3. The Astana Model: Methods and Ambitions of Russian Political Action

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Russian performance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region can arguably qualify as one of the most spectacular foreign policy success stories of President Vladimir Putin and his team in recent times. With relatively modest investments in blood and treasure, Moscow has managed to turn itself from an almost invisible, marginal player into a power broker of international stature with influence on most of the region's actors. Russia has succeeded in making it near impossible to resolve many Middle East security problems without Moscow's involvement.

Russia's success calls for an explanation. One way to account for it is to argue that after a highly controversial US engagement in Iraq, former US President Barack Obama's administration was reluctant to engage in any interventionist operations in the MENA region. Washington limited its involvement in the region to the extent possible, leaving a political and military vacuum behind. Moscow made full use of the unique opportunity and filled the vacuum at a very low cost[1].

Another explanation boils down to the assumption that Moscow was more efficient in the region than its Western adversaries due to a higher level of expert advice and intelligence feedback from within Middle Eastern countries. While US

[1] D. Ross, "War on ISIL: How Obama Created a Middle East Vacuum", *Politico*, 10 January 2016.

leadership often relied on biased views of pro-Western dissidents and political immigrants, the Kremlin always had at its disposal a community of highly professional area studies academics and vast intelligence networks on the ground inherited from the early days of the Soviet advance to the region.

Yet another viewpoint asserts that the main comparative advantage of Vladimir Putin was consistency and coherence in his overall approach to the region. This approach rewarded Putin if not with sympathy, then at least with respect and a degree of trust not only from Russia's regional partners, but also from its opponents. Western powers, by periodically changing their positions on the most important regional problems, grossly undermined their credibility in the eyes of the region's political and military elites.

Some would argue that unlike many other overseas powers, Russia has managed to maintain good (or, at minimum, decent) relations with all sides in the major regional conflicts. Moscow has connections with Israelis and with Palestinians, with Shia and with Sunnis, with Turks and with Kurds, with Saudis and with Iranians, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and with Qatar, with General Khalifa Haftar and Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya Fayez al-Serraj. This unique position is directly linked to the relatively marginal status that Russia had in the region prior to the Arab Spring. After the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), Russia had not taken on multiple political or security commitments in the MENA region and, unlike the United States, it has not been constrained by any rigid alliances limiting its flexibility. Therefore, Moscow has been and still is better suited to play the role of a regional power broker than Washington.

A Shift in Strategy

It seems that initially the Russian return to the MENA region had no goal of becoming such a power broker. The original plan had more to do with global geopolitics than regional alliances.

After the United States demonstrated its apparent inability to "fix" places like Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan, Moscow wanted to be seen as the bearer of a different, more practical, and more efficient approach to the region. This was particularly important after the Ukraine crisis in 2013 cast a dark shadow over Russia's relations with its Western partners and, above all, with the Obama administration.

The Kremlin had to demonstrate to leaders at the White House that it could be a part of the solution, not a part of a problem. The idea was not to replace the United States in the Middle East, but to change the US approach to the region, most importantly to convince Americans that their enthusiastic support for the Arab Spring in 2011 had been irresponsible, shortsighted, and dangerous. This idea reflects the overall mental framework of contemporary Russian leaders, who believe that the real borderline in global politics today divides not democracy and authoritarianism, but order and chaos.

The hope of using Syria as an opportunity to limit the damage in US-Russian relations caused by the Ukraine crisis did not last for too long. The widely advertised US-Russian agreement on the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria in September 2013[2] failed to lead to a broader US-Russian agreement on the Syrian settlement. On the contrary, subsequent use of chemical weapons in Syria and the problem of attribution became yet another source of tensions between Moscow and Washington.

The peace plan painfully negotiated by US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in September 2016 collapsed just weeks after signing[3]. The Russian side accused the United States of failing to put the needed pressure on select groups within the anti-Assad opposition to make them abide by the terms of the ceasefire agreement – a task

[2] US Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons", 14 September 2013 (last retrieved on 23 September 2019).

[3] L. Wroughton, "U.S. suspends Syria ceasefire talks with Russia, blames Moscow", *Reuters*, 3 October 2016.

that was arguably too difficult for Washington to handle successfully. Russians also complained that the United States did not manage to separate the "moderate" Syrian opposition from more radical factions gravitating toward Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and al-Qaeda. Again, it remains unclear whether the United States was in a position to compel such a separation. However, the main source of the Kremlin's frustrations was the perceived unwillingness of the US military to work in any substantive way with their Russian counterparts. In the fall of 2016 in Moscow, it became popular to argue that the US Defense Department had managed to overrule the State Department, with the hawkish views of the former's Secretary Ash Carter prevailing over the more moderate positions of the latter's Secretary Kerry.

The Astana Process

It seems that this bitter experience led Russia to seriously reassess the approach to Syria and to the region at large. After the failure to create a US-Russian alliance, the Kremlin focused its energy and diplomatic skills on building a coalition of regional players through peace talks on Syria in Kazakhstan's capital – launching the Astana process in January 2017. Bringing Turkey and Iran to the negotiating table was an unquestionable diplomatic victory for Vladimir Putin, and the Kremlin labored to get major Arab countries interested in the new arrangement. The invitation was also extended to the United States, but US participation was no longer considered critical for the success of Russia's strategy for Syria.

The practical results of the Astana process – reducing overall levels of armed violence in Syria – became observable in the short term[4]. However, Astana could never replace and was never intended to replace the UN-led Geneva dialogue on the

[4] "Syrian war: All you need to know about the Astana talks", *Al-Jazeera*, 30 October 2017.

political future of Syria. Why did the Astana process succeed where the Geneva talks failed? One explanation is the composition of the two models: Astana has served as a meeting point for predominantly regional players, while Geneva has convened primarily global actors in addition to select regional ones.

The Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in the Russian resort city of Sochi in January 2018 was an attempt to overcome, or at least to narrow, the gap between the two peace processes. On the one hand, successes in Astana and on the battlefield allowed the Congress to involve a wide range of ethnic, political, and religious groups supporting both Damascus and the opposition. On the other hand, if the announced "wide spectrum" of participants had really been assembled in Sochi, the Congress could have become an effective catalyst for the Geneva process, forcing the slow and uncompromising negotiators in Switzerland to move on from a dead end. The Sochi Congress, however, failed to reconcile the two models. Moreover, it demonstrated the limitations of what Russia could do in Syria and beyond while working primarily with regional rather than with global partners.

The current reality in Syria is that Russia, with all its allies, is capable of winning the war, but not peace. The post-war socio-economic reconstruction of the country will require resources that neither Moscow, nor Tehran, nor Ankara simply have[5]. The Gulf states have too many higher-priority problems of their own, including Yemen and Qatar. China is hardly ready to act as the main donor of post-war Syria. The United States – at least as long as President Trump remains in the White House – will not invest in Syrian reconstruction. There is the European Union, which has significant interests in the Middle East and financial opportunities for large-scale assistance and investment in post-war Syria. However, it is necessary first to bring all member states to an agreement. This could potentially

[5] K. Calamur, "No One Wants to Help Bashar al-Assad Rebuild Syria", *The Atlantic*, 15 March 2019.

happen in Geneva or within separate forums, like the Russian-Turkish-French-German summit in Istanbul in October 2018.

At the same time, Russia's increased engagement in the Middle East may risk the country's comparative advantage as an honest broker in the region. One of the most vivid manifestations of this trend is the military and political dynamics in Syria, where Russia currently enjoys the most preferential position. Over time, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain multiple intra-Syrian balances, most of which are becoming fragile and unsustainable. One should note that this has progressed as ISIS has been defeated – at least militarily. With ISIS gone, the glue holding together numerous players in Syria despite their conflicting aspirations and the deficit of mutual trust is evaporating.

A Sustainable Approach?

Bashar al-Assad is growing more rigid and uncompromising in his dealings with the Syrian opposition, counting on its unconditional surrender to Damascus. Tehran, having fortified its position in Syria, is no longer willing to consider any significant self-restraint on the ground. Israel, fearful of the growing Iranian presence and Hezbollah's enhanced capabilities and counting on almost unlimited US support, tends to increase the scale and broaden the geography of its air strikes in Syria. Ankara is desperate to consolidate its gains in Syria's West and Northwest, building a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border. Syrian Kurds are anxious anticipating another betrayal of their cause by situational partners and unreliable allies.

Even if we assume that the current balances in Syria and in the region at large generally meet Russia's strategic interests, the question remains: are these balances sustainable even in the mid-term perspective? There are reasons to believe that the task of balancing the diverging interests of local and regional players will become increasingly difficult for Russia. Moscow may be forced to take sides, which will deprive it of its current

comparative advantage. If this happens, the challenge that the Kremlin confronts in the MENA region will be how to convert its recent military successes in Syria into more stable (even if less explicit and visible) political influence in the region.

The official Russian position on the desirable security arrangements in the region favors an inclusive collective security system. Such a system implies a Middle Eastern version of the European Helsinki process of the 1970s and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)[6], with UN Security Council guarantees. One can assume that such an arrangement, if implemented, would indeed allow for a stable solution to numerous regional security problems, although in Europe itself OSCE did not prevent the Ukraine crisis in 2013. However, such a system is not likely to emerge in the MENA region anytime soon due to a number of formidable obstacles that Moscow is fully aware of.

First, an inclusive collective security system requires the participation of not only Arab, but also non-Arab states of the region: Turkey, Israel, and Iran. Today it is hard to imagine how one could achieve this goal or even to move in this direction, especially as far as Tehran is concerned. Of course, Russian leadership can claim that it has managed to incentivize Saudis and Iranians to work together on a very sensitive matter of oil production quotas within the OPEC+ arrangement. However, there is a difference between a problem-driven tactical alliance and a long-term institutional agreement. The latter is much more difficult to achieve given deep divisions in fundamental security perceptions between Riyadh and Tehran.

Second, the Arab world itself remains highly fragmented and hard to reconcile, most recent illustrated by the crisis around Qatar. The crisis has totally paralyzed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which under different circumstances could emerge as the core of a collective security system for the region.

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[6] Commission on security and cooperation in Europe, The Helsinki Process and the OSCE, hiips://www.csce.gov/about-csce/helsinki-process-and-osce (last retrieved on 23 September 2019).

The League of Arab States looks even less suitable to serve as a prototype of such a system; its institutional capacities are too limited, and contradictions between its member states are too apparent.

Third, even if Moscow and its partners somehow managed to construct a collective security system in the MENA region, such a system would hardly be in a position to cope with threats and challenges generated by non-state actors. However, these are exactly the threats and challenges that are likely to shape the security agenda of the region in years to come. The concept of a new Westphalian arrangement for the Middle East has little to do with realities on the ground; nothing suggests the crises of state in the Arab world will be over anytime soon.

Thus, while a MENA collective security system might look great in theory, it is hardly attainable in practice. Are there any alternative regional arrangements that would suit Russia? For instance, could regional security be guaranteed by a non-regional hegemonic power? Historically, there would be nothing new in such an arrangement; the MENA region has always depended on non-regional hegemonies, be it the Ottoman Empire for a couple of centuries, Great Britain and France between the two world wars, The United States and the USSR during the Cold war, or the United States alone after 1991.

It is clear that Russia today cannot successfully perform as the non-regional hegemonic power – it lacks the needed military, economic and political resources. A renewed US hegemony should not encourage strategists in the Kremlin, given the sour state of the US-Russian relations today. For the same reason a US-Russian condominium over the region looks unattainable. One should also add that these days Washington appears to be on the path toward a gradual withdrawal from the region, due to a growing Middle East fatigue in the United States and to emerging US energy self-sufficiency. The odds are good that instead of taking on the burden of full-fledged regional hegemony, the United States will limit itself to continued support for Israel and persistent pressure on Iran.

A regional hegemonic power could theoretically replace the non-regional hegemon. In the MENA region, the most apparent candidate for this position is Saudi Arabia (or, rather, a combination of the Saudi resource base and the political ambitions of the UAE). For Moscow, such an option would be undoubtedly undesirable, as it would deprive Russia of its current comparative advantage of avoiding taking sides in regional conflicts. A consolidated hegemon-centered security system would force Moscow to take sides – between Riyadh and Doha, the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Arabs and the Turks, and so on. Furthermore, ongoing developments in the region – such as the conflict in Yemen, the GCC stalemate, and the uneasy political transformation of Saudi Arabia itself – turn the concept of a regional hegemony into a purely hypothetical option.

Finally, Moscow, along with other non-regional players, could focus not on promoting a new MENA security architecture, but rather on geographical containment of regional insecurity. In other words, Moscow should accept a continuous Arab "time of troubles" as a historically predetermined phenomenon, on which external actors have very limited influence, if any influence at all. The goal should be not to try to "fix" the region, but to limit the negative implications of the Middle East's troubles on other regions of the world. However, specifically for Russia this strategy is not likely to work. While the United States and China are located far away from the Middle East and could probably avoid the spillover effect of instability, Russia (as well as Europe) are simply too close to the theater to count on successful containment. The MENA region is directly connected to Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and even to predominantly Muslim regions of the Russian federation itself. The MENA instability is for Russia not only a foreign policy problem, but a domestic problem as well. Unlike the United States, Russia cannot "withdraw" from the region without creating a range of new security problems for itself. Besides, a strategic Russian withdrawal would inevitably nullify

all the Kremlin's accomplishments in the region achieved in recent years.

A Path Forward for Russia

In this case, what is the future MENA policy that would secure Russia's interests in the region in the long term? How can Moscow maintain its regional presence without exposing itself to excessive political risks or to prohibitively high costs? Without trying to draw a detailed roadmap for Syria and beyond, one can offer a number of general principles to reduce risks and costs without withdrawing from the MENA region completely.

First, the Kremlin should proceed with the assumption that its role in the region – as well as the roles of other non-regional actors – will be limited. The current level of Russia's influence is not sustainable in the mid-term, not to mention the long-term future. This relative decline will happen not because Moscow will be replaced by Washington, Brussels, or Beijing as the powerbroker. It will take place because no external factors can significantly affect fundamental social, economic, and political changes in the MENA region since the beginning of the Arab Spring. It is likely that the region is only at the very beginning of a long transformation, in which regional dynamics are far more decisive than external influences.

Second, policymakers in Moscow must confess that there are no irreconcilable conflicts of interest between Russia, the West, China, and India regarding best-case and worst-case scenarios for the MENA region. An intense tactical competition for regional influence should not obscure the longer-term vision. All responsible external players should be interested in keeping the current borders of the region intact, countering international terrorism, curbing large-scale uncontrolled migration from the region, preventing nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) proliferation, and exploring economic opportunities with MENA countries. These common interests appear

to be broader and more strategic than situational rivalries; therefore, the latter should not overshadow the former. Russia should demonstrate more interest in and more commitment to "regional commons" than it does now.

Third, at this stage of the multifaceted and multidimensional MENA crisis it would be futile to look for any universal solution to regional problems. No "one size fits all" approach is likely to work. It appears more productive to take an incremental approach in looking for specific solutions to each individual conflict situation. For instance, in dealing with Yemen, which faces an approaching humanitarian catastrophe, the UN could take the leading role in terminating the civil war and rendering humanitarian assistance to the civil population. In Iraq, external players could limit themselves to coordinated support of the ongoing positive domestic developments in state-building and economic recovery. In Syria, where military clashes continue but fatigue of endless civil war is growing stronger within all the fighting groups, external players could focus on facilitating political compromises and isolating militant extremists, whatever side these extremists are fighting on. In Libya, where civil conflict persists, the immediate task could be preventing both horizontal and vertical escalation of the war, i.e. preventing its proliferation to neighboring African countries and containing the scale of the armed confrontation inside Libya proper.

Fourth, the importance of the MENA region for Russia notwithstanding, policymakers in Moscow should keep in mind that this region is not as central to Russia's security and prosperity as Europe or Asia Pacific. It means that no victories in the Middle East can serve as substitutes or alternatives to addressing Russia's more critical foreign policy challenges, such as Ukraine. On the other hand, it also means that Moscow can demonstrate more flexibility in dealing with MENA conflicts than in approaching other, more sensitive foreign and security policy matters.