



A Review of: “Russian Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East. New Trends, Old Traditions” edited by Nikolay Kozhanov¹

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The edited volume called *Russian Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East* sets itself the task of a comprehensive analysis of the process of the Kremlin return to the Middle East, which took place in the second decade of the 21st century. Despite the events of 2022, Russia’s intervention in Syria since 2015 remains the Kremlin’s first major military action outside the former Soviet region in the post-Cold War era. The idea that this international political process is the quintessence of the foreign policy legacy of the Soviet era and Putin’s Russia runs as a red line throughout the volume. As during the Cold War, the main motive for Russia’s return to the Middle East in 2015 is political, with the Kremlin aiming to use the region as a political lever in relations with the West, as well as to strengthen the prestige of the ruling power in the frameworks of domestic and international arenas.

At the same time, other drivers that pushed the Kremlin to the proactive actions in the region (among which the main ones are ensuring economic and national security) today in their importance are not at all inferior to the political motive. These drivers are dictated by modern endogenous factors, which boil down to the continued high dependence level of the state budget on export share, the peculiarities of the ethno-confessional composition of the population of Russia with the number of Muslims exceeding 25 million people (which approximately amounts to seventh part of the Russian population), as well as to maintaining the concentration of the domestic news agenda for the bulk of the population on the “external threat” in order to consolidate it around the government and distract from internal socio-economic problems. The Kremlin’s transition to the course of real politics after the events of the "Crimean Spring" may be called as an exogenous factor which contributed to the start of the events of 2015. New motives force the Kremlin hawks to resort to cooperation with new allies and use methods that were considered alien to the USSR. Russia’s return to the Middle East is a complex and multilateral process, which over the course of five years has been differently assessed by the expert communities of the West, Russia, as well as specialists from the Middle East. Considering the ambiguity of the process itself, the present edited volume consisting of publications written by authors of various expert communities may be called a successful attempt to reflect this historical process on paper, representing a

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compilation of key approaches and opinions in international analytics on the topic under discussion.

The first chapter by Viacheslav Morozov is called *The Middle East in Russia's Foreign Policy, 1990-2020* and is built on genealogical approach. The main thesis of the author of the chapter concentrates on the transparent dominance of the anti-Western motive as the main factor of the Russian side in the decision to support President Bashar al-Assad against the US-backed opposition in 2015, and thereby not only declare their claims to participate in determining the track of the political development of the region, but also to consolidate the geopolitical positions gained in 2014. In his opinion, this step is the consequence of the events of the Crimean Spring, and, if we take a broader context, the Euromaidan revolution of 2014, which the Russian authorities regard as an illegal coup d'état, an invasion of the West into their sphere of interests. He says: "Syria was the perfect arena for what the Russian leadership probably saw as developing its geopolitical success achieved in Ukraine" (p. 32). In the conclusion of the chapter, the author emphasizes the importance of taking into account the fact that maintaining the status of one of the world's political leaders since the early 1990s is of the concern issue for Russia and remains a significant motive for taking such serious political decisions.

The second chapter by Mark N. Katz titled *Different but similar. Comparing Moscow's Middle East Policies in the Cold War and Putin eras* is dedicated to the comparison between the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia politics in the Middle East. The main criteria for comparison are the motives for cooperation, the mechanisms and opportunities for collaboration, the criteria for choosing geopolitical allies and the main challenges of the Kremlin in both time frameworks. The chapter argues that the policy of President Putin, in terms of the breadth of influence in the Middle East, is more successful than the policy of the Soviet Union. He emphasizes the importance of establishing bilateral relations not only with numerous political actors in the region, which are considered traditional allies of the United States (for example, the Gulf countries), but also with some quasi-state structures and political organizations opposed to local regimes. The author's analysis shows that "factors contributing to Putin's Middle East foreign policy successes also contributed to the success of Cold War-era Soviet foreign policy towards the region" (p. 38).

As noted above, a comprehensive study of the Kremlin's return to the Middle East in 2015 is impossible without taking into account not only external, but also internal political factors that provoked this decision. In the third chapter by Leonid Issaev *Domestic Factors in Russia's Middle East Policy*, the opposite point of view on the independent variable is defended, particularly: the domestic political situation and the need to solve problems of the national level led the Kremlin to the proactive actions in the Middle East. According to the author, the main factor in Russia's interference in the affairs of the Middle East was the internal mass protests of 2011-2012. These events were hardly the first manifestation of citizens' dissatisfaction with the policies pursued by the



authorities since President Putin came to power. Leonid Isaev explains the socio-political lull of 2000-2010 by satisfying the demand of the majority of the population for political stability, which led to rapid economic growth among the population, tired of the uncertainty of the 1990s. On the one hand, the fall of "Arab presidents for life" in the countries of the Middle East in 2011, observed by the Russian elites, led them to the need to provide support to authoritarian regimes in the region which are similar to Russia. Another motive was the need for patriotic mobilization of the population during Putin's third presidency, for whom stability alone was no longer enough due to the rising living standards. The author comes to the conclusion that given the weakening of the state system and the multiplication of economic challenges due to the imposition of sanctions against Russia after the "Crimean Spring", in the long term the Kremlin just remains to play the role of an "honest broker" (p. 81) between warring regional forces, but in no way Russia is capable to influence the development of socio-political trends in the region.

The fourth chapter by Roy Allison *Russian Legal and Regulatory Claims For Its Intervention in the Syrian Conflict Since 2015* aims to assess the international legality of Russia's actions in Syria from the point of view of international and international humanitarian law, as well as informal normative grounds. It opens with a case study of the involvement of the Kremlin and the United States in situations of interference in the internal affairs of foreign countries. Taking into account the unsuccessful Afghan experience, which became one of the main factors in the collapse of the USSR, the author emphasizes that during the operation in Syria, the Kremlin's task was not only not to repeat the most undesirable outcome, but also to "present the surprise military operation as lawful and rightful" both for the population inside country, and in the international arena (p. 86). As the author shows, the abovementioned tasks were more or less completed by the Kremlin: countries close to Moscow political course officially recognized the legality of the Kremlin "counter-terrorist operation", which was justified as a reaction to the "invitation of the Syrian government", whereas the response of other countries was their "tacit consent" (p. 86). He notes: "No state formally contested the legality of this intervention, whatever their criticisms of it" (p. 90). As the researcher describes, the main logic of criticism of these actions comes down to the question of the legitimacy of the Syrian government, its inability to effectively control the territories and, as a result, its right to request this assistance. At the same time, as he emphasizes, when applying this criterion to the Syrian case, one should also take into account the previous experience of actions taken by both Russia and the West in relation to the governments of certain countries. The problem of Moscow's flagrant violation of international humanitarian law in its military operations in Syria cannot be avoided, as well as the issue of the formation of an appropriate image of the Russian government actions among the main population inside the region where Russia has not succeeded. In conclusion, it is once again emphasized that Moscow has managed to legalize its actions in Syria from the point of view of international law, laid a good foundation for

defending its interests and forced the Middle Eastern countries to reckon with its opinion in solving problems affecting the issue of national security. It is difficult not to share the author's opinion that in order to consolidate the indicated military and geopolitical success, it is necessary to strengthen political positions via soft power.

The fifth chapter by Ghoncheh Tazmini *Russia and Iran: Strategic Partners or Provisional Counterweights* aims to reveal the nature of relations between the post-Soviet Kremlin and Tehran after the Islamic Revolution, in which he rightly notes two separate analytical levels: common and disparate *Realpolitik* interests level and the level of common principles and perceptions of the world political system (p. 122). According to the author of the publication, the widespread idea that Iran is just a regional lever for putting pressure on the USA does not seem entirely fair. To a greater extent, these bilateral relations in the 21st century can be characterized as a "strategic alliance" (p. 137) against the post-1991 global order imposed by the Western world, built on the hegemony of one or more states, imposing Western normative values and hierarchical structures as the only right ones and universal for the whole world. Both sides stand for a global world order built on multipolarity, in which Russia and Iran could participate on parity grounds with other countries. This idea is the "fundamental commonality" (p. 138) of the two energy-resource authoritarian powers. Shared with Russia views on the global world order allow Iran to enjoy the support and protection of the Kremlin in the international arena in those matters in which, in fact, this Middle Eastern country simply does not have allies of similar strength. At the same time, in other circumstances, for example, in cooperation with the countries of the Middle East, where the Kremlin does not have to lead ideological struggle, the Russian side adheres to a pragmatic approach, which leads to an inevitable clash of economic interests of Moscow and Tehran. On the example of several cases, including those related to the extraction of energy resources in Syria and Iraq, the author shows that local players prefer cooperation with Russia, despite the disproportionate real investments of Moscow and Tehran in the economy of the Middle East Arab countries.

The sixth chapter by Nikolay Kozhanov *The drivers of Russia-GCC Relations* aims to examine the impact of Russia's direct intervention into Syria in 2015 and related geopolitical factors on Russia's relations with the Gulf monarchies, in particular Saudi Arabia, as well as the prospects for the development of this dialogue and taking it to a new level. In the first part of the chapter, he defines the main interests of Russia in the development of relations with the Gulf countries: in the leverage used in the confrontation with the West, the protection of economic interests and ensuring national security. The author draws attention to the change in the perception of the Gulf countries of the Kremlin role in the region since the beginning of the civil war in Syria: as the Arab Spring started, the attitude of the Gulf countries was negative due to the Kremlin's formal support for the regime of Bashar Assad, but subsequent years strengthened Russia's position in the eyes of the Gulf elites due to the decisiveness actions of the Kremlin in achieving the set goals in the region, as well as the fact that in most



issues the Kremlin still took seriously into account the interests of regional leaders. The author notes the "pragmatic approach" (p. 151) of Russia in building relations with the Gulf countries, as well as their parity. Establishing relations with Saudi Arabia and the desire to cooperate with the regional leader has more specific drivers: the Kremlin understands that "Assad regime's final victory in the Syrian civil war should be legitimized through a formal political agreement between belligerents" (p. 154), therefore it informally supports Riyadh's actions in Yemen, for his part, the king of Saudi Arabia contributed to the establishment of a dialogue between Russia and Syrian opposition groups. Nevertheless, the author stresses that despite the fact that these measures look very mutually beneficial, they have situational nature. The Gulf countries still see Washington as their main political strategic partner.

The seventh chapter by Samuel Ramani *Russia and the Yemeni Civil War* tells about Russia's strategy towards Yemen, which consists in non-interference in the internal affairs of the South Arabian state after the 2014 revolution. On the one hand, this is explained by Russia's relatively little interest in Yemen in general, and on the other hand, by the Kremlin's unwillingness to worsen relations with the local leader, Saudi Arabia (p.181), whose role has become decisive in the escalation of the Yemeni crisis. Taken together, the both motives turn Yemen into a leverage option for achieving regional goals in the hands of the Kremlin since 2015, mainly in relations with Riyadh. Thus, the core of the proposed chapter lies not so much in the study of bilateral relations between Russia and Yemen (although a very concise overview is presented in the beginning), but in the relations between Russia and Iran, Russia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Russia and Saudi Arabia in the framework of the Yemeni crisis. It is shown that for the largest local players (of which Iran and Saudi Arabia are the worst rivals), the Yemeni card is one of the central problems. This fact only reinforces the Kremlin's very logical goal of maintaining its role as the optimal mediator in reconciling the warring sides of the Yemeni crisis in order to keep its position on it as the bargain argument.

The eighth chapter by Yahia H. Zoubir *Making up the Lost Time: Russia and Central Maghreb* is the final chapter of this volume. It clearly stresses the assessment of President Putin's foreign policy in the region as more successful than the one that took place during the Cold War in terms of development opportunities. Since the period of Putin's first presidency, Russia has been considering the possibilities and prospects for cooperation not only with Algeria (as it was in the Soviet era), but also with other countries of the Maghreb like Tunisia and Morocco. Russia's direct diplomatic and indirect military involvement in the Libyan crisis also underlines the Kremlin's claims to uphold interests in the region. At the same time, the scale of bilateral cooperation between Russia and Algeria, compared not only with North Africa, but also with other African countries, is exceptional. The history of cooperation between Russia and Algeria goes back to 1963, when the USSR met the interests of the African country in selling to it the critically needed modern weapons for the so-called "Sand War" with Morocco, the last one was provided with technical support from the United States. The following

two key factors prompted Algeria to return to at least the previous level of relations with the Kremlin in the late 1990s: the need to end the ten-year international isolation after a bloody civil war and the need of the after-sales support services for Soviet weapons purchased by 1989 (p. 197). In addition to military-technical cooperation with Algeria, Russia is developing pragmatic partnerships with the Maghreb countries in the fields of energy, agriculture, tourism, and healthcare (a good example of the latter is the production of the Covid-19 vaccine Sputnik-V in Algeria). The author notes the possible growth of Russia's political involvement in the remote western corners of the region through its role of a political mediator, for example, in the conflict between POLISARIO Front (supported by Algeria) and Morocco, while doubting the Kremlin's serious interest in a broad participation in resolving this issue, as well as in the region in general. The author stresses that most of the Maghreb countries likely will remain on the periphery of Russian political and economic interests.

Overall, this volume is a valuable contribution to the direction of literature on the international politics of President Putin's Russia in the second half of the 2010s, logically chronologically limited by the beginning of the global Covid-19 epidemic. A comprehensive analysis of the Kremlin's actions in the Middle East since the events of 2015 shows that, despite widespread (and often just) criticism, the system is learnable: it takes into account not only the mistakes of the Soviet past, but also the problems that Western countries have faced in similar cases in the Middle East. One of the main conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of the reviewed publications is that the main vision of Russia's policy in the Middle East in no way contradicts its main thesis in ideological opposition to the West, namely, the vision of a multipolar world and the need to reckon with the interests of regional leaders of the world-system basing on the parity foundations.