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THE MIDDLE EAST HELPS RUSSIA'S COMEBACK AS A GLOBAL POWER

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Not for decades has there been such public hand-wringing over Russian intentions in Syria, Libya and the Mediterranean. European and American media keep reminding us that Russia's moves are evidence of aggressive policies, similar to Russian military actions in Ukraine and Crimea. Ethan Chorin, a former US diplomat, in "Russia Strategic Waiting Game in Libya" said this is "hyperbole". While Russia has taken advantage of the vacuum in US policy since the "Arab spring" to maintain and increase its geographical status, its policy remains "selective and opportunistic." It has neither the resources nor the desire to incur responsibilities, other than limited in Syria and not at all in Libya for the foreseeable future. His analysis is included in "[War in Peacetime, Russia's Strategy on NATO's Eastern and Southern Flanks](#)".

In a forthcoming book "What is Russia up to in the Middle East", Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, [offers a lucid explanation](#) for what he sees as Russian caution. Western enthusiasm for promoting democracy in the region "led to suspicions in and around the Kremlin that Western-funded Russian NGOs might try to bring about a 'Russian spring'". The mass protests in Moscow in 2010-11 challenged Russian President Vladimir Putin more than anything since his coming to power in 2000. From the start, Russian experts were "sceptical that upheavals in Arab countries would actually lead to democratic transformation as hoped for in the West", Trenin writes. They feared an "Islamist winter" and felt many American and European analysts were "no more than hapless sorcerer's apprentices". Nor were they alone as leading specialists of the region in the US and Middle East made clear in a much quoted article called *The Arab Counterrevolution* [published in September 2011](#). Most observers forgot that the first "Arab Spring", which swept Algeria between 1988 and 1992, ended in a bloody civil war which left 150,000 dead, thousands of 'disappeared' and 600,000 people fleeing the country, mostly to Europe.

Western observers who kept their heads cool in 2011 remembered the enthusiasm with which many in the United States and United Kingdom - but not France - had greeted the US invasion of Iraq. We know that it was undertaken for the wrong reason, failed to drain the swamp where terrorists are bred and, in destroying a key secular state between the Gulf and the Levant, unleashed an unprecedented wave of Islamic sectarianism and terrorism. It also fuelled Iran's ambitions in the region.

Russia was astonished that the US did little to support Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. More importantly, it failed to form a comprehensive partnership with the West in Libya and was left out of the decision-making process after it abstained from vetoing the UN Security Council resolution 1973, which authorised a no-fly zone in Libya to prevent a feared massacre in Benghazi as Gaddafi was mounting a counter offensive against his opponents. NATO's use of force led to regime change and the disintegration of the Libyan state. Western behaviour resulted in "effectively foreclosing that route for the future" Trenin writes. Though having no seat on the Security Council, Algeria, a major regional power, was furious its warnings about the risk that the looted weapons from Gaddafi's vast arsenals would flood over the Sahel belt of Africa went unheeded, notably in France. Their fears were amply justified as Mali nearly collapsed in January 2012 and a year later when Islamist extremists who had made Libya their new stronghold mounted a major attack against the south eastern Algerian gas field of In Amenas.

The conclusion reached by Russia that Americans and Europeans lack strategic vision and fail "to foresee even the immediate consequences of their actions" had in Syria. Trenin explains that "with (US President Barack) Obama winning a second term, and (Syrian President) Assad still in power in Damascus, the Kremlin was ready for a fresh attempt at a political settlement". Russia's suggestion of "a Dayton *a deux*" did not convince the Americans who wanted Russia's cooperation in dislodging Assad "for a fee, such as US consent to Russia keeping its facility in Tartus and continuing to supply arms to the new Syrian regime".

There was no deal and what followed in Syria was an offensive, preventative move. Russia's objective was to prevent a fall of the regime and the estimated 7,000 battle hardened jihadist fighters from Russia and the former Soviet republics from returning to their countries of origin. Killing them in Syria made more sense. Operating in Syria also allowed the Russian armed forces to test and develop its tactical and operational concepts, give large numbers of its officers the high-end war experience they had not been able to get in Ukraine, and combat-test over 150 new weapons systems; the two countries became military allies in the full sense of the term.

Another overlooked reason for Russia to play hardball in Syria, Chorin writes, was Assad's willingness "to block the efforts of the Gulf emirate Qatar to build a natural gas pipeline through the country to supply Europe, which would have undermined Russia's market power in Europe and undermined its leverage over Europe in defending its actions in Ukraine". He points out that the same strategic interests exist in Libya, but to a much lesser degree. Qatar tried for years to get the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi to relent on investment in the country's gas industry so it could undercut the Russian position in the European gas market. Libya supplies Europe with natural gas from large offshore deposits through Green Stream pipeline, which has a throughput capacity of 11bn cubic metres a year. However, like Assad, Qaddafi said no. Russian would like to recoup the losses on its tens of billions of dollars' worth of arms and oil and infrastructure contracts it signed with Qaddafi.

The US and the EU have, in sharp contrast, become risk averse. One of Europe's most respected observers of Russia warns, privately, that the three leading western powers "have done away with or ignore their expertise on the region, have no strategic thinking mechanisms and do not know what they want the region to look like. They are therefore easy prey to Israeli influence and Saudi money". The Russians are diplomatically more active across the wider region than is at first apparent, making good use of western ineptness. Their military push is inescapable: "they need to sell weapons abroad to fund their own rearmament at home. They are putting pictures of their kit in action in Syria on Youtube as advertisements!"

Russia has used the Middle East to make its comeback as a major geopolitical player and a capable military actor and not only in that region. The United States' absence in the region is driving old enemies together and creating new dangers. Both authors note the costs of Russian intervention in Syria, of which the Kremlin is well aware and the country's poor economic position which do not support an expansionist policy. Putin may desire to remain visible and flex Russian muscles but there are economic limits to the game. He is an influence dealer in the south eastern Mediterranean, more than any Russian leader in a generation. He aims to push back the spread of hard-line radical Islamist groups. He would like to sell Russian weapons. If the West opts for a policy of strict containment in Libya, who will blame Russia for doing deals with whoever remains?

As Europe and the United States watch their influence in the world decline, they will have to pay more heed to what Russia and middle ranking, but regionally important, powers like Algeria, which has a strong vested interest in the stability of southern rim Mediterranean and the Sahel, think. In the mid term, it is more likely than not that the United States will follow a strict policy of containment towards Libya. If this happens, Russia will say 'we told you so', while attempting to shape whatever remains in Libya to its advantage. Algeria will do the same.

The sooner Europe wakes a situation which is quite different from what it was at the turn of the century, the better. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, shows every sign of wishing to play a role in the Middle East but it is too early to say whether France, of course Germany, and the UK, despite its current disarray and the other nations of Europe can act in concert. If Trenin and Chorin's analysis is correct, the challenge the EU faces is to tailor a policy which addresses the two facets of Russian foreign policy. In Eastern Europe it is seen as a revisionist power which seeks to roll back Soviet defeat in the cold war but in the Middle East it is a status-quo power, albeit a fickle one. Russia's defeat in Afghanistan taught the Kremlin, in Trenin's words "to regard alliances and alignments in this part of the world as essentially tactical and easily shifting, with no permanent friends and no eternal enemies". By one of those odd historical sleights of hand, that is exactly how one of Britain preeminent 19th century statesmen defined his country's foreign policy in a famous speech to the House of Commons on 1 March 1848. "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."