Caspian

THE GREATER CASPIAN PROJECT

A BI-WEEKLY EDITION FROM THE MODERN DIPLOMACY MODERNDIPLOMACY.EU



THE GLOBAL GAMES ISSUE

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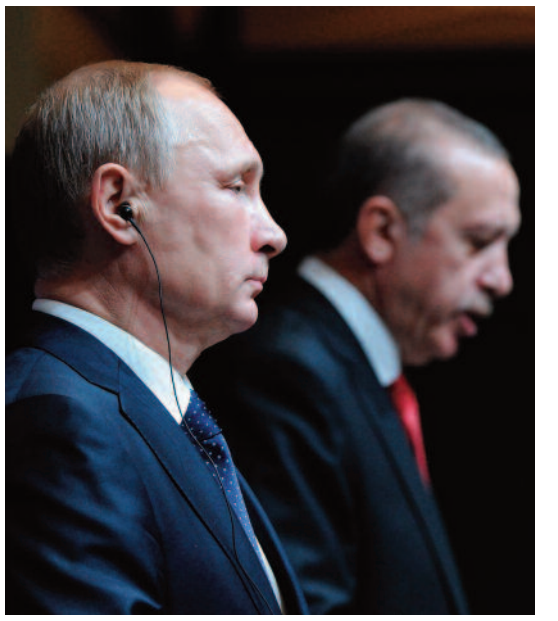
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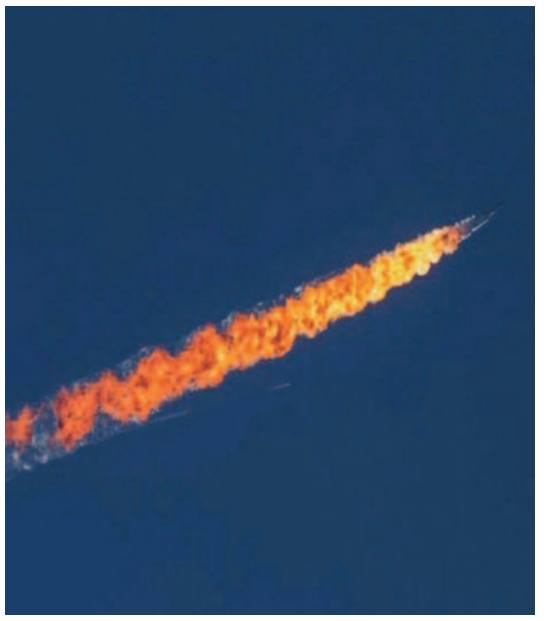
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"The society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting by fools"

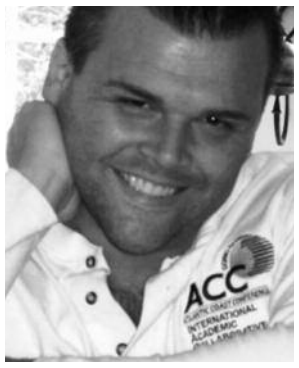
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THE GLOBAL GAMES ISSUE



Prof. Dr. Matthew Crosston

Senior Editor,
Director, The Caspian Project

This issue marks a special excitement for all of us affiliated with Modern Diplomacy. It signals the official launch of a new brand as The Caspian Project transforms into The Greater Caspian Project. This is more than just the addition of a single word, but rather an expansion of our geopolitical focus: it became clear over the course of 17 previous editions that an examination of the affairs of the Caspian littorals was routinely cutting across several other countries that will no doubt have a major say and influence on the region in the coming future. Trying to deftly sidestep those countries while still attempting to give our readers a full analytical accounting of the Caspian Five ultimately proved inefficient and intellectually unfulfilling. The end result is what you see here in its first form in No. 18, The Global Games Issue.

From this day forward the Greater Caspian Project will seek outstanding submissions from authors the world over interested in the affairs and interests of not just the Caspian Five littorals, but now the countries of Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are also included. Strategic realities dictated to us here at Modern Diplomacy that not including this 'Expanded Six' was actually beginning to limit and be a disservice to how we approach and cover the Caspian Five. We believe this greater coverage will only result in an improved project, deeper analysis, and greater global issue relevance. It is an exciting future indeed.

This first issue in the new age already reaps the benefits of our executive decision. Within its pages readers now get the opportunity to consider issues of influence and strategic gamesmanship that spread out to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and go as far afield as India, Pakistan, and Africa. In each case we show how all of these regions are impacted by and interacting with our original focus – the Caspian region. So we welcome all of our dedicated readers to this new endeavor and especially embrace all of the new readers who will flock to the expanded geographical coverage. We hope all of you, new and old, will be nothing but informed and inspired.





INTERVIEW WITH AKHMETZHAN YESSIMOV

KAZAKHSTAN IS INTENDED TO BECOME A WORLD HUB FOR DEVELOPMENT OF GREEN POWER

DIMITRIS GIANNAKOPOULOS

Modern Diplomacy Editor-in-chief

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Last August, Mr. Akhmetzhan Yessimov, a man with a great economic and diplomatic experience and former Akim (Mayor) of Almaty, appointed Chairman of Astana EXPO-2017 by the President of Kazakhstan. For the energy rich Central Asian country, EXPO-2017 is more than just an exhibition. It is an event that will put Kazakhstan in the international spotlight throughout the whole of 2017. Mr. Yessimov explained in an exclusive interview with *Modern Diplomacy*, his personal vision on Expo 2017 and the ways Astana Expo will improve the public image of Kazakhstan.

What is your personal vision on Expo 2017 and how will this important event affect the infrastructural development in Astana?

Kazakhstan is the first country of Central Asia accepting the exhibition with a century of history. Holding of EXPO in Astana will give an impulse for development of upper levels of economy - science and knowledge-intensive industries. For Kazakhstan holding of EXPO is primarily economic and infrastructure project.
All progressive ideas and innovations in the field of new energy from the planet will be concentrated at the same venue in Astana. We expect a great number of participants as the theme "Energy of the Future" combines two the most pressing challenges for mankind, ecology and traditional power relief actions in global economy.

Presently 51 countries including France, Germany, the Great Britain, China, Japan, and India confirmed their participation in the exhibition. We expect more than a hundred. The most densely populated regions of Southeast Asia with great number of "tourist mobile" residents showed interest to EXPO-2017. Eleven international organizations, including the World Bank, UNDP, UNESCO, IAEA and others confirmed their participation.

Great interest to EXPO in Astana is shown by the innovative companies of the USA Silicon Valley as Google Earth, Stanford Global Thermostat, Obscura Digital, and Planet Labs. Holding of EXPO will be included into a triad of events, historically important for Kazakhstan, along with the 25th anniversary of Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the 20th anniversary of the capital of Astana. Due to existing hydrocarbon dependence in the world, shift to alternative energy sources is inevitable. Developed and developing countries equally need "green" technologies. We are for universal development of alternative energy sources. EXPO will acquaint the world with more flexible, economic and effective power sources, against the background of negative processes currently proceeding in power field.

At the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan suggested to make the country a world hub for distribution of green technologies after closure of the World Fair EXPO-2017. EXPO on the theme "Energy of the Future" in Astana will entirely support the initiative of the UN "Sustainable Energy for All". Healthy global ecological environment is essential for mankind. EXPO-2017 in Astana will bring up a concern of climate change and reduction of environmental emissions.

The exhibition will move up the sphere of rendering services to the international quality standards. We prepare complex infrastructure optimization for the exhibition - land and air transport systems as well as all city services will be ready to accept a large stream of guests. Our objective is not only to pay back invested funds, but also to create perspective infrastructure which will be useful for the city and the country after the exhibition. One cannot write off image-based benefits for further promotion of Kazakhstan initiatives in the world.

In what ways will Astana Expo improve the public image of Kazakhstan? How do you plan to promote Expo2017 and attract participants and visitors around the world?

Kazakhstan, the ninth country in the world with variety of natural landscapes has enormous tourist potential. When 2011 Asian Winter Games took place in Almaty I was Akim of the City, and I am familiar with details of administrative work at outstanding events. After Aziada a stream of foreign tourists increased several-fold, for example, to Shymbulak, a ski resort



I can tell with confidence that we have a developed tourism cluster in large cities belt. In 2016 we will enter an active phase of attraction of member countries to the exhibition.
The exhibition will accept 2.5 million people and over 5 million visits.The effect from visiting EXPO-2017 will replicate on expansion of tourist opportunities of the regions of Kazakhstan.

We have already signed contracts with the largest world international tour operators, including Indian Skyway International Travels, STIC Travel Group, and Chinese CITS, and we are also intended to work with German TUI Group and others.Guests will be able not only to visit the exhibition, but also to see all tourist variety of Kazakhstan.We will provide tour packages as "EXPO + Burabay", "EXPO + Baykonyr", "EXPO + Alakol", "EXPO + Charyn", "EXPO + Karkaralinsk" and others. We have presented the program "Recommended by EXPO-2017" which would provide the tourists only with the best goods and services during their stay in Kazakhstan.
Kazakhstan EXPO-2015 pavilion in Milan was among the top three of the most visited ones and was ready to accept the millionth visitor. Pavilion of Kazakhstan in Milan was quintessence of national traditions and modern achievements of the country.

How important is the sustainable energy policy and its promotion for the Astana Expo 2017 and for the international recognition of Kazakhstan itself?

Kazakhstan possesses serious raw materials and energy resources.At the end of the last century the Republic joined the world leaders in oil export. Despite advantages, in long-term prospects it is not the most favourable scenario for development of economy. Dependence on hydrocarbons will result in gradual stagnation of economy.Substantial adherence to prices for oil and gas, negative consequences from fluctuations in the raw market have already collapsed economies of a series of countries.The perspective to shift to alternative energy sources is particularly acute around the world.

In the last decades problems in power field became sources for global crises.New energy is interesting for the countries which are concerned in diversification of economy. Nowadays focus is shifted from obtaining oil and gas dividends to new, more flexible sources of power and income. Ecological aspect is also important. Presently our objective is to reconcile industrial development with requirements of nature conservation.We need to expand utilization of low-carbon technologies with maximum possible methods of recycling.

Kazakhstan is intended to become a world hub for development of green power. New energy has to become a tool to start up economy of the future. EXPO-2017 will give a new direction for development of power field in Kazakhstan and all over the world. Kazakhstan is ready to actively join in this process.

How will you use the buildings and infrastructure after the event has finished?

Post-exhibition integration of EXPO-2017 facilities into city architecture and economy is a difficult but resolvable issue. In this matter we considered organizational errors of some fulfilled exhibitions. Kazakhstan EXPO structures are constructed with due account for all post-exhibition risks and are already designed for future owners. Today I can state that International Financial Center (IFC) will be located at particular part of exhibition territory.

The curator of IFC construction is the National Bank of Kazakhstan and Akimat (Administration) of the City of Astana. At the moment the task team is created to work over issues connected with construction of IFC. The International Financial Center will be working according to the principles of English law. Attractive tax conditions, privileges and preferences will be provided for the members of IFC.
I can assure that the territory of the exhibition will be almost completely integrated into the city infrastructure. Astana is a new center, which constantly require various social facilities and in this context exhibition structures will be foremost applied.



HOW THE TURKISH-RUSSIAN DILEMMA UNMASKS NATO

FALSE PROMISE

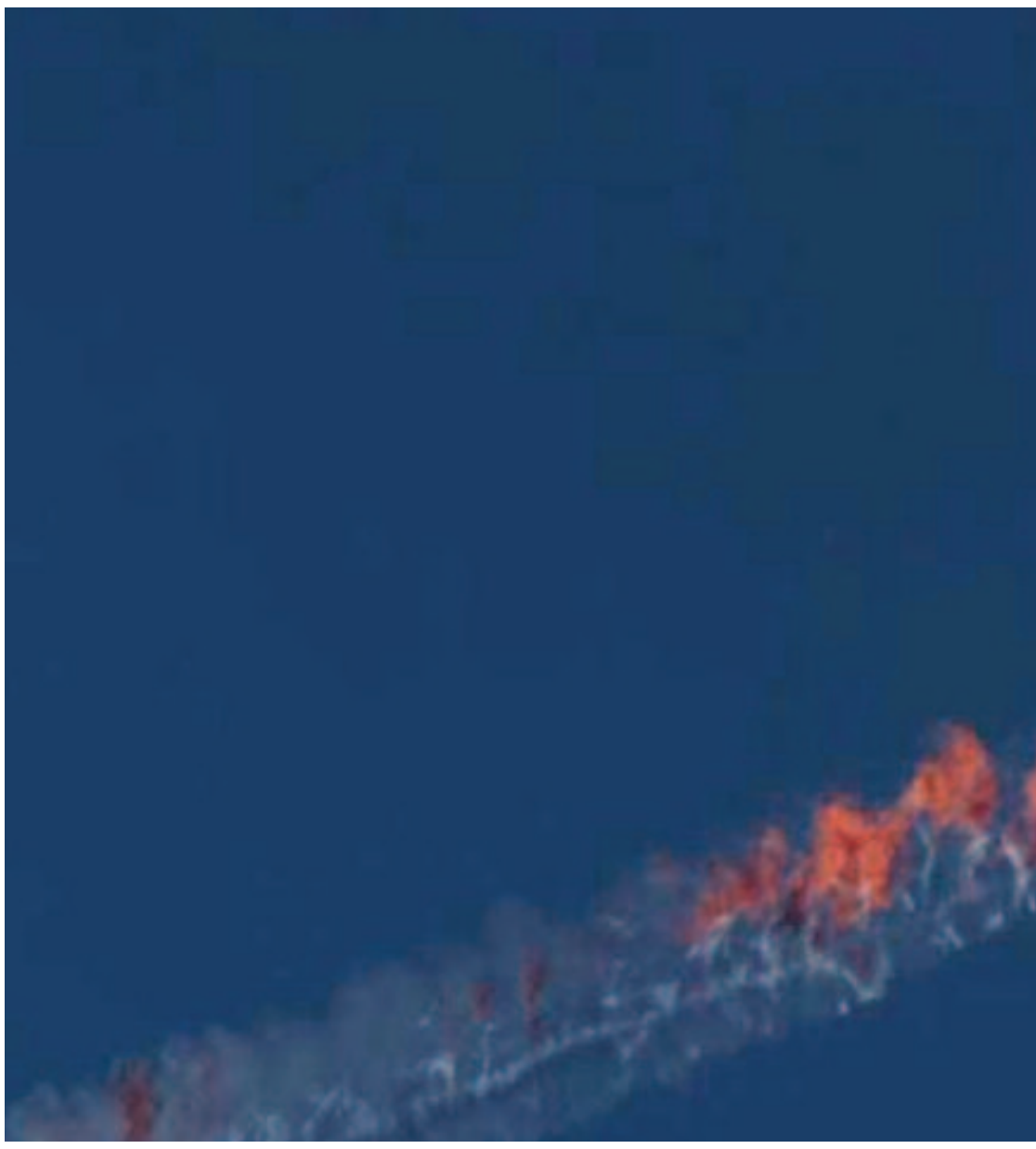
EVAN THOMSEN

Evan Thomsen is a graduate of the International Security and Intelligence Studies Program at Bellevue University in Omaha, NE and is currently a Master's student at the world-renown Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. He has just joined with the Eastern Congo Initiative as Strategic Partnerships Officer.



There is no shortage of security threats to the NATO alliance: a resurgent and militarily active Russia; the territorial and global jihadist threat of DAESH; and the movements of over 4 million refugees. Now, more than ever, would seem a time where solidarity of purpose and the coordination of logistical and security efforts would serve as a useful mechanism for minimum basic security. While NATO could hardly be described as a model of solidarity or efficiency, the outlook of NATO has not only dramatically changed after the November 24th downing of a Russian Su-24 warplane, its very purpose for existing may be now called into question.

While the data is insufficient at this point, the narrative is developing predictably. Turkish President Erdogan said that the Russian warplane violated Turkish airspace and that it failed to respect 10 warnings from the Turkish military.



Ultimately, "Turkey is a country whose warnings should be taken seriously and listened to. Don't test Turkey's patience. Try to win its friendship." Erdogan doubled down by highlighting the estimated 2 million Syrian refugees in Turkey - a burden that far out paces any commitment by other NATO member states. These are nothing short of targeted threats and are intended to resonate more within the NATO alliance than act as a hedge against Russia's military activity on or within Turkish borders.

Russia's reaction has been equally predictable. President Putin has quickly adopted a more harsh tone, not only highlighting the consequences of this action on Russian-Turkish relations but directly calling this "a stab in the back by the terrorists' accomplices." Thus, the board is set, the die cast, and the pieces moving. The next steps are now what crucially matter.

In this sense, it is easy to see why some are questioning how is this not the start of WWIII? We are witnessing a nearly global response to a series of meta-conflicts that have seen tens of thousands of lives lost and millions displaced. Meanwhile, global and regional powers are now openly brandishing military, economic, and political tools, bound in seemingly contradictory relationships as everyone has a web of shared/conflicting interests. Forces are gradually being amassed reminiscent of a situation preparatory to war and now the traditional security dilemma could be starting to unfold. The only ingredient missing is a modern day Ferdinand-Princip moment.It would be overly pessimistic to say that this is a foregone conclusion. Similarly, it would be foolishly naive to say that the current state of affairs in the Syrian-DAESH conflict is not a potential tinderbox that could unravel the world's strongest military alliance.



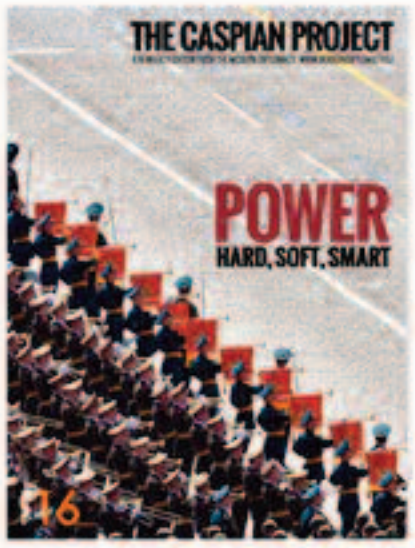
Unfortunately, the varied and inconsistent reactions by NATO member states are doing little to prevent the pessimistic narrative from becoming reality. The brief moment of opportunity and unity of purpose between the U.S., Russia, and France in light of DAESH's global strikes in Paris seem to have been as substantively robust as internet selfies transposed with the French flag on Facebook. The Turkish strike, which could technically be called a strike by NATO against Russia, has effectively sublimated any global sentiment for transcending traditional rivalries.

While the message from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg was clear ("we stand in solidarity with Turkey and support the territorial integrity of our NATO ally"), the responses from leaders of other NATO member states have been less clear. The responses have been a mix of passively enumerating international law, a call for calm and de-escalation, and confusion, given the many reports citing that the Russian aircraft was only in Turkish airspace for 30 seconds. This last claim, which comes out of an early report from the U.S., gives credence to Putin's charge that this attack from Turkey was far from reactionary but premeditated. How, ultimately, can the NATO alliance move forward given the disparate reactions to the events of November 24, their competing goals in the two-front challenge of Syria-DAESH and Russia, and the increasingly emotional political discourse heavily-laden with nationalistic overtones?

It is important to put the NATO alliance into context. It is a military alliance intended to provide mutual security and protection against external threats. This function was a strategic priority of the highest order.

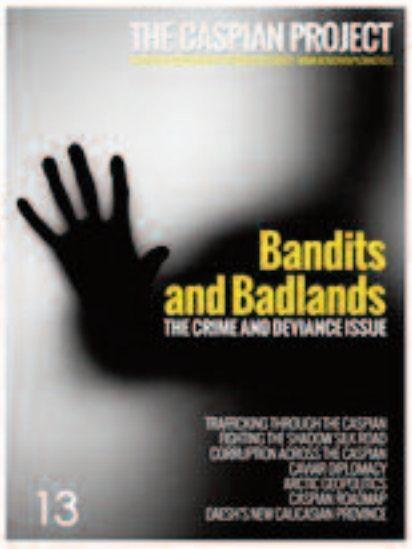
The history of NATO was rather simple in this regard: it was designed to be a bulwark against the Soviet Union in a bi-polar world with inter-state security threats expected to be fought in conventional theatres. 25 years on, a lot has changed in the global political and security landscape. And while NATO has not adapted one cannot be overly critical: NATO, in effect, served its purpose. If its purpose now is to support and extend ad infinitum the status quo of 'Pax Americana,' then its aims are aspirational and its structure is subordinated to interests based upon values (or dogma) rather than security.

It is at this point where we ought to be reminded of another set of European values - the specific and changing interests of the state. To paraphrase the famous quote from Henry Templeton: "I say that it is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or the perpetual enemy of [insert country]. 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." NATO is not a single sovereign state and it is no longer singularly charged to defend the collective interests of Europe against the no longer existent Soviet Union. Security threats and interests change, as do individual state strategies toward pursuing those interests and defending against diverse threats. NATO, in its current structure, no longer adequately addresses the security challenges to its member states nor serves as a convening body to unite a set of similar interests among diverse parties. This alliance is in tatters and basically has been for 25 years. The Turkish strike on the Russian aircraft was not the straw that broke the camel's back, therefore, but simply the removal of a blindfold long needed to be removed.

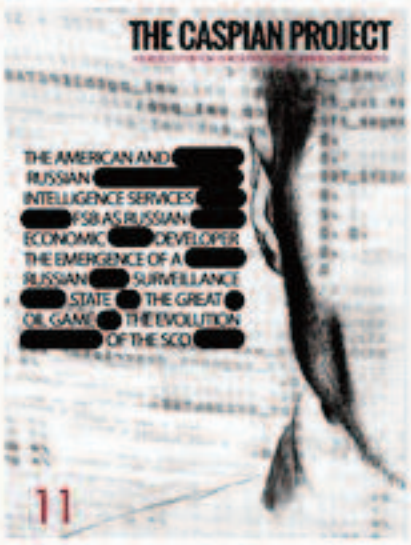


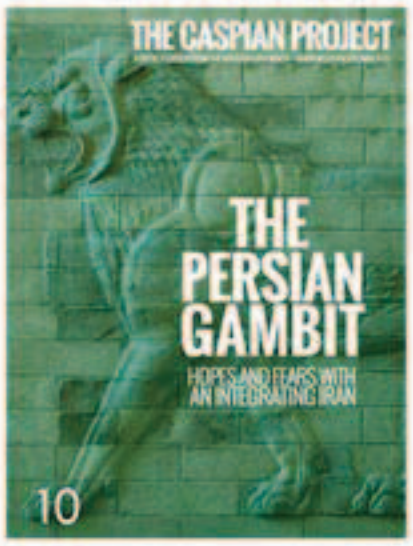






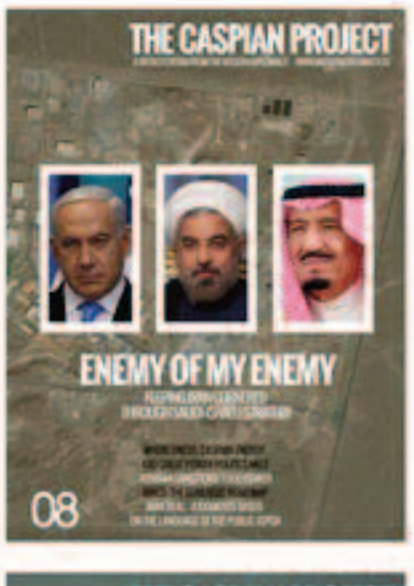








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THE WOLVES OF ISLAMIC ZEALOTS

THE NEED FOR AMERICAN-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP

ANDY DEAHN

Andy Deahn is a 2015 graduate with a Bachelor of Science degree from Bellevue University's International Security and Intelligence Studies program. He is currently employed as a Field Service Engineer at the Sierra Nevada Corporation (SNC) providing aerial surveillance and intelligence analysis for the Department of Defense throughout various worldwide locations. He had previously worked as Special Tactics-Tactical Air Control Party member in the U.S. Air Force supporting Army Special Forces ground teams as a Joint Terminal Attack Controller.



Hellfire awaits you. Europe is shaking. Russia is dying." These words uttered in an Islamic State (DAESH) propaganda video in November 2015 projected a new vision of DAESH ideology.

With this statement DAESH pledged that it wished to overtake the Kremlin by any violent means necessary. No longer are wars fought by means of attrition and territorial gains. Rather, they are fought by influencing the minds of impressionable individuals through strong religious identities and extreme ideologies. And while the United States and many other Western powers have been engaged in the War on Terror for the last decade and a half, the Caspian Five have remained somewhat free of these extremists' grasp. But perhaps no more and this demands new strategic partnerships and cooperation.

We know that out of the Caspian Five, Russia is home to the smallest Muslim community overall. Russia's citizenry is composed of about 75% Russian Orthodox Christian, 11% Muslim, and the remaining 14% consisting of Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic, or having no religious affiliation. This demographic breakdown illustrates how Russia is less alike culturally than the rest of its neighbors in the Caspian Region. For example, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan are all Muslim majority nations. Iran, the nation most influenced by its religious heritage, has been issued threats by DAESH. This is because Iran is the regional Shia power and DAESH regards followers of the Shia sect of Islam to be heretics who should be eliminated. Kazakhstan houses a slightly smaller percentage (63%) of citizens following the Islamic faith, with another 25% of the population being Russian Orthodox. Russia is therefore isolated, Islamically speaking, and lacks this major common identity unifier with the other Caspian littorals. While remaining the religious outlier in the Caspian Sea region is not necessarily a Russian disadvantage, it does pose certain strategic obstacles. Fighting DAESH, an organization that bases its actions off of its own perverted version of Islamic discourse, poses unique challenges to Russia's preferred method of engagement.

For instance, on September 30, 2015, Russia began its air campaign inside Syria. While the Assad regime welcomed the blankets of bombs, a vast majority of the international community rejected them, believing that the Kremlin was only looking to satisfy its strategic goals: namely, to preserve the Assad regime while confirming the Kremlin's position in the world as an indispensible power. Moreover, Russia has engaged with Iran in its support for the Assad regime.

While I do have to applaud President Putin for taking action against a vile extremist organization such as DAESH, the move was not strategically calculated or adequately coordinated amongst all the players currently participating in military operations against the group. In order to achieve victory, prevent political fallout, and reclaim some of its pride, Russia will need to cooperate with the other players involved, most importantly the United States, due to its leading investment in the fight. In addition, without this necessary coordination, Russia would remain an international scapegoat and receive too much criticism for a conflict that is not entirely of its own devising.

Air strikes alone have become the preferred instrument with which a nation engages the fight. While winning them political points on the international stage, it does not necessarily commit whole-heartedly to permanently eliminating actual enemies. It is almost as if this new trend has become the exclusive norm for declaring war in the 21st century. Moreover, following a strategy that only commits localized air strikes, rather than a combination of air and ground forces, is a half-hearted attempt at best for countering such capable zealot organizations like DAESH. Take for example in January 2015 when DAESH members burned Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh alive. Jordan commenced a bombing campaign that lasted only a few weeks. Again in November 2015, as we all watched in horror the murders across the streets of Paris, it was only in the wake of such heinous violence that French authorities committed multiple air assets for a bombing campaign against DAESH strongholds. These maneuvers are reactive rather than proactive in the fight against zealots and ultimately wane as time progresses.



Relating back to Russia, it was only in October 2015 when militants in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula bombed a Russian civilian airliner, killing all 224 passengers. Only then did the DAESH extremism in Syria hit close to home. Russia is a prideful nation, one that I think will attempt to not only commit more forces to the fight just to spite the United States and Western powers, but also so as to not project weakness in the face of tragedy.

While swallowing some of its pride in order to coordinate better counter-terrorist efforts may be hard for the Kremlin, a perceived defeat in the Middle East would be far more detrimental to Russian power and domestically generate undesirable socio-political effects. The Kremlin has now received heinous aggressions as well as direct threats from DAESH. It has more to lose from backing out of the fight now or straying from the most cooperative and advantageous course.

This is not only due to the increased threat level and prevalence of attacks across the Middle East, but also because this danger potentially threatens Caspian partners as the expansion of DAESH operations increase in scope and frequency. Turkmenistan worries about increasingly new security challenges which may spill over into the Russian Federation. The same worry at least peripherally applies to Azerbaijan as well.

This begs a final important question: could a U.S.-Russian partnership provide the necessary leadership and direct military cooperation to inspire the world to eliminate the growing threat of violent religious extremism? Such a partnership could hold this potential if only old traditions of rivalry and mistrust can be broken. Going it alone does not guarantee victory and may de facto ensure defeat. The wolves of Islamic zealots can only be overcome by the American bald eagle and Russian bear teaming together.



NOT REALLY ATTATURK VS. LENIN

10 QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA-TURKEY RELATIONS

DR. MATTHEW CROSSTON

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Most of the world raised a curious eyebrow when news broke of a Russian military jet being knocked from the sky by Turkey, resulting in the murder of the Russian pilot and rescue of the fighter's navigator. Tensions and mutual accusations continue to be lobbed by all interested parties. While some inquire if this is the spark for igniting the closest we have come in two generations to WWIII, others wonder if this might not be the 'crisis' needed to bring disparate sides together for a larger and more dangerous fight? For those who wish to understand just why this incident happened and what will truly emerge as a consequence of it, certain questions need to be answered that so far are barely being asked by the world's major news organizations. So in the interests of providing the essential framework, the following ten questions are proffered. How well or how poorly the world finds answers to these questions will indicate how deeply or superficially we will understand the complicated and multi-layered relationship between Turkey and the Russian Federation.

1.Turkey claims it was simply defending its own sovereign airspace. Does general global hesitancy mean that defending airspace should be put on a sliding scale based on real world power and significance?

2.Just exactly how many times did Turkey warn the Russian fighter jet? Will Turkey provide recorded proof of these warnings?

3.Exactly how much time did the Russian fighter cross and remain in Turkish airspace? Will radar evidence be presented proving said incursions and time periods?

4.Was Turkish impatience and assertiveness explained singularly by incursion into sovereign airspace or is it explained more compellingly by irritation with Russian airstrikes against anti-Assad rebels, whom Turkey tacitly supports?

5.Were there in fact bombing strikes by Russian forces in Syria that killed ethnic Turkmen rather than DAESH fighters, something Turkey alleges? Will proof of casualties be produced to support this accusation? If proven, does this explain Turkish impatience with Russia?

6.Is it just coincidence that the Russian fighter was shot down exactly in an area where Turkey and Syria have had a long-standing border dispute, and which, in the past, Russia has often sided with the Syrian claims?

7.How much political animosity is generated for Turkey toward Russia over the Crimean Tatars, who speak a Turkic language and have generally opposed the secession/annexation of Crimea to Russia? (Especially in the recent aftermath of Tatars blocking the restringing of power lines that were mysteriously blown up, putting nearly the entire Crimean peninsula this past weekend in a total blackout.)

8.If Russia ultimately responds by only sending a defensive air-missile system to Syria along with trade and travel restrictions – but no active military response directly against Turkey – will these examples of 'military restraint' from Russia be recognized and commended by NATO or disregarded?

9.Both Putin and Erdogan have reputations for being brash and aggressive in personality. If this incident only simmers and then fades away in decreasing diplomatic/military importance, does this signify personal agency is not as important a causal factor for explaining state behavior in international affairs as many Western analysts like to claim?

10. Does a successful de-escalation of this crisis affirm the argument that the greater fight is against DAESH and thus potentially creates greater cooperation opportunities between unaffiliated actors, like the United States, France, Russia, Iran, Israel, and the Assad government?

"The strong do what they have to do and the weak accept what they have to accept"

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EUROPE'S NEW GEOPOLITICS FOLLOWING THE RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN SYRIA AND IRAQ



GIANCARLO ELIA VALORI

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In 1992 he was appointed Officier de la Légion d'Honneur de la République Francaise, with this motivation: "A man who can see across borders to understand the world" and in 2002 he received the title of "Honorable" of the Académie des Sciences de l'Institut de France

After the shooting down of the Russian Su-24 aircraft by a Turkish F-16 fighter, some analysts are envisaging a future scenario of waged war. Nothing can be ruled out, but the possibility of a third world war - visible and bitterly fought with real weapons - for Mesopotamia, the area in which, however, the Eurasian identity was born, is not fully rational. What is certain is that the Russian Su-24M aircraft was shot down at 10.24' Moscow time. There is no evidence of the ritual communications between two countries which are not at war with each other, as always happens in these cases and, however, the NATO rules are strict on these issues. Russia stated that its plane was shot down four kilometers from the Turkish border.



Moreover, we do not know yet what happened to the Russian helicopter Mi-8AMTSh which had rushed to the rescue of the Su-24 pilots and was attacked, presumably not only by the "Turkmen" operating on the edge of the Latakia region, with the final destruction of the helicopter with US-made TOW anti-tank missiles, which probably ended up there as a result of some triangular operation between the Gulf region, Cyprus and Turkey.

The Russian Federation has already deployed several S-400 missiles for air defence in al-Humaymin, on Syrian territory and, in all likelihood, they will be the first military asset against a Turkish attack, unless Turkey does not organize a "children' crusade" of EU countries still eager - after the terrible massacre in Paris – to "bring democracy" to Syria.

The problem does not lie in the point where the Fencer – as NATO calls the Sukhoi 24 – fell down, but in the political logic underlying this fact. Now, with their documents, the news agencies in Moscow demonstrate that the low-flying Russian bomber was downed within the Syrian borders, but again this is not the core of the issue: Turkey, the largest Islamic country of Eurasia, the second NATO military power after the United States, wants to make the Atlantic Alliance fall into in the Syrian-Iraqi chaos, with the results we can easily imagine.So far the United States have supported Turkey which, however, should be the NATO future geopolitical pivot against Russia. The United States look to China and, in the meantime, surround the Russian Federation with advanced electronic weapons systems. Although probably not fully aware of this, the United States want to separate the Eurasian peninsula from the central Sino-Russian system - a new edition of the Atlantic system, but without a US military presence on site.

And even without those guarantees which enabled the Cold War to full enter into the "thirty glorious years", as the economist Jean Fourastié called the years from 1943 to August 15, 1971, the date marking the end of the Bretton Woods system, based on fixed parities between the US dollar and the currencies of Europe, Canada, USA and Japan.
What remains of the "Invertebrate Europe" today, in a context in which the US walk out and, indeed, design the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) - a complex and still secret commercial treaty - the Middle East is on fire and the Maghreb region is becoming - after the Libyan disaster – a gun aimed at Italy and Europe which, however, does not realize it?
Nothing, but it is a nothing deprived of any strategic rationality.
Nevertheless we may think of common intents between the European Union, Russia, China and some Central Asian countries.

Nothing is ever certain in today's intelligence war between Turkey and Russia, but some consequences are easy to infer from the context of the operations over the skies of Latakia: 1) Turkey wants to internationalize the Syrian-Iraqi conflict, by possibly involving the Jewish State.
The latter, however, would have no place where to stay. Certainly it cannot side with the Russian-Syrian-Iranian coalition - the collection of its fiercest and most traditional enemies, except for Russia.
2) The State of Israel cannot even side with the Coalition of "rebels" ranging from the Jabat al Nusra Front - the Qaedist branch in Syria - to the "Division 30" trained by the United States and then immediately included in the Caliphate's forces, or with the United States which sometimes clash with the sword jihad and sometimes help it against Bashar El Assad.
Without a project, without a strategic idea, without real allies and, however, without guarantees for the Jewish State - the only Middle East centre we can trust.
Everyone wages and fights its war on the same ground, without a serious geopolitical goal: the United States want to oust the Syrian "tyrant" Assad - obviously the fall of the "tyrant" Saddam Hussein did not teach anything to them, not to mention the fight against the other "tyrant", Muammar Al Minyar El Gaddafi, which ended as we all know. Everybody knows that in the Middle East tyrants do not exist.
It seems that the United States still want to blindly apply - in the Arab-Islamic world - the same splitting up theory that Zbigniew Brzezinski had managed effectively in the Balkans' case.

Brzezinski, one of the most brilliant foreign policy analysts of the last decades, was born in Poland and had the same anti-Communist ideas of General Pilsudski, who thought that revolutionary Russia could be destroyed by breaking it up by ethnic lines and groups.
Today, in the market-world and in global finance, such projects are bound to end quickly: the small countries are intended to be either self-sufficient - and then survive – or, when this does not happen, Mozart's famous "stone guest" - namely organized crime - comes and leads them to death.
Hence if we do not think in a radically new way, it will be impossible to redesign the world order effectively.
Moreover, with its operations in Syria, the Russian Federation has sealed the geopolitical space of the Eurasian peninsula.
3) Russia has closed the European geopolitical space from both directions.
Along the border of the former Warsaw Pact, Russia is sufficiently armed to be able to deter an increasingly weak and confused NATO.

In the Middle East, with its presence in Syria, Russia can easily and safely negotiate a peaceful management and settlement of the dispute with Ukraine and still close the East to the European Union.
This is exactly what it needs, with President Xi Jinping's new Chinese policy of the "new Silk Road".



The United States are now clearly withdrawing, thus leaving Mesopotamia to the clash between Shiites and Sunnis, with a European Union which, recklessly, is already full of Islamic people who can be often radicalized or full of "travel companions."
The solution could be a Eurasian pact with Russia.
Obviously Eternal Russia targets the Eurasian peninsula presenting itself as a "Third Rome", according to the Eurasian fascinating theories by Alexander Dugin, a close and trusted advisor to President Vladimir Putin. Nevertheless, Putin must be reminded of the fact that two great European politicians (dare I say strategists) spoke - before anyone else - of the union between the peninsula and the Heartland.
One was Pope John XXIII, whose experience as a diplomat and political theorist of the Vatican foreign policy in terrible years and during the Cold War is scarcely recalled.

Pope John XXIII spoke of "Europe from the Mediterranean to the Urals", while the other supreme statesman planned to unite "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals".
It was not a threat to the unity of the USSR, as only a naïve interpretation could lead us to assume.
It was the idea of a continuum of civilizations spanning from the First to the Third Rome, possibly through the second, Constantinople, which regards many nations' deep interest.

Russia of European ethnicity cannot be part of peninsular Europe, while the large steppes dominated in the past by the "Golden Horde" must still be exploited and managed with the wisdom of the Roman Empire.
Without this union, the Islamic world will engulf us, regardless of the US presence in the Euro-peninsular region.

USING IRANIAN GEOPOLITICAL AMBITIONS



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Strengthening of Russia-Iran alliance in Syria can lead to strengthening positions of Tehran in the Middle East and disruption of situation in several Gulf States.

There are strong evidences of political and military cooperation and actions coordination between Iran and Russia in Syria that show probability of enhancing Tehran's position in the region and using it by Moscow to undermine the Saudi Arabia leadership as far as stability in the Gulf.

Russia – US relations exacerbation 'caused by Kremlin's annexation of Crimea, aggression in Ukraine and attempts to expand influence in Eastern Europe and Baltic region induce Moscow to return to confrontation with the West using methods of the Cold War. Russia leadership supposes that the intensification of intervention in conflicts abroad can be an effective way to renew cooperation with the West, lift sanctions and come to a compromise on geopolitical spheres of influence.

Groups of Iranian troops have been arriving in Syria via Bassel al-Assad International Airport in Latakia province as the Syrian army launches a major offensive north of the strategic city of Homs backed by Russian military aircrafts. The airport has become a joint hub for Iranian and Russian forces. Russia, Iran, Syria, and Iraq signed intelligence-sharing agreement. Some intelligence data Moscow receives via Tehran from Hezbollah forces. October 13th Iraq has begun bombing Islamic State fighters with the help of a new intelligence center operated by Russia, Iran and Syria. If Russia can provide only satellite and technical intelligence support all ground intelligence collection with field sources and agent network is provided by Iranian and less by Syrian opportunities.

The deeper convergence between Moscow and Tehran on Damask became clear since April this year after the visit of the Chairman for the Committee for Foreign Policy and National Security of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran Alaeddin Boroujerdi to Moscow.

Also the Iranian military support in Syria began after he met the Syrian parliament speaker in Damascus. The discussion issue was the joint operation against opposition fighters in northwest Syria.

Russia could try to stimulate Iran for increased ground activity in Syria and support Bashar Assad's regime to break down the negotiation process between Tehran and Washington. The lifting of sanctions against Iran is the main threat for Moscow because of fall in oil prices prospects. The World Bank forecast is $10 per barrel fall in case of this scenario. At the same time the IMF expects that Russian economy will lose 3.4% this year because of sanctions and low oil prices in 2015. But this estimation is based on current prices and not includes the scenario of Iran's output on the market after lifting sanctions against Tehran that doubtless will lead to the deepen crisis in Russian economy. So sanctions retention against Iran is one of the current main intentions of Kremlin in the region. Moscow is achieving this aim by playing on the Tehran's geopolitical ambitions, i.e. its desire to strengthen regional positions.

Moscow can support Iran in its confrontation with Saudi Arabia and use pro-Iranian Shia communities to destabilize several Gulf States. Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have not been this high since the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988. The Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubair said in July this year that the kingdom is against any Iranian interference in the Arab world.

Meanwhile Iran has expanded to the extent where it now has a military presence in Saudi Arabia's immediate environs: to the north in Iraq, and in Saudi Arabia's southern neighbor Yemen, while its affiliates are active as opposition groups in Bahrain to the east. Iran is investing plenty of its manpower and funds in a project which seemingly aims to lay siege to the Gulf countries. There is an indirect confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria as forces from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are directly leading militias from Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan to fight in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime. Russia can encourage Tehran to use the potential of pro-Iranian Shia political groupings like Islahiyyah and Hezbollah Al-Hejaz and battle groups in Al-Ahsa and Qatif regions (Eastern province) to shake the integrity of the Kingdom. The same actions could be launched in Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (Sharjah and Dubai emirates) and possibly Kuwait.Such scenario will trigger the oil prices sharp growth and eliminating the chance of some EU states like Poland to diversify their oil supply (saving Russian dominance on European market) by oil production disruption and maintaining instability in oilfields zones. Creation of the Shia Pro-Iranian governments or autonomous exclaves in Gulf States will destroy existing interstate geopolitical system in the Middle East.

The correspondence of this with Russian tactic of unrecognized states creation in Black Sea region gives a chance to claim the Russian coordination of such policy using the resources and influence of Iran. It is likely that Iranian uncovered activity in Syria was suggested by Kremlin and not vice versa as affirmed by former Russian president adviser Illarionov at October, 17.

Russia can be interested in enhancing positions of Iran in Tajikistan as the border state with instable Afghanistan staying the significant threat for Russia from the South which also is the gate for radical groups backed by some Gulf circles. Russia is vulnerable rom the South direction facing risks of IS forces deployment in Central Asia states close to Russia borders. In recent years Tajikistan becomes the center of competition between Iran and KSA in Central Asia for the influence. Tajik foreign minister in 2012 called Iran as the best strategic partner. So in the fighting for influence on Dushanbe between Muslim Iran, KSA, Pakistan and Afghanistan Kremlin choose Tehran as the most loyal and less dangerous power to support.

Strengthening of Russia-Iran alliance can increase vulnerability of the US and its Western Allies because of the Middle East states integrity risks and local conflicts development that will negatively affect the world economy.

At the same time Russia tries to use Iranian ambitions to undermine the US positions in the Gulf region, increase Kremlin's value on the world energy market and finally to include Shia axis states to Russian geopolitical projects confronting US and its allies.



TRYING TO REACH NUCLEAR GLOBAL ZERO

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Non-nuclear weapon states have become increasingly disgruntled over what they perceive as the nuclear weapon states' unwillingness to seriously commit to nuclear disarmament.

The United Nations adopted UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/56 in 2012, which established an open-ended working group to "develop proposals to take forward multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations for the achievement and maintenance of a world without nuclear weapons."

Other non-nuclear weapon states have also created initiatives: for example, the New Agenda Coalition called for increased political momentum to create a nuclear disarmament agenda. Many credit this coalition with convincing the nuclear-weapon states to agree to 13 steps toward nuclear disarmament. The Middle Powers Initiative launched an "Article VI forum" which aimed to "examine the legal, technical, and political requirements to fulfill nonproliferation and disarmament commitments for a nuclear weapon-free world." One of the most influential movements was implemented by four formerly high-ranking U.S. officials, including George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn. They published their proposals titled "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons" and "Toward a Nuclear Weapon Free World" in the Wall Street Journal oped.

The humanitarian argument against nuclear weapons has gained popularity and traction in recent years. At the 2015 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, the humanitarian initiative was the focal point of discussion. As it continues to gain momentum and popularity, the nuclear weapon states will likely have to address and potentially support such initiatives. Recognizing this to some extent, the five formal nuclear weapon states have taken the "P5 step," promising that they will continue to work step-by-step toward nuclear disarmament. Seven conferences have been hosted by the P5 countries with the goal of increasing dialogue and transparency in regards to the nuclear disarmament progress. However, they still have not agreed to any form of timeline or real progress.

Times are changing, however, and a conflict between nuclear-weapon states is still an increasing possibility. China's economy is growing and it is set to become a serious competitor to the United States and Russia across all economic and military realms. Consequently, it is enhancing its nuclear capabilities and delivery systems. Russia is modernizing its nuclear arsenals and creating waves with its operations in Syria. Traditionally, Russia has depended on nuclear weapons to make up for shortfalls in its conventional military capability. It is not feasible to expect any nuclear-weapon state to give up its nuclear weapons soon as long as other states retain theirs. Any real nuclear disarmament will likely have to happen with all nuclear-weapon states simultaneously capitulating and including all of their weapons concurrently.

Because nuclear weapons are the most powerful and destructive weapons in the world, there has been much research done on the specific arsenals, doctrines, and capabilities of nuclear-weapon states. The international community places heavy emphasis on the security of the warheads and the materials used to produce these weapons. However, despite this emphasis, and the treaties that were signed to minimize the amount of strategic weapons operated by the dominant nuclear powers but still allowing them to keep arsenals, many analysts, scholars and non-nuclear weapons states remain staunch proponents of full nuclear disarmament.

The potential policy prescriptions that could be made to bring this about will depend on one's specific stance on nuclear weapons. Many academics split along extremes: either advocating for complete international nuclear disarmament or supporting the modernization of and open use of nuclear weapons as a strategic deterrent. Those who do not choose the extremes tend to support tighter arms control and increased regulation by an unbiased international agency. However unfeasible at the moment, there are those that advocate for 'Global Zero,' a complete and total international nuclear disarmament.

"The United States can't rid the world of nuclear weapons on its own; other states, including its enemies, get a vote. Russia, China, Britain, France, Israel, India, Pakistan, and North Korea possess nuclear weapons not because they blindly imitate the United States but because they fear their neighbors and, in the case of Washington's enemies, America's awesome conventional military power." (Kroenig, 2013)

If countries were to get rid of their nuclear weapons they would have to rely on their conventional capabilities. America's conventional military capabilities are far superior to those of any other country. Russia recognizes this and would therefore likely never give up its nuclear capacity. "Only if we could fundamentally transform international politics such that states no longer faced security threats might there be reason to think that the world could be made safe for Global Zero." (Kroenig, 2013)

The opposite end of the spectrum rings more true, however, as to what the Russian Federation has been doing. Russian military doctrine has continually emphasized the importance of nuclear weapons in its national security. It has even begun modernizing and developing new strategic warheads with advanced capabilities. Many of its nuclear weapons and warheads are still from the Cold War era and have not been tested or overhauled since inception. Therefore, they needed to be updated and modernized for safety purposes so as to continue to regulate Russian national security and make its adversaries more readily predictable. Though some argue that maintaining nuclear weapons is an enormous financial burden, the cost of modernizing and developing an equally powerful conventional force that could truly compete with the United States would be astronomically expensive.

The last option, therefore, is the best and most likely to happen: Russia and the United States will continue to rely on international organizations and arms control methods to monitor and keep track of nuclear weapon developments. These tighter arms control measures could placate the international community, making them feel more involved in the limiting of capabilities of nuclear-weapon states. Currently, Russia and the United States abide by their nuclear weapons treaties, continuing to decommission their strategic nuclear weapons until reaching the levels outlined by the new START treaty. They will maintain those levels and continually perform maintenance upgrades on their strategic delivery platforms and warheads. While this is a far cry from Global Zero, it is still admittedly many steps below the intermittently open hostility of the Cold War era. It seems, for good or bad, the march to Global Zero will have to be taken with baby steps.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS AT SCO



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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, initially, the Shanghai Five was created by China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan in 1996 with the aim to resolve the border disputes among its member states. Later on, Uzbekistan was also granted full membership in 2001 and the Organization was named as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The Organization promotes and beholds the objectives for creating an environment of mutual respect, trust and friendly ties with neighboring and member states based on enhanced support for the progressive cooperation in the political, economic, cultural, education, scientific technology, power, communication, energy and environmental protection issues.

The collapse of the Soviet Union gave birth to a new world order based on a unipolar system under the U.S supremacy influencing almost all the major fields of the international affairs. During the Cold War era, the world was mainly divided into two major blocs having their respective military alliance frameworks where each side had a number of allied states under their command; these military alliances were based on the commitments and arrangements for the collective security of all the member states and the defensive and offensive modes by all the member states even for the attainment of respective national interest goals of any single member state.Similarly, the member states of the U.S led NATO collectively struggled to check the further expansion of the Communism to Europe and other parts of the world.

Polarity is a theoretical construct; real international systems only approximate ideal types. The concept of unipolarity implies a threshold value in the distribution of capabilities among states. How do we know whether a system has passed the threshold, becoming unipolar? It happens when a unipolar international system contains one state whose share of capabilities places it in a class by itself compared to all other states.

This definition reflects the fact that a state's capabilities are measured not on an absolute scale but relative to those of other states. In keeping with this definition, a unipolar state is preponderant in all relevant categories of capability. In a narrow but also frequently used, criterion, a system is unipolar if it has only one state capable of organizing major politico-military action anywhere in the system. After the dismemberment of Soviet led WARSAW PACT, the challenging of the US supremacy was a natural factor due to the US designs to dominate the former parts of Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States of Central Asia (CIS) by granting them membership of NATO. Hence unable to counter the threat alone, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was created as a power balancer to prevent the US dominance over the Russian sphere of influence. Still it was insufficient on its part because the members of the CSTO were not that militarily or politically strong, to counter balance the NATO States.During the Cold War era, the collective security alliances like Warsaw Pact under the Soviet and the U.S led NATO were the organizations which aimed to collectively respond the other side in case of any aggression.

The basic principle behind the creation of organizations was to prevent the other side from any kind of military, political, diplomatic and economic hegemony which may turn the other side to dominate the global affairs single handedly and by that way, the concept of balance of power flourished where each side tried to maximize its power through the means of maximum number of allied states committed to collectively check the growth of other side to their sphere of influence and respond accordingly. Even in recent time, the great power seek option to further enhance their spheres of influence and such moves close to the theories of neo-colonialism have urged the global political system to gradually keep moving towards a new Cold War. Such stereotype thinking resulted in an ever growth in the number of Organization like the NATO, EU, SCO, ASEAN, CIS, BRICS, etc.

SCO AS A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE REGION

The increasing engagement of the US and allies in the Asian region are perceived as serious threats to Russia and China. Particularly, the recent development in the aftermath of Crimea crisis between Russia and the West and the prevalent perception of encirclement of China by the NATO forces are some of the pushing forces to look beyond the economic gains and counter the challenges existing next door. This situation of competition is created among the states when they found their interests on stake each challenging the other to gain the national policy objectives on each other's expanse.In some cases when the states find it difficult to pursue the policy objectives individually, due to intensity competition among states. In such a scenario, the states' immediate approach becomes to align themselves with the other states to form a common alliance. These alliances can be of different kinds i.e.; economic alliances like E.U., ASEAN, OIC and, military alliances like as NATO, WARSAW PACT and regional alliances like SAARC etc

The member states of these alliances thus share some common interests which binds them for collective effort; ultimately all aimed at balancing the power equilibrium against other competing powers so that no single country becomes able to dominate the global or regional military and political scenario

In global political system states generally create a balance against each others' powers, when two great powers equally maintain the equilibrium called bipolarity where both exercise equal status of power in international affairs and when many states succeed to maintain the status-quo it is called a multi-polarity where each posses a particular sphere of influence and in general sense at the international level as well. The bipolarity or multi-polarity is not only limited within the concepts of competition for between two states but all the member states of an alliance as a whole maintain the balance of power equilibrium against the opposite side.

The Shanghai Co-operation Organization also faces some challenges side by side to the opportunities. Russia envisions several dimensions to the future of SCO; these include strengthening the major functional areas of the cooperation along with expansion of the organization in the form of new partnerships. Although Russian hopes to enlarge the scope of SCO organization by expanding its membership list yet the prospective of potential candidate states agreeing to the offer does not seem much positive. Members of the SCO had agreed on the fact that there is a need to pause the process of enlargement of the SCO but some Russian experts having completely opposite views voted against it. Anatoly Torkunov, rector Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University) stated that SCO would be more effective if it if it was identified as a representative of the whole Asian Pacific Region rather than being isolated to the representation of Central Asia alone.

This could be accomplished by including new stated in SCO. However, the full membership of Pakistan and India raised two issues for Russia and the SCO. Firstly, both the countries in spite of being nuclear weapon states are non-signatories of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Non-Proliferation Treaty, NPT) which is a clear contradiction of the primary requirements for the being a member state of SCO.

PROSPECTS OF INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS AS PERMANENT MEMBERS OF SCO

For Pakistan and India, the period after its inception was the marker of the direction of its foreign policy. The society under the rule British Raj was greatly influence by the Western thoughts and the way of conducting state affairs in the likely style. The unlucky movement after one year of their partition, the India and Pakistan fought a war in 1948 involved the both states in an unending arms race and their involvement with various regional and international alliances and forums in order to meet their economic and military needs.

During the initial period of their status of observer states at the SCO, the main concern for about the full membership of India and Pakistan was that it would cause further trouble to the organization due to their prolonged hostility that is existent right from their inception, despite the SCO powers Russia supported the Indian membership so the China to Pakistan but their entrance in SCO as permanent members was always a gloomy reality that it would create a de-fragmentation within the organization and a divide as two different groups one led by the China and the other by Russia and ultimately it would become an impression of an organization within organization that yield in a weak institutionalized organization diverted from its main agenda to counter-weight the extra-regional powers and ultimately the SCO would become a less effective organization having very low significance and benefits for the member states.

Moreover, the closely observing analysts of the SCO believed that the acceptance of India and Pakistan as permanent members would disrupt the current internal political arena and will also affect the relations of other members with the rest of the world particularly, the countries that are being urged by the international community to abide by the regulations of the NPT. Secondly, the main cause of tension and a bone of the contention, the issue of Kashmir between India and Pakistan would always remain a direct variant to affect the consensus of the member on any particular issue related to bilateral relations between India and Pakistan, which is not the kind of message SCO wants to portray in front of the outside world.

Similarly, the case of Iran for the grant of permanent membership has always remained a controversial topic. Iran is viewed a potential nuclear state by the international community and hence would provoke the USA to further obstruct the organization's work. This is why the Iranian membership in the SCO being considered controversial although, Russia is already linked with Tehran for trade purposes and the SCO members can also largely benefit from Iran's huge energy resources but ultimately the acceptance of Iran as a member state of SCO would only involve severe risk of inviting diplomatic isolation of the organization. Moreover, such controversy at this point would not be benign for the further development of organization into a real balancing power bloc for SCO still needs certain improvement in various grounds. In case of Iran's full membership of SCO in near future despite of its ambiguous nuclear program which is a pinching point between US and Iran relations, but it would also pose e direct threat other non- member states of NATO.

China's growing ties or energy trade with Iran and Pakistan is one of the other reasons that Russia does not want Iran and Pakistan to join the SCO group.

China is in the process of exploring the opportunity of importing gas through pipeline from Iran and Turkmenistan, with Iran. According to China's view, this gas would be delivered across Pakistan and Afghanistan via a pipeline. Therefore, it is very much clear that Gazprom, Russia's largest energy company, would most certainly oppose any such route plan. Russia would definitely try to restrict the options of China of buying gas from Turkmenistan or increase its pipeline capabilities to gain access of gas resources in Central Asia. These concerns are the basis of Russia's negativity towards full membership of Iran and Pakistan with the SCO and according to many analysts cooperation over energy supplies is precisely the reason why China wants these two states to be members of the SCO.

SCO AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN

Although the SCO's Council of the Heads of States has accepted the proposal for the grant of full membership to Pakistan and India in the Organization and it is also hoped that by the start of 2016 these two states would gain permanent membership after completing certain documentary requirements. The two states were observer states of the SCO since 2004 and had been trying to get the permanent membership but the main hurdle between the grant of membership always remained the concern about Pakistan and India's hostility towards each other. Despite of the fact, the hostility will definitely prevail after becoming permanent members but the thing which is being perceived as a ray of hope that both the states will get a platform to resolve their bilateral issues effectively.

The basic tenets of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization abide its members to refrain from the interference in other's internal matters and preserve their self-respect, sovereignty and to encourage the creation of an environment based on cooperation in their region and neighborhood.

The Organization is further ambitious in promoting the enhanced support for the economic, cultural, scientific, environmental, communication and educational cooperation. Despite of all these factors, the Organization has never came out of its ambiguous nature that whether it's going to become a permanent military alliance to counter the Western bloc or it will only remain a regional economic forum. The ambiguity is because of the creation of Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) that has a remarkable number of quick response forces and the members of SCO often conduct collective military and naval drills and demonstrate the military and naval power effectively.

Moreover, it is strongly going to become a time of test of the significance of the SCO as an effective player to bridge the gap between India and Pakistan through a series of diplomatic moves that would urge both parties to bring an end to the historical disputes and hostility between the two neighboring states. Such success at the part of SCO would be historical landmark on its credit and would encourage many others to consult the Organization for their issues and this will ultimately make the SCO an ever effective player next to the UNO in the international political arena.

Apart from the issues of discord between India and Pakistan, the Organization will bring immense economic and trade opportunities for the both as the dominant powers of the SCO i.e. China and Russia are huge industrial and economic hubs and at the other hand the other Central Asian members are immensely rich with their oil and natural gas resources that are more than enough for energy starved nations like China, India and Pakistan.

ROLE OF DOMINANT SCO POWERS IN BRINGING-UP PEACE AND PROGRESS IN THE REGION

SCO has not only helped in establishing regional calm and stability but has also been successful in controlling conflicts from spreading to other regions. Central Asia, Balkans and the Middle East share a history of complex conflict ranging from religious to ethnic nature. But the formation of SCO in Central Asia portrayed a much better image of it as compared to the Balkans and the Middle East. The presence of SCO played an important role in preventing the Afghan civil war from spreading into Central Asia. By doing so SCO managed to develop a successful example for the rest of the international community struggling with post Cold war conditions. It would not be wrong to say that had 'Shanghai Five-SCO' not been present in Central Asia the Afghan war would have most certainly spread to its neighboring countries. This depicts how the SCO is acting to maintain the security and stability.

In the light of these achievements, it can be said that SCO has played an integral part in maintaining the regional calm and stability of its member states. Addressing the Afghanistan which is also one the urgent defence and foreign policy issue faced by the Obama administration, the SCO's claims of the failure of US strategy and their growing demands to new government for setting-up a final time frame to call back NATO troops from Afghanistan.

The current situation is completely against the US and its allies' troops that are badly stuck in Afghanistan and the further announcement of sending more troops to the country has raised many questions for the SCO members and other world as well.

In a very short period of less than a decade, the SCO has established itself as a global security mechanism. Successfully being able to marginalize the Western and American influence in the Central Asian region therefore, most of times the SCO has been termed as NATO of the East and a counter-weight by Russia and China to challenge the United States and allies presence in the region. It is also believed, that the Sino- Russian interests will shape the future of whole region and more especially of oil and natural gas rich Central Asia.



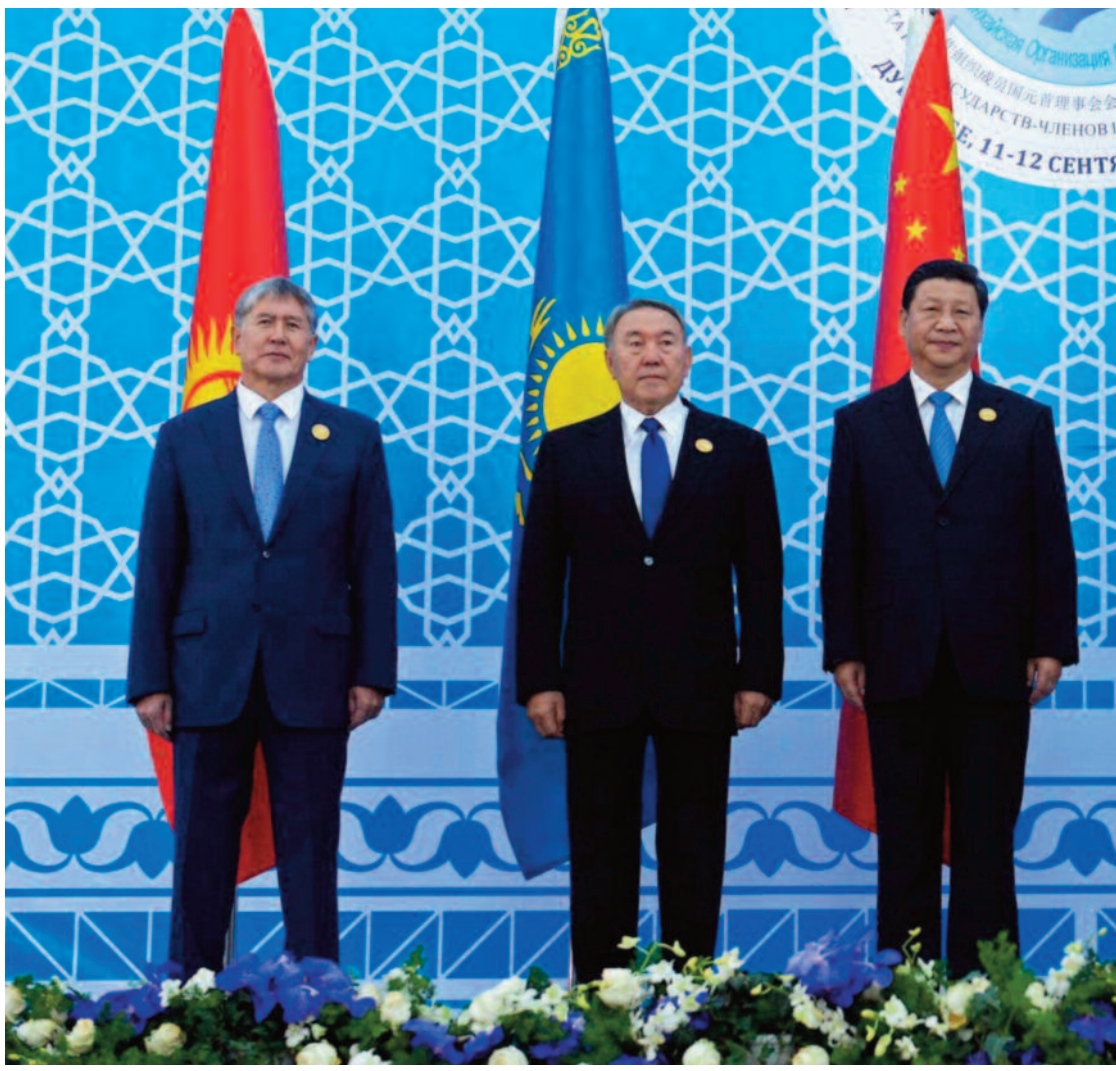
FUTURE PERSPECTIVES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE REGION

The phenomenon of continuous shift in power among the major players of the world, the face of international relations keeps changing respectively. Given that, it is important that our understanding of the world we live in should also evolve accordingly, and we are not stuck with a worldview that has no relevance with the evolving realities of a world in transition. Global politics is always characterized with three tendencies; namely, cooperation, competition and conflict.

The world affairs are integrative and disintegrative processes are always at continued development where there are factors contributing to peace and issues leading to war. There is always hectic competition going on among major players of the world. Sometime, this competition causes conflict. Some time, it leads to peace. All depending mainly upon the great powers relations with one another, the present state of relations cause any shift or smoothness of inter-state relations.

In international relations the future of any state-to-state relations is completely unpredictable, but the present course of any activity can at least reflect the possible outcome of their possible action. Thus, certain degree of caution needs to be taken while comparing the SCO with any of the organizations in the West for economic and security cooperation in the near future. It is believed when two for the coming future time. It is believed when two friendly states having interest in the same thing, it naturally creates a sense of competition and to some extent makes them hostile to one another.

Especially while looking into the history of international relations, most of times it has been seen when ever two states have been struggling to pursue a common thing as a issue of their vital national interests they ultimately became rivals, as it was in the case of Soviet Union and US in the post world war II era their vital interests, turned their alliance into confrontation and hostility and finally resulted a prolonged Cold War involving the whole world. The current state of SCO and NATO relations is alarming for a change of global political system with a forecast of a new emerging global bipolar political structure.



The SCO's demand for a new world order not merely based on the US dominance over world affairs and other institutions, the economic one is not an exception which brings a growing clash of interests between the SCO and NATO member states. The SCO poses serious challenges to other organizations in various grounds that are not only for NATO but also for the European Union; the SCO's economic strength is also one of turning factor in the present global structure.



CONCLUSION

The grant of permanent membership to India and Pakistan by SCO's Council of Heads of States would give an impetus and a distinguished role of these two states in the international affairs. These two states would also get access to enormous economic, political, military and other opportunities. Though the membership in the SCO brings opportunities at one hand but at the other it will open a new Pandora's Box for the India and Pakistan due to the fact that the SCO is believed to be a counterweighted to the NATO and sometimes it is also called a NATO of the East because of its military designs and the drills that would pave the way for the transformation into a permanent military alliance, will generate the sense of competition and an opposition towards the most of European nation and the American.

For Pakistan and India, there already exists a regional forum like SAARC that has hardly effectively managed the crises between the two states. The less effective role of the SAAR is because the India and Pakistan are never accommodated any accord of the regional organization. Apart from the fact that SCO has immense economic and development opportunities but a futuristic role that is not more than the SAARC would hardly extend SCO's importance in the regional and international affairs. Even after becoming permanent members of the Organization, the upshot cannot be expected that positive but definitely it would only affect the current prevalent status of the Organization and would only drag it towards an unending divide.



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US sanctions throughout history have not always had the best success rate and the current sanctions against Russia may backfire on the United States, causing more harm to global US interests than benefit.

Not only does the United States need to worry about the sanctions backfiring, the threat faced by other countries that have been involved with or that support the sanctions - such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands - is also something the US needs to take more seriously into consideration.Germany is the biggest European trading partner with Russia. It receives nearly 36% of its natural gas and almost 40% of its oil from Russia.

EFFECTS OF RUSSIAN SANCTIONS ON PERIPHERAL EUROPE

BACKLASH DETERRENCE

Also, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made the decision in 2011 to move away from nuclear energy. Immediately after this decision was made eight nuclear plants were shut down, increasing Germany's dependence on natural gas. As an ally of the United States, Germany could be placed in a tough situation if Russia decides to retaliate by decreasing or even stopping natural gas exports to Germany. While this may be unlikely at the present time due to Russia's current economic and military intervention situation in Syria, when Russia eventually stabilizes its economy, and Russia will, it could enact its own energy deterrence against those who originally supported US sanctions.

Beginning in 2018, Russia will have an alternative market in China for its natural gas. In May 2014, Russia and China signed a $456 billion gas deal with Russian state-owned energy giant Gazprom. This deal is a win for both China and Russia because China has secured natural gas from Russia for the next 30 years (which is desperately needs) and Russia can reduce its independence on European markets (which it vigorously wants).

Russia can also use this deal to strengthen its position against the sanctions imposed by Western countries. Therefore, even though there is not an immediate threat of Russia retaliating against Germany by limiting its natural gas exports, it is a very real possibility that can logistically occur in just three years.

German businesses are also threatened by the sanctions against Russia because of the consequential dwindling economic relationship. There are approximately 6,200 German companies active in Russia, including giants like Siemens and Volkswagen. The Russian population has already begun boycotting American businesses because of the sanctions, so it is very possible that German companies could suffer the same fate. The sanctions are expected to cause a loss of at least 250,000 jobs in Germany as German-Russian exports collapse. More than 300,000 jobs in Germany are currently dependent on trade relations with Russia. Along with job loss, it is anticipated that Germany will lose over $10 billion in trade according to the Committee on Eastern European Economic Relations simply because of its agreement to support US sanctions.

The United Kingdom is also feeling the financial strain of sanctions on Russia. As the leading European global financial center, the United Kingdom has drawn in many Russian companies and individual investors over the past fifteen years. Since recovering from the Russian financial crisis of 1997-1998, Russian companies have been turning to the United Kingdom to invest in London's booming residential property market and in British securities. The value of Russian international investments in London is substantial. It is estimated that the total value is £27 billion with nearly half of that raised between 2004 and 2012. The round of sanctions against Russia that focus exclusively on finance and investment could have a serious impact on the United Kingdom because of this Russian economic engagement.

British companies can also be negatively affected by Russian sanctions, especially within professional services and international arbitration. London-based lawyers and arbitration venues, such as the International Dispute Resolution Centre, have benefited greatly from being a favorite location for Russian businesses seeking to resolve commercial disputes over global assets. However, Russian companies which enter into arbitration proceedings in countries that imposed or supported the sanctions are often blacklisted from the Russian market. This will undoubtedly result in a significant weakening of British arbitration services. This is no small loss as approximately 75% of the world's commercial dispute market involves Russian entities.

The Netherlands is another major trading partner of Russia. Rotterdam imports more Russian oil than any other nation in the world. Shell, a large Dutch oil company, has major investments in Russia so any energy deterrence Russia may impose on the Netherlands could have serious economic implications.Also, the Netherlands has nearly €37 billion worth of business linked to Russia. Dutch exports to Russia fell 35% in the first half of 2015 and as much as 50% in some areas. The most important Dutch exports to Russia are flowers and plants which, in 2013, made up a total export value of over €390 million. Dairy products make up the second most important Dutch export to Russia, valued at €301 million. Finally, vegetables and fruit are the third most important export to Russia with a value of €184 million. Because of the sanctions, Russia has boycotted vegetables, fruit, dairy products, meat, and fish from the Netherlands, meaning the country has a potential yearly loss of nearly 1 billion Euros.

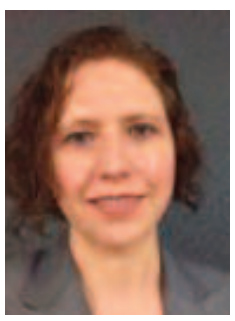
Russia is now getting all of its ducks in a row to rebuild its economy, in spite of the sanctions, and will focus on building new strengths in Asia and the Middle East. Therefore the continuation of sanctions against Russia will likely not do anything that benefits the United States or its European allies, but rather just makes the United States look like a bully and bigger enemy of Russia. In the near future Russia will be taking steps to once again become a major player in the energy, securities, and trade markets, leaning on strong new partnerships with key players outside of Europe such as China and India. If the United States keeps isolating Russia from the West, it could indirectly cause major energy and security disruptions with some of its most trusted European allies. Therefore, the United States should reassess the efficacy of its current 'sanctioning path' with Russia and consider if new strategies might be more prudent. It isn't so much about backing down as reducing unwanted collateral damage or incurring future blowback deterrence.



BROTHERS IN UNETHICAL-ARMS

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All views expressed within this piece are hers and hers alone and do not represent an official statement or policy from the United States government



Two of the largest foreign intelligence agencies in the world, the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Russian Federation's Foreign Intelligence Service (FSB), ironically appear more similar in their organization, methods, and ethics than not.

Similar to the CIA, the Russian foreign intelligence service operates under different levels of concealment from foreign governments.

Both foreign intelligence services use "official cover", meaning they pose as government employees in the country's embassy which offers diplomatic immunity if the agent is caught. They also both have "non-official cover" agents (NOCs), where the agents "typically pose as private business employees and are subject to less scrutiny and, in many cases, are never identified as intelligence agents by the host government."" This role does not provide diplomatic immunity if caught (Bender 2015, and Finn 2003). The questionable ethical practices of both agencies have tarnished their names in the international public eye at times. Their politicization of intelligence, financing of insurgents or rebels in other countries, and the use of torture, have sparked international condemnation from many different corners.

Both foreign intelligence services have been accused of being too political. As noted by Robert Gates in his 1992 address to the CIA, discussing recent Congressional allegations of the agency's politicization of intelligence:

"Almost all agree that [politicization of intelligence] involves deliberately distorting analysis or judgements to favor a preferred line of thinking irrespective of evidence. Most consider classic solicitation to be only that which occurs if products are forced to conform to policy maker's views. A number believe politicization also results from management pressures to define and drive certain lines of analysis and substantive viewpoints. Still others believe that changes in tone or emphasis made during the normal review of coordination process, and limited means for expressing alternative viewpoints, also constitute forms of politicization" (Gates, 1992).

Similarly, the international community accused Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, of politicizing intelligence when he insisted that there were still serious grounds to believe the deadly chemical attack in Damascus was a 'provocation' staged by Syrian rebels, despite evidence in the United Nations report that seemed to suggest government forces were to blame (Mackey, 2013). In an April 2015 interview with retired Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov, one can see a similar example of Russian politicization as he discusses how the United States 'ditched Israel' to work with Iran to 'encircle Russia', overthrow President Vladimir Putin, and divide the country (Chuikov, 2015). Both foreign intelligence services have done such things either to promote their own world view or to promote a particular agenda favored by the presidential administration in power.

The problem with politicization is that it distorts information and thus leads to poor analysis and ultimately leads to skewed results rather than fair, balanced, and accurate assessments. Skewed intelligence hinders policy-makers and governments alike and prevents opportunities for understanding and collaboration.

Both the United States and Russia fund insurgents or rebels throughout the world. Currently, the CIA is funding the Syrian rebels against the government of President Bashar al Assad in Syria and 'vetted rebels' in Saudi Arabia against the Islamic State (Mazzetti, 2014). Similarly, both the United States and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe have accused Russia of financing terrorism with respect to militarily arming rebels in Ukraine (Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2014 and EuroNews, 2015). Arming the rebels, however, in either case, is rarely done in a vacuum: this can lead to the arms or finances falling into the hands of other 'unwanted' extremist groups who wish harm the United States and/or Russia.

In other words, the secret maneuvers often can backfire and strengthen the very opposition the CIA or FSB had hoped to defeat. As noted by President Obama, there aren't many examples of pure success where the CIA [only] provided financing and arms to an insurgency (Mazzetti, 2014).

In addition to the politicization of intelligence and the financing of 'rebels' a third aspect where both the CIA and FSB are similar is in their use of torture to 'confirm' intelligence. In October 2012, during the 49th Session of the UN Committee against Torture, the United Nations reported that Russia's intelligence services participated in torture, including beatings, removing finger and toenails, and sodomizing a subject with a bottle (United Nations Committee Against Torture, 2012, p. 4). Similarly, according to a previously released Senate Intelligence Committee report on the details of 'harsh CIA interrogation techniques,' the CIA has participated in torture including rectal feeding, sleep deprivation, insects, use of diapers, and mock executions. (Business Insider, 2014) Since the report's release, the Senate Intelligence Committee has removed it from their site. However, several news agencies quoted the report:



"The CIA led several detainees to believe they would never be allowed to leave CIA custody alive, the report's executive summary says. One interrogator told another detainee that he would never go to court, because we can never let the world know what I have done to you. CIA officers also threatened … to harm the children of a detainee … sexually abuse the mother of a detainee, and … to cut [a detainee's] mother's throat."

These methods were often found to have achieved little to no actionable intelligence. For example, in an email titled "So it begins," a medical officer wrote that a detainee gave "NO useful information so far," but had vomited several times. "It's been 10 hours since he ate so this is surprising and disturbing.We plan to only feed Ensure for now," the officer said. (Business Insider, 2014) As noted by the Senate Intelligence Committee report, torture does not usually produce actionable intelligence.

Veteran and former prisoner-of-war, Senator John McCain agreed: "I know from personal experience that the abuse of prisoners will produce more bad than good intelligence. I know that victims of torture will offer intentionally misleading information if they think their captors will believe it. I know they will say whatever they think their torturers want them to say if they believe it will stop their suffering." (McCain, 2014)

In conclusion, ethically speaking, both the United States and Russia's foreign intelligence services are unfavorably similar to each other as both participate in practices that hurt their international reputation for little national security gain. Arguably, none of these activities provide their government with fair, balanced, or accurate intelligence and quite often the moral ambiguity encourages corruption and repression, let alone global condemnation. Thus, both intelligence services are similar in nature, organization, methods, and ethics – to their detriment. They are brothers-in-unethical-arms.

THE CONSERVATIVE HOLD ON POWER IN POST-JCPOA IRAN

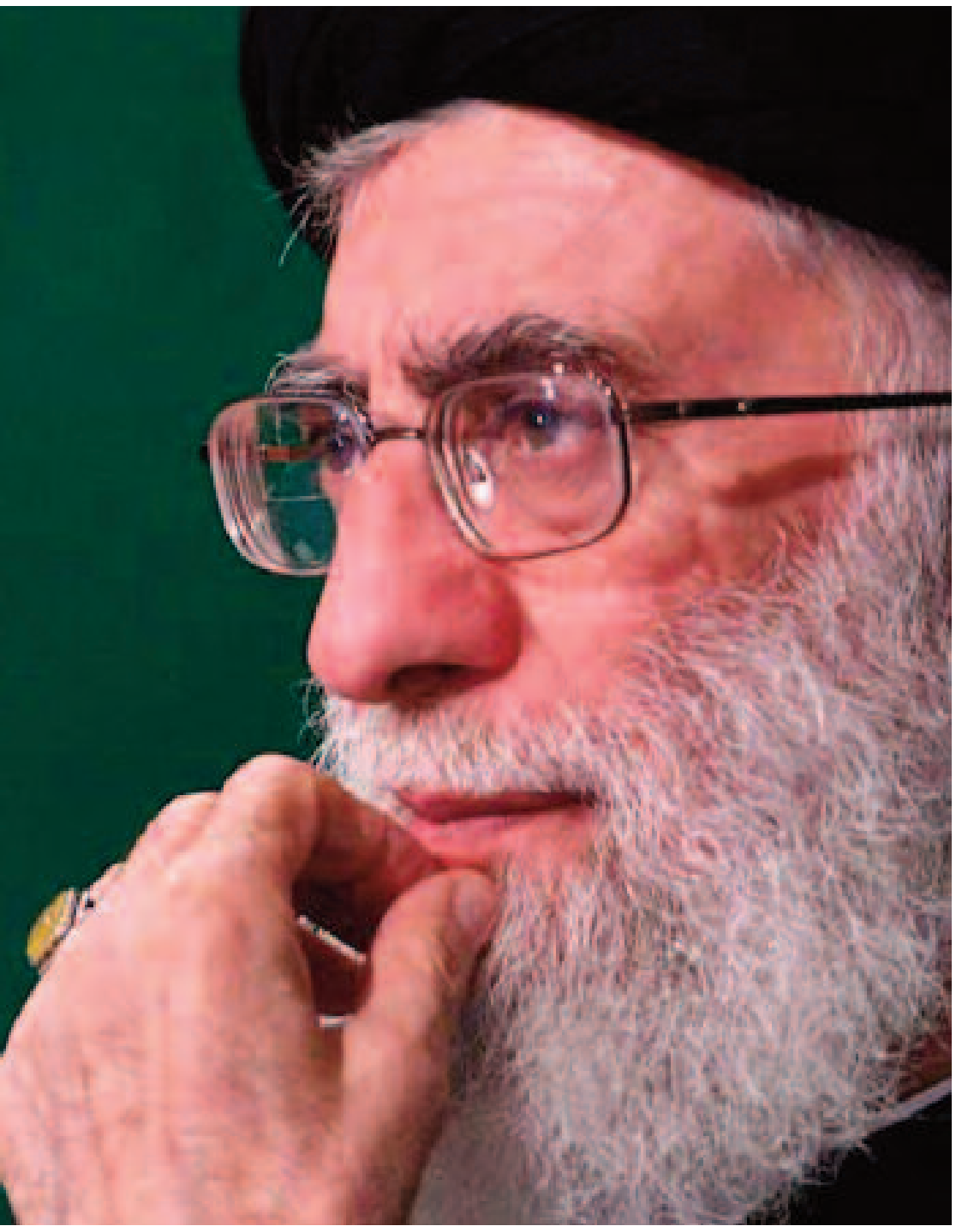
STEPHEN SARTY

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Within the Iranian domestic political scene the use of the nuclear program to affect elections has been in place for the past decade or more. Earlier, conservatives within the regime used an agreement between Iranian reformists and the EU3 foreign ministers to label reformists as traitors, spies, and agents of the West.

Unable to recover the crumbling economy, the conservatives leaned on their ability to deliver a nuclear program as their main source of legitimacy to a public weary of years of hardship.



In 2009, however, splits within the conservatives started to appear as President Ahmadinejad attempted to reach an agreement on nuclear fuel exchange. The deal was ultimately unable to be reached largely due to the efforts of opponents from Ahmadinejad's fellow conservatives.

The election of President Rouhani in 2013 came as both a shock as well as an indication that the decade of crippling sanctions had finally taken their toll not only on the people of Iran but on the Iranian ruling elites as well. His election also represented a major shift in the political landscape of Iranian politics. Running as a moderate, Rouhani emerged victorious from a group dominated by conservatives. During the election Ayatollah Khamenei stressed the need for continued resistance against Western forces and warned against those who felt that compromise with the West would lead to positives results. Rouhani maintained that Iran had a right to its nuclear enrichment goals but also advocated for a somewhat softer stance, while also advocating for increased diplomacy with the West to work toward lifting Iran from its diplomatic and economic isolation. His final numbers in the election showed not only that an overwhelming number of Iranians favored a more moderate approach to domestic and foreign policy but also caused a reevaluation of the opinion that Khamenei had absolute political control over Iran.

The popular consensus now is that the nuclear deal between Iran and the West will change the balance of power in Iranian domestic politics in favor of moderate forces. There will also be considerable posturing by the various players within the political elite to claim credit for the deal in order to enforce their positions in upcoming Parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. There is also agreement, unfortunately, that much of the money influx from the lifting of sanctions will be squandered due to widespread corruption or diverted into the military machine to continue Iran's numerous proxy wars within the region.

Keen to defray credit for the agreement benefiting moderates and to prevent a Rouhani victory lap, conservatives were quick to call for a Parliamentary review of the nuclear deal, headed by Ali Reza Zakani, and pounced on Rouhani when he vigorously opposed it. Principalists, a faction of the parliamentary conservatives, attacked Rouhani claiming it was their right and duty to conduct such a review. When Khamenei came out firmly on their side, their hard won victory damaged Rouhani. Khamenei, while backing the negotiations, has ultimately not come out and approved or disapproved the deal, thereby spurring additional motivation to those attacking Rouhani.

Real reform would largely undermine the grip and control that the ruling elite currently has on power. This reform, however, would in large part consist of a continued movement towards more normalized relations with the outside global community and the creation of a domestic environment that promotes foreign investment, both of which are strongly opposed by conservatives. But it could well be the overwhelming interest in retaining power will ultimately force the conservatives' hands. With oil prices still quite low due to a strategic effort on the part of regional rival Saudi Arabia, Iranian economic woes continue. An additional wildcard in determining where the future of Iranian domestic politics are headed could well reside with the Ayatollah himself. At 75, Khamenei still has no heir apparent and his death will likely bring about a fierce competition to choose a successor. Given the level of power still innate to his position, this will be a major factor in determining the path Iran ultimately takes.

It is likely that conservatives will continue to move along their path to marginalize the impact of any economic benefit in the wake of the nuclear agreement and, considering the level of control that Khamenei possesses over the state-run media, it will be difficult for Rouhani to counter conservative spin. Also, with conservatives effectively controlling the state's purse strings, it is likely that they could also prevent any real economic improvements from reaching the general public where it would benefit Rouhani's pledge to restore the nation's economy.

Additionally, the upcoming Parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections will hold the real key to the Iranian future. In a move that again does not bode well for the reformists, a prominent hardliner, Guardian Council secretary Ahmad Jannati, was chosen to head the committee that will oversee the elections. In his role Mr. Jannati has the ability to declare candidates 'unworthy' to run for election and will likely do so to those supportive of Rouhani to ensure that the full authority of the Ayatollah will still remain unchallenged through any electoral process.

But the question still remains: can the conservatives find a way to make the adjustments needed to move the country forward in a manner acceptable by the nation's populace? Is it possible to find a sort of middle ground as nations such as China have found, where there is a maintained political orthodoxy balanced against the expansion of civil liberties and the enactment of economic reforms such as expanded industrial privatization, increased foreign investment, and the creation of a more accommodating international posture? It is possible. But in the short term it is unlikely that any real change will occur. Currently, even though Rouhani was swept into office with impressive support, there appears to be no person or group with the real depth of power needed to threaten the conservative stranglehold on domestic leadership. Given the current generational shift and deep-rooted frustrations with the government, coupled with Iran's long history of both political and social unrest, however, it is likely just wishful thinking if the conservatives think that this will hold for the long-term without any real substantive change on their part in the domestic status quo

RUSSIA IS INCREASING ITS INFLUENCE ON CA STATES



ANATOLII BARONIN, ANDRII KOLPAKOV

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Russia uses risks of ISIS expanding in Afghanistan to increase its influence on CIS Central Asia states, their armed forces and to expand CDTO membership. Moscow could try to develop NATO analogue of collective defense in the region on the base of Collective Defense Treaty Organization as the core of pro-Russian regional integration model.

The ISIS group is trying to strengthen positions in Afghanistan, winning over a growing number of sympathizers and recruiting followers in 25 of the country's 34 provinces. The militant group has been trying to establish itself in Afghanistan, challenging the Taliban. Russian leadership considers the probability of moving ISIS to CIS Central Asia states as the main threat for southern borders of Russian Federation and Caucasus stability. Their fears are based on facts of active participation of citizens from Central Asia states in Syria and Iraq on ISIS side.

At October 16th leaders of post-Soviet states in Kazakhstan during the summit of CIS signed a concept of military co-operation until 2020. Russia has been pushing its military presence across the region and this document will certainly fit this policy. Moscow struck deals with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to extend its bases till 2042 and 2032 respectively. It has announced an increase in troops in Tajikistan, its largest foreign 201st base, from 5,900 to 9,000 soldiers by 2020. Russia is planning to renew the fleet of its airbase at Kant, Kyrgyzstan by 2016.

It has already sent a dozen of new and modified versions of Su-25 fighter jets to replace older aircrafts. Russian MoD announced upgrading other equipment at the bases: trucks, armored personnel carriers (APCs) and drones. The Central military district recently announced that it will dispatch a helicopter unit to be stationed at the airbase in Ayni, Tajikistan. Moscow has been trying to gain access to this airbase since at least 2004.

Today it is unlikely for Taliban forces to move in the north direction beyond Afghanistan borders. There were no signs of such intentions even in 1996 when Taliban was more powerful and have no centralized opponent as ISIS. So expanding ISIS in Afghanistan depends on its potential to cooperate with Taliban. But for several months violent clashes with the Taliban continued, ending questions about possible alliances.

Prospects of such alliance are very weak because of inability to share control over opium poppies plantations, narrow ideology congruence and low ISIS support by local tribal leaders. ISIS numbers are still small in Afghanistan. Though ISIS in Afghanistan has regrouped and recruiting new members the overall conclusion is that ISIS does not yet represent a significant strategic threat to Afghanistan in the next 6 months.

Despite this Moscow justifies building up a military presence in the region by highlighting the threat Central Asia and Russia are facing from Afghanistan and beyond, pointing main risks for the leaders to be overthrown. Kremlin via security and intelligence services underlines the internal risks for Central Asia regimes coming from radical organization operated in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan like Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of



Uzbekistan, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, or the Islamic Jihad Group, Hizb un-Nusrat. In some cases, these risks are exaggerated.

Russia is positioning itself as the only one force to protect Central Asia regimes that make them more pliable. Kremlin counterworks US regional positions intensification endeavoring to keep control over authoritarian leaders, playing on their weakness and fears of losing power as the result of 'Arab spring' scenarios and civil war outbreaks. Obviously US efforts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan could not let Washington to compete effectively with Russia in Central Asia.

Russia will try to expand rashly its military presence by intensifying of training programs for regional troops and military supplies. At first this will give Kremlin 'a legitimate right' to intervene with Russian troops at the early stage of a conflict.



Secondly it could give the opportunity to set loyal and controlled high and middle echelon command staff in armed forces of these states. In third place Kremlin receives a chance to organize military coup d'états in the case of risks to lose influence in the region because of elite/leader changing (due to death or mass protests).

Kremlin can change configuration of the CDTO making an offer to Bashar Assad (Alavite controlled territory) and Iran. The ultimate goal is to build the rapid reaction forces joint staff under Russian command, i.e. the opportunity to control and command the more battleworthy units of national armed forces of CDTO. But this project could face noncompliance by Belarus, Kazakhstan not to mention suppositional membership of Iran.

Nevertheless Russia's activity in the region means the strengthening bet on military-based integration driver. It is the significant change taking into account economic-based integration driver as Eurasian Economic Union promoted by Kremlin in recent years in the region. It is also the strong sign of totally militarized foreign policy of Moscow that turning back to the Cold War strategy and opposition to the US and the West.



ATTEMPTING A BRIDGE TO AFRICA

KESTER KENN KLOMEGAH

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While Russia's interest in the sub-Saharan Africa is nothing new, Russian authorities have realized that it's time to move back primarily to reclaim its economic footprints and to find old Soviet-era allies, but that step comes with new challenges especially from other foreign players and the changing internal political and economic conditions in Africa. For the past few years, Russia authorities have taken steady and strategic steps at the possibility of pushing huge investments in lucrative sectors as ways to strengthen bilateral relations and expand economic cooperation in a number of African countries. That show of corporate investment and business interests have been sealed into various agreements, for instance, were the results from high-powered state delegations that frequently visited both regions, Russia and Africa, last year and during the first half of 2015.

Keir Giles, an associate fellow of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London explained to me in an email interview that "Russia's approach to Africa is all about making up for lost time. The Soviet Union's intense involvement in African nations came to an abrupt halt in the early 1990s, and for a long time Moscow simply didn't have the diplomatic and economic resources to pay attention to Africa while Russia was consumed with internal problems."

According to Giles "that changed in the last decade, thanks to two things: the arrival of President Vladimir Putin with a new foreign policy focus, and the massive influx of cash on the back of increased oil prices, which transformed Russian state finances. Russia is interested both in economic opportunities and in rebuilding political relationships that had in some ways been on hold for over a decade."

In order to raise Russia's economic influence and profile in Africa, in June 2009, the Coordinating Committee on Economic Cooperation with Sub-Saharan Africa, popularly referred to as AfroCom, was created on the initiative of the Russian Federation Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Vneshekonombank to help promote and facilitate Russian business in Africa. Since its creation, it has had full-fledged support from the Russian Government, the Federation Council and State Duma, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the African diplomatic community.

The vice-president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation, Georgi Petrov, noted at the AfroCom's annual executive meeting held in April 2015 that "in view of the current geopolitical situation in the world and the economic situation in Russia Russian businesses have to look for new markets. In this regard, of particular interest is the African continent, which today is one of the fastest growing regions in the world with an annual GDP growth - 5%. In addition, opportunities for projects in Africa are opened with the accession of South Africa to the BRICS bloc." Brazil, Russia, India and China are members of BRICS.

Reports also showed that Russia has started strengthening its economic cooperation by opening trade missions with the responsibility of providing sustainable business services and plans to facilitate import-export trade in a number of African countries. But, these Russian trade centers must necessarily embark on "Doing Business in Africa" campaign to encourage Russian businesses to take advantage of growing trade and investment opportunities, to promote trade fairs and business-to-business matchmaking in key spheres in Africa.Maxim Matusevich, an associate professor and director, Russian and East European Studies Program at the Seton Hall University, told me in an interview discussion that "in the past decade there was some revival of economic ties between Africa and Russia - mostly limited to arms trade and oil/gas exploration and extraction.

Russia's presence in Africa and within African markets continues to be marginal and I think that Russia has often failed to capitalize on the historical connection between Moscow and those African elites who had been educated in the Soviet Union."

"It is possible that the ongoing crisis in the relations between Russia and the West will stimulate Russia's leadership to look for new markets for new sources of agricultural produce. Many African nations possess abundant natural resources and have little interest in Russia's gas and oil. As it was during the Soviet times, Russia can only offer few manufactured goods that would successfully compete with Western-made products. African nations will probably continue to acquire Russian-made arms, but otherwise, I see only few prospects for a diversification of cooperation in the near future," added Maxim Matusevich.

As Buziness Africa gathered in May 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has held talks during the first quarter of this year with a number of state delegations at various levels and that included Foreign Ministers from Burundi, Tanzania, Algeria, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Libya and Zambia.

And also at the start of this year, the high-ranking Russian delegation headed by special presidential representative for the Middle East and Africa, Mikhail Bogdanov, participated in the 24th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of States and Governments of the African Union and on the sidelines held series of diplomatic discussions with representatives from some African countries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

"On the sidelines of the forum, Mikhail Bogdanov had meetings and talks with President of the Republic of the Congo Denis Sassou Nguesso, President of Mauritania, Mohamed Abdel Aziz, President of Madagascar Hery Rajaonarimampianina, President of Equatorial Guinea Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of Gabon Ali Bongo, Vice President of Angola Manuel Vicente, Deputy Secretary General of the Arab League Ahmed Ben Helli."

"The parties discussed current bilateral and regional agendas, further improvement of diverse cooperation between Russia and Africa, including cooperation with sub-regional organizations of the continent," according to the transcript posted to the official website of the Foreign Ministry. Further to that, Lavrov held a meeting on the sidelines of the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The meeting was attended on the SADC side by representatives of Zimbabwe (the SADC presiding country), Angola, Zambia, Namibia, Mauritius, Malawi, Mozambique, Seychelles, Tanzania, the Republic of South Africa, as well as SADC Executive Secretary.

Without doubts, Russia's strategic return to Africa has sparked academic discussions at various levels where academic researchers openly admitted that political consultations are on track, arms exports has significantly increased, but other export products are extremely low. Russia's involvement in infrastructure development has also been low for the past decades on the continent.

In an interview, Themba Mhlongo, Head of Programmes at the Southern Africa Trust, thinks that Africa should not expect higher trade flows with Russia simply because Africa has not engaged Russia. Mhlongo told Buziness Africa media that "there is still low Africa-Russia Dialogue or mechanism for dialoguing with Russia, and on the otherhand, Russia has not been as aggressive as China in pursuing opportunities in Africa because Russia has natural resources and markets in Eastern Europe, South West Asia. Russian exports to Africa might be dominated by machinery and military equipment which serves their interest well."

He suggested that Africa must engage all BRICS members equally including Brazil and Russia in order to build alliances and open trade opportunities including finance and investment opportunities. Also African countries must not seem to show preferences in their foreign policy in favour of Western Europe if they want to benefit from trade relations with Russia. They must learn to be neutral!

Mhlongo suspects that Africa still holds an old view about Russia being a communist state and less technologically developed or unsophisticated compared to Western Europe. But, Russia never colonized Africa and therefore there are no colonial ties between the two. "If you look at African trade flows to Europe they reflect colonial ties most of the time. However, modern Russia is now one of the important emerging market countries and a member of BRICS. The Russian society is also closed and orientation is towards Western Europe in particular the United States (probably as a result of the period of bi-polar global power system that existed before). Although Russia exports to Africa but rarely sets up businesses. The language (or culture in general) could be one of the barriers to the development of trade relations with Russia," he pointed out.
He further proposed that both Africa and Russia can initiate a dialogue in the form of Africa-Russian business summit to explore economic opportunities between them. However, there are other avenues to engage each other through the BRICS bloc or through bilateral diplomatic channels. Russia has embassies in Africa and African countries have diplomatic representations in Russia. Africa may have to pay special attention to cultural issues and try to understand Russia in this ever changing environment and find an entry point to engage Russia.

On her part, Alexandra Arkhangelskaya, a senior researcher at the Institute of African Studies under the Russian Academy of Sciences and a staff lecturer at the Moscow High School of Economics told Buziness Africa in an interview that Russia and Africa needed each other – “Russia is a vast market not only for African minerals, but for various other goods and products produced by African countries.”
The signs for Russian-African relations are impressive - declarations of intentions have been made, important bilateral agreements signed - now it remains to be seen how these intentions and agreements will be implemented in practice, she pointed out in the interview.
The revival of Russia-Africa relations should be enhanced in all fields: political, economic, trade, scientific, technological, and cultural. Obstacles to the broadening of Russian-Africa relations should be addressed. These include in particular the lack of knowledge in Russia about the situation in Africa, and vice versa, suggested Arkhangelskaya.
"As we witness rapid deterioration of relations between Russia and the West unfold, Russia's decision to ban the import of some agricultural products from countries that have imposed sanctions against Moscow offers great opportunities for the expansion of trade of such products from Africa," the academic professor observed in her discussion.
Experts, who have researched Russia's foreign policy in Africa, at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for African Studies, have reiterated that Russia's exports to Africa can be possible only after the country's industrial based experiences a more qualitative change and introducing tariff preferences for trade with African partners.

As a reputable institute during the Soviet era, it has played a considerable part in the development of African studies in the Russian Federation.

"The situation in Russian-African foreign trade will change for the better, if Russian industry undergoes technological modernization, the state provides Russian businessmen systematic and meaningful support, and small and medium businesses receive wider access to foreign economic cooperation with Africa," according the views of Professor Aleksei Vasiliev, the director of the RAS Institute for African Studies and full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and Evgeny Korendyasov, an expert at the RAS Institute for African Studies.

Statistics on Africa's trade with foreign countries vary largely. For example, the total U.S. two-way trade in Africa has actually fallen off in recent years, to about $60 billion in 2013, far eclipsed by the European Union with over $200 billion and China, whose more than $200 billion is a huge increase from $10 billion in 2000, according to a recent "Africa in Focus " website post by the Brookings Institution. According to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation, Russia's trade with Africa, south of the Sahara, is only $3.2 billion.

In one of his speeches posted to the official website, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted frankly in remarks: "it is evident that the significant potential of our economic cooperation is far from being exhausted and much remains to be done so that Russian and African partners know more about each other's capacities and needs. The creation of a mechanism for the provision of public support to business interaction between Russian companies and the African continent is on the agenda."

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