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Russia's new Middle Eastern role

By Spengler

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Russia has thrown a monkey wrench into Western plans for Syria by promising to deliver its top-of-the-line S300 surface-to-air missile system to the Bashar al-Assad government. Exactly when the missiles might arrive remains unclear; the last word from Moscow is that the missiles are not yet in place, which means the matter is up for bargaining.

It is humiliating for the West to trip over a game-changing Russian technology nearly a quarter of a century after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The larger scandal is that the West lacks countermeasures against the Russian system, the result of misguided defense priorities over the past dozen years. If the United States had spent a fraction of the resources it wasted in nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan on anti-missile technology, Russia would lack the bargaining chip in the first place. That's spilt milk, however, and the pressing question is: what should the West do now?

The questions to ask are:

1. Is Russia a rational actor?
2. If the answer to the first question is affirmative (as the overwhelming majority of analysts believe), what does it have to be rational about?
3. Can the United States do anything in the foreseeable future to change the present regime in Russia?
4. If the answer to the third question is affirmative, then what do we want to negotiate with Vladimir Putin?

The right way to go about this, I believe, is to draw a bright line between Russia's opportunistic meddling in Middle Eastern affairs and existential issues for the Russian state. Much as we may dislike the way the Russians manage their affairs, it isn't within the power of the West to change the character of the Russian regime.

What does Moscow want in the Middle East? It has taken a more active interest in the region's malefactors of late. Jean Aziz of Al-Monitor argues that Russian Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's April 28 meeting with Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon marks a turn in Russia's relationship with the Hezbollah. Russia's new alliance-that seems to be the right word-with the Lebanese terrorist organization implies a Russian commitment to carving out a sphere of influence.

On the other hand, Russia does not seem to want a full-blown alliance with the Iranian regime and its Syrian satrap. Iran is present suing Russia for failing to deliver the promised S300 system at the same time that Russia claims that it is sending the same system to Syria. Russia's refusal to honor its contract with Tehran is a signal that the Putin regime would not be heartbroken if someone were to obliterate Iran's nuclear bomb-making capacity. Russia has no interest in helping a fanatical regime deploy nuclear weapons on its southern flank.

On the other hand, Russia's support for the Assad regime is a fact of life. Russia may enjoy the paralysis of the West in the region and seek to embarrass the United States and its allies, but that is a secondary matter. It also may want to demonstrate to the world that it doesn't abandon allies the way that the United States abandoned former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Again, that is a minor matter. Russia's interest in the outcome of the Syrian civil war stems from two critical interests.

The lesser of these is the naval supply station at Tartus, which supports the expansion of Russia's naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The more important concern is Russia's fear of the Sunni jihadists who dominate the rebel opposition.

Russia has been fighting a brutal war against jihadists in the northern Caucasus for 20 years, punctuated by some of the most horrendous terrorist acts ever perpetrated, including the 2004 slaughter of 380 hostages on North Ossetia, mainly small schoolchildren. The term "paranoid Russian" may be a pleonasm, but in this case Russia has a great deal to be paranoid about. Caucasus terrorism spilled over into the United States with the Boston marathon bombing.

"In Russia, most analysts, politicians and ordinary citizens believe in the unlimited might of America, and thus reject the notion that the US has made, and continues to make, mistakes in the [Middle East]. Instead, they assume it's all a part of a complex plan to restructure the world and to spread global domination," wrote Fyodor Lukyanov on the Al Monitor website March 19.

Lukyanov, who chairs Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, dismisses this sort of thinking as a "conspiracy theory". But he is quite serious in his account of the Putin government's frame of mind. The Russian elite really think that the United States is creating chaos in the Middle East as a matter of geopolitical intent. Lukyanov wrote:

From Russian leadership's point of view, the Iraq War now looks like the beginning of the accelerated destruction of regional and global stability, undermining the last principles of sustainable world order. Everything that's happened since - including flirting with Islamists during the Arab Spring, US policies in Libya and its current policies in Syria - serve as evidence of strategic insanity that has taken over the last remaining superpower.

It is impossible to persuade Vladimir Putin that the Middle East policies of the past two American administrations were merely stupid, because Putin doesn't believe that stupid people rule great powers. All the stupid people he met are dead. From the Obama administration's vantage point, chaos in the Middle East is a matter for hand-wringing by the likes of anti-genocide crusader Samantha Power, now the designated ambassador to the United Nations. From the Russian point of view, it is an existential threat.

The ethnic Russian population is declining, and Russia well may have a Muslim majority by mid-century. If chaos envelops the Muslim world on its southern border, it may spread to Russia via the northern Caucasus. During the Cold War, America supported jihadis in Afghanistan and elsewhere to make trouble for the Soviet Empire (and properly so, because the Soviet threat to American security outweighed any inconvenience the US might suffer at the hands of jihadists). Russia is convinced that America still intends to promote jihad in order to destabilize its old Cold War opponent.

How should America respond?

First, the US should back the partition of Syria into a Sunni majority state and an Alawite rump state in the northwestern quadrant of the country, where the Russian navy station happens to be located. The Kurds should get autonomy, just like their Iraqi compatriots.

Turkey will object vociferously because it would advance Kurdish independence, which Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan views the way Captain Hook viewed the crocodile. Too bad for the Turks: someone has to lose here, and it might as well be they. Partition is the only way to stop the civil war and avoid mass murder in its wake. Total victory by either side would be followed by massacres. The most humane solution is a breakup on the precedent of the former Yugoslavia. Assad can remain in power in a rump state where the Alawites will be safe from Sunni reprisals, and the Russians can keep their fueling station. One wonders why the "responsibility to protect" crowd in Washington hasn't considered that.

Second, the US should use its influence with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to clean out the nastier jihadist elements among Syria's Sunni rebels. It should also make clear to the Russians that it will not interfere with their counter-terrorist operations in the Caucasus, grisly as these might be.

Third, the US should attack Iran and destroy its nuclear weapons capability and key Revolutionary Guard bases (and perhaps a few other things; various American flag officers have their own list of druthers).

Neutralizing Iran is the key: it eliminates the pipeline of support from Iran to Assad and various terrorist organizations, and reduces them to obnoxious but strategically unemployed local players.

Russia evidently has fewer objections to an American air strike on Iran than on Damascus. It has signaled this as clearly as it can by refusing to deliver the S300 system to the Iranian regime while promising to deliver it to the Syrian regime. The bad news is that we cannot extract Russia from the region; America has made too many blunders in the region to turn the clock back.

The good news is that the problems occasioned by Russia's enhanced role can be localized and contained. Basher al-Assad and his Alawite army bottled up in a redoubt would be an annoyance, not a strategic threat. A Sunni regime with a Kurdish autonomy zone in the remainder of the country would be susceptible to Western pressure to purge the more dangerous jihadists.

In fact, Russia has fewer objections to an American attack on Iran's nuclear program and foreign subversion capacity than does the Obama administration. It is painful to read American conservative Jeremiads against the resurgence of Russian influence in the Middle East, when few American conservatives openly propose a strike against Iran. They are afraid that voters don't trust them with guns after the poor results of the Iraq and Afghanistan nation-building campaigns.

It is much easier to rally the troops by shouting "The Russians are coming!" than to point out that the Obama administration's ideological aversion to using force against Iran is the core problem. In fact, Putin's position is more amenable to America's strategic requirements than Obama's, counterintuitive as that might sound.

More broadly, the US should draw a bright line between areas of the world where it has inviolable interests and areas subject to bargaining. It was a supreme act of stupidity to abandon the deployment of anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic as the Obama administration did in September 2009. Russia didn't like it, but Russia is not supposed to like it. Showing weakness to the Russians merely elicits contempt. The US should make clear that ties of culture and blood link the Poles and Czechs to the American people, and that we will stand behind them no matter what.

Ukraine is a different matter. Russians comprise half the population of Ukraine, and Russia cannot walk away from them, nor from the rest of the 22 million Russians left outside the Federation in the so-called near abroad after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

As I reported in a 2008 essay (Americans Play Monopoly, Russians Chess, Asia Times Online, August 19, 2008), "The desire of a few hundred thousand Abkhazians and South Ossetians to remain in the Russian Federation rather than Georgia may seem trivial, but Moscow is setting a precedent that will apply to tens of millions of prospective citizens of the Federation - most controversially in Ukraine."

America has no strategic interest in Ukraine. Nine years after the so-called Orange Revolution, the pro-Moscow Party of the Regions remains firmly in charge. The opposition is tainted with an ugly strain of anti-Semitism, as Rachel Ehrenfeld, director of the American Center of Democracy, reported May 30.

The nationalists whom Washington backed in the heady days after the invasion of Iraq are not exactly the good guys. What we have learned from a decade of bumbling is that Russia can have Ukraine if it wants it badly enough, and that we really don't want it anyway. Except for Hungary, Ukraine has the lowest fertility rate of any country in Europe. Its strategic importance will deteriorate along with its demographics.

The proposals above are stopgap measures to limit damage in a deteriorating situation. If the US really want to get Russia's attention, it needs to do precisely what Ronald Reagan and his team set out to do in 1981: convince the Russians that America would leapfrog them in military technology. That means aggressive funding of basic research on model of the old DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency). If Putin is persuaded that his residual advantage in surface-to-air missile technology has reached its best-used-by-date, he will be far more flexible on a range of negotiating issues.

I am painfully aware that the political environment is not conducive to this approach. That does not change the fact that it is what needs to be done.