeed an ISIS-inspired terrorist attack.¹⁸

One new development in this problem is the growth of extremist networks among migrants from Central Asia, which manifested itself in terrorist attacks in Istanbul (January 1, 2017), Stockholm (April 7, 2017), and St. Petersburg (April 3, 2017). Europeans have good reasons to be worried about it, suspecting that Moscow is the main recruiting hub for these networks; but the Russian authorities remain uncooperative, not least because a major source of radicalization is the severe exploitation of labor migrants from Central Asia in Russia.¹⁹

Russia simultaneously presented itself as a major force in the fight against ISIS in Syria, but refused to join the US-led coalition, asserting that focusing narrowly on ISIS allows other terrorist groups to grow. This reasoning is not without merit, but when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov converted it into an accusation that the US always “spared” Jabhat An-Nusra (affiliated with al-Qaeda) in order to use it to overthrow the al-Assad regime, a reasonable assessment became an exercise in dirty propaganda.²⁰ Moscow was careful to target this attack on US policy, making it possible for Lavrov to suggest to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini to put aside the “artificial obstacles” in Russia-EU relations, first of all sanctions, and to concentrate on the real agenda of counter-terrorism.²¹ Mogherini was not exactly enthusiastic about this idea, knowing that, in reality, the situation was exactly the opposite: Sanctions are a manifestation of deep disagreements between the EU and Russia on the norms and values underpinning the European security system, and the prospects for cooperation in counter-terrorism are actually slim. What stands in the way of such cooperation is the plain fact that Russia

is firm set on treating all anti-Assad forces in Syria (with a possible exception of the Kurdish YPG) as terrorist organizations.²² This strategy of winning the war for al-Assad by camouflaging the extermination of rebels of all persuasions as counter-terrorism remains unacceptable for Europeans.

Humanitarian Disconnect

What constitutes a major negative influence over European views on Russia's policies in the Middle East and, in particular, on the Russian intervention in Syria is Moscow's complete and sincere disregard of the humanitarian consequences of its actions. The EU places a strong emphasis on the humanitarian agenda of its foreign and security policy, which is prioritized by Germany. Even small European states, such as Norway and Sweden, take pride in their reputations as "humanitarian superpowers."²³ Moscow seeks to counter accusations of indiscriminate violence by alleging that the US is covering up the "collateral damage" from its airstrikes, particularly in the battles for Mosul and Raqqa.²⁴ This propaganda cannot whitewash Russia's reputation as an accomplice in multiple and continuing crimes against humanity.

The issue of the deliberate targeting of civilian populations in Russian airstrikes emerged in the European media already in the first weeks of the intervention, but the most charged outcry was caused by the protracted battle for Aleppo. Moscow's flat denials of strikes on humanitarian convoys compelled even left-leaning commentators to condemn its "barbaric" methods of waging war and to expose the lies of Russian propaganda.²⁵ French President Hollande made an emotional speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2016 on the plight of the "martyred city" of Aleppo and asserted that "enough is enough."²⁶ Putin had to cancel a visit to Paris but was not particularly impressed with Hollande's hollow stance, so the offensive on Aleppo continued until full "liberation." Another outcry of anxiety followed the chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun, on April 4, 2017; British officials instantly called for holding Russia responsible for that crime.²⁷ The EU Foreign Service was particularly upset because the shock from the use of chemical weapons overshadowed the long-prepared donor conference in Brussels, where pledges for aid to Syria amounted to \$6 billion, much below \$12 billion pledged in 2015.²⁸

This indignation against Russian intervention makes most Europeans suspicious of Moscow's ongoing efforts at managing the Syrian conflicts by establishing the so-called "de-escalation zones." They are seen as both an attempt to consolidate the gains on the ground and legitimize the victory of the al-Assad regime. Furthermore, those "de-escalation zones are seen as a draft for splitting up the Syrian state, which is freely discussed by Russian commentators.²⁹ European attitudes toward the negotiations in the so-called "Astana format" involving Russia, Turkey and Iran are certainly far from coherent. On the one hand, many European politicians, particularly in France, as well as in the EU Headquarters, resent being excluded from the peace-making process, the parties to which tend to take for granted the prospect that Europe will provide the bulk of funding for the post-war reconstruction.³⁰ On the other hand, the discourse on a stronger EU role in Syria typically camouflages the reluctance of many European actors to shoulder any direct responsibility for bringing the devastating war to an end.³¹ The new French President Macron performs a tricky diplomatic dance, first confronting Putin on his backing for the Syrian regime, then noting that there is no "legitimate successor" to al-Assad, and then complimenting Trump on his back-channel deal with Putin on a ceasefire in the southeastern corner of Syria. But Macron's own stance on the continuing humanitarian disaster is ambivalent at best.³²

European views on the mutating Syrian war and Russia's role in it are significantly influenced by the evolving refugee crisis, which for such states as Italy and Germany constitutes the main humanitarian dimension of this protracted catastrophe. The escalation of the refugee problem in 2015–2016 produced a strong drive for a greater EU role in Syria, but presently the stabilization of the outflow of refugees results in a slackening of that drive.³³ The main part of this problem is now the maritime trafficking of migrants from Libya to Italy. Russia can, in principle, be a part of the solution, but prefers to play a low-cost spoiler role. Moscow has granted tangible support to “Field-Marshal” Khalifa Haftar in Tobruk, who contests power with the “Government of National Accord” (GNA) in Tripoli led by Fayeze al-Sarraj. When Italy reached an agreement with the GNA on deploying its Navy to interdict the traffickers, Haftar promptly rejected it. And while he has no capacity to “repel” Italian patrol crafts, he is firm set to deny them access to ports in Eastern Libya.³⁴

In general, while Moscow perceives its ability to squeeze European sensitivities to humanitarian problems as an important political advantage, in many European states, from Norway and Finland to Germany and Italy, there is a growing indignation about Russia's attempts to aggravate the need for aid and to exploit the refugee crisis as means of manipulation of conflicts.

Energy Matters the Most

A very particular perspective on Russia's policies in the Middle East comes from those European business circles that are engaged in, or evaluating the prospects of joint ventures in energy projects in the Eastern Mediterranean or in the Persian Gulf. Understanding is growing that the newly-achieved US energy self-sufficiency diminishes Washington's interest in engaging with the Middle East, while Europe continues to be dependent on oil and gas imports from the region and Russia is keen to cut into this dependency.³⁵

While Russian propaganda typically presents the US “occupation” of Iraq as an execution of the desire to take control over its oil reserves, in fact, Gazprom-Neft, Rosneft and Lukoil are successfully developing production and exploration projects in both southern Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. In a similar way, the newly-discovered gas resources of the Eastern Mediterranean are usually described in Moscow as a subject of fierce competition, which precludes their development for the European market, while in fact, Russian companies are aggressively expanding in this area.³⁶ New sanctions legislated by the US Congress are targeting particularly joint energy projects with Russia and so cause much anxiety in the European oil and gas milieu.³⁷

The Russian energy sector is generally known to be badly affected by the price dynamics on the oil market, so the readiness of Rosneft and Gazprom-Neft to invest in new projects in northern Iraq in 2017 has taken many European stakeholders by surprise.³⁸ The main destination of the new crude is the European market (an expansion of the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline is in progress), so a partnership with such “usual suspects” as Total and ENI could be mutually beneficial. The problem with this enterprise is that the deal was signed by Rosneft directly with the Kurdish Regional Government, and this constitutes a direct encouragement from Moscow to the cause of independence of Iraqi Kurdistan.³⁹ The EU is cautiously opposed to the prospect of a break-up of Iraq, but it seeks primarily to ensure that Iran proceeds with opening up for business on the condition of the full implementation of the July 2015 nuclear deal. And in that, European interests are fully compatible with Russia's stance.⁴⁰

In the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia spins a convoluted energy intrigue, showing the seriousness of its intentions by partaking in the gas development in Egypt, where Rosneft paid ENI as much as \$1.13 billion for a 30 percent stake in the “Zohr” project at the end of 2016.⁴¹ This deal is endangered by the new sanctions, so European lobbyists managed to persuade the US Congress to exempt from punishment joint projects in which Russian companies own less than 33 percent of shares.⁴² The peculiar business-political paradox here is that while Russia shows eagerness to partner with ENI, Total and Noble Energy in the development of various gas fields, including “Aphrodite” in Cyprus and “Leviathan” in Israel, it is fundamentally not interested in the arrival of this gas to the European market, because it will inevitably reduce its own export niche.⁴³

Another new development that has not been as yet quite comprehended by Russia’s European business partners is the first-ever workable agreement between Moscow and OPEC on oil production cuts. The deal has not yielded the expected results in terms of pushing the oil price up, but Russian officials tried to convince Putin that a great success had been achieved.⁴⁴ European experts venture mixed opinions about the prospects of this cartel arrangement, which certainly violates the principles of free trade but cannot significantly weaken the trend of abundant supply on the global oil market.⁴⁵ The real issue with this deal is that it adds to the problems in the Russian energy sector, where sustained under-investment is aggravated by mismanagement and corruption. Rosneft is most severely affected by these problems; yet, its CEO, Igor Sechin, made the decision to grant the insolvent Venezuela a pre-payment of \$6 billion, which Russian experts can only explain as a cover-up for embezzlement.⁴⁶ European companies, including BP, which owns some 20 percent of Rosneft shares, have to evaluate carefully the risks of partnering with this crony-captured company, particularly as the sanctions regime is tightened.

Current affairs in the oil and gas business in the Middle East are always tumultuous, and Russian companies are eagerly fishing for opportunities in these murky waters. Still, the basic imperative for Moscow, about which European stakeholders are fully aware, is ensuring a significant increase in the oil price. Cartel deals on production cuts cannot deliver this result, so Russia’s only hope is a major armed conflict in the Persian Gulf, which is by no means an impossible proposition.

Conclusions and Implications

Disarray and discord are nothing new in European foreign policy-making and in debates on most key issues, so the spectrum of different views on Russia’s policy in the Middle East is presently perhaps only marginally wider than at the start of this decade, when the arrival of a new cold war appeared to be an improbable scare. What makes a big difference now is the erosion or even complete disappearance of US leadership, which used to be (with some significant exceptions, like the beginning of the Second Gulf War) a major formatting influence on European views and policies in the greater Middle East. European political and business elites, as well as fractured public opinions, are at a loss about the trajectory of interactions between US and Russia in the Middle East, and so they miss a key reference point for assessing the consequences and risks of Moscow’s policies in the region. There is now in Europe (with the notable exception of Greece) a widespread and well-deserved mistrust of Putin’s intentions, but the unique feature of the political landscape is that Trump is trusted even less.⁴⁷

The introduction of new US sanctions has extinguished the initially exuberant expectations in Moscow regarding a cultivation of special relations between Putin and Trump, and has made it

essential for the Kremlin to focus greater political effort and propaganda attention on Europe, in order to exploit the sharply increased trans-Atlantic disunity. Intrigues in the Middle East, and the Syrian intervention in particular, have been a major instrument for Russia's policy of building bridges with and putting pressure on the EU.⁴⁸ The application of this instrument is set to intensify, and Moscow will try its best to advance the proposition on the need for, and usefulness of cooperation in counter-terrorism. One example of such re-energized efforts is the initiative of the semi-official think tank Russian International Affairs Council to develop a channel with the European Commission for dialogue on the theme "Russia and the EU in the Greater Middle East."⁴⁹ In the Europeans' view, talk and dialogue are always good, but the rationale for cooperating with Russia in the hard struggle against terrorism has proven to be weak, and Moscow's pronounced disregard of humanitarian problems remains deeply disagreeable.

One particular issue pertaining to European perspectives is the highly unstable pattern of Russia-Turkey relations. The EU has arrived at an awkward and dubious position as it has to sustain the process of Turkey's accession but at the same time make it clear to the member states that there is no prospect of actually admitting it in. Poignant European criticism of the curtailing of democratic rights in Turkey since the failed coup in July 2016 has brought estrangement and tensions, particularly in German-Turkish relations.⁵⁰ Putin, to the contrary, has expressed full support to Erdoğan and proceeds with rehabilitating the partnership interrupted by the November 2015 air skirmish crisis. Concerns abound in many European quarters that further censure of Erdoğan's semi-authoritarian regime, justified as this reproach may be from the point of view of human rights violations, may push Turkey further into an alliance of sorts with Russia.⁵¹ In the oscillating but progressing confrontation between NATO and Russia in the Black Sea theater, Turkey's position is pivotal, so there is a strategic need to strengthen its commitment to and engagement with NATO, despite all the disarray in its severely purged military. The nearly done deal on purchasing the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles for the Turkish air defense system is certainly not making this task any easier, because the interoperability with NATO forces is set to suffer.⁵²

The pragmatic proposal to ensure an efficient management of the new confrontation with Russia often transforms in many European political circles into a denial of the reality of this confrontation, and this ambivalence, in turn, muddles the assessments of Russia's policies in the Middle East. Many Europeans, for that matter, find Putin's ability and readiness to maintain dialogue with all important parties to regional conflicts, from Israel and Saudi Arabia to Hamas and Iran, highly commendable and fitting with their preferences for carefully negotiated political solutions.⁵³ Middle Eastern actors are glad to talk with Putin, but there is little trust in his good will, so Moscow is unable to act as a mediator either in the old Israel-Palestinian conflict, or in the new Qatar crisis. An understanding also exists that Russia can claim a role to play only as long as there are violent conflicts; but as the political work proceeds to post-conflict reconstruction, this role evaporates.⁵⁴ This propensity for conflict manipulation, combined with the appraisal of military force as the most useful instrument of policy, and compounded with the need to ensure an increase in oil prices, makes Russia a very particular kind of stakeholder in the overlapping Middle Eastern areas of turbulence.

Overall, European views on Russian activities in the Middle East tend to become more diverse between countries and political forces of different orientations and less compatible with one another. Moscow tries to pursue proactive opportunistic policies using the Syrian intervention as a lever for entering other developing situations, and this makes the European policies reactive, slow and often incoherent. What significantly hampers the development of EU responses to

Russia's steps and intrigues is the disappearance of US leadership, aggravated by increasingly typical opposition to Trump's gestures and initiatives. The EU capacity for developing a coherent foreign and security policy is hardly going to increase. And regarding the Middle East, the weakness of German leadership is particularly apparent. Russia is at a great and deepening disadvantage in its confrontation with the West, so it cannot afford to miss opportunities for aggravating the trans-Atlantic discord, as well as the divisions inside the EU, emerging in the chaotic Middle East.

ENDNOTES

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