

RUSSIA'S POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
PROSPECTS FOR CONSENSUS AND CONFLICT
WITH THE UNITED STATES

DMITRI TRENIN

A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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This report is one in a series commissioned by The Century Foundation to explore issues of interest to American policymakers regarding Russia, aimed at identifying a framework for U.S.-Russian relations and policy options for a new administration and Congress that could help right the two countries' troubled relationship at a crucial juncture. The papers in the series explore significant aspects of U.S.-Russian relations, outlining a broad range of reasons why Russia matters for American foreign policy and framing bilateral and multilateral approaches to Russia for U.S. consideration. A high-level working group, co-chaired by Gary Hart, former U.S. senator from Colorado, and Jack F. Matlock, Jr., former U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, has provided direction to the project and offered recommendations for action that the United States might take.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Century Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

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INTRODUCTION

As Russia, by the mid-2000s, had recovered from its domestic crisis, so did its global ambitions. Moscow's principal interests still lie mostly in the West (that is, Europe, including western members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and North America), but the relative importance of Asia (China, India, Japan, Korea) is clearly on the rise. The Middle East, which lies geographically between those two key areas, is back on Moscow's radar screen. Russia's withdrawal from the region, symbolized by the 1989 pullout from Afghanistan, has been reversed. Moscow has re-established political ties with its former allies, such as Syria; engages in a lively dialog with Israel; sees Turkey as a key partner in the region; maintains a thriving, albeit most complex relationship with Iran; and promotes trade with energy-rich countries, from Algeria and Libya to the Gulf States. Millions of Russian tourists flock to the sea resorts of Turkey and Tunisia, Egypt and Israel. In a radical departure from the Soviet days, Russia keeps the lines of communication open with all important actors in the region.

The Middle East is important to Moscow for several reasons. First, for its physical proximity: the distance between Grozny, Chechnya's capital, and Iraq's Mosul is about 600 miles. Second, due to the Muslim factor: since the fall of the isolationist Soviet Union, there is no wall separating Russian Muslims, who account for one-seventh of the country's population (and growing) from their brethren in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Arab world. On the other hand, after the post-Soviet exodus, some 20 percent of Israel's population are former Soviet Jews, nearly all of them Russian-speaking. Third, in view of the continuing religious and political turbulence within the Muslim world: radical ideas and militants from the Middle East cross into the Russian North

Caucasus, the central Russian republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, and in the post-Soviet Central Asia. Fourth, because of the energy riches of the region: Russia sees itself as an energy power, and looks for opportunities south of the border. Fifth, Russia pays attention due to the current U.S. focus on the region, and American military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.

RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In geopolitical terms, Moscow works to build a power bloc of its own and aims to be the principal outside player in the South Caucasus, the Caspian and Central Asia, that is, just north of the Middle East. In the coming multi-polar world order, Russia is mindful of the growing importance of countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, whom it sees as key regional partners. In the wake of the first Gulf war and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Moscow feared the growth of U.S. military presence in the region as a potential security threat to Russia. Over time, however, Moscow strategists have discounted that threat, and have learned to reap benefits from the U.S./NATO operation in Afghanistan. Russia continues to object to U.S. military presence in Central Asia, which it views as trespassing on Russia's turf.

In security terms, Russia is very concerned with the sources of Muslim radicalism in the Middle East, which feed domestic extremism, including terrorism, in places such as the North Caucasus. For over a decade, Chechen militant separatism and terrorism had been the major real danger to Russia's national security. The bitter experience of the two Chechen campaigns is the prism through which the Russian leaders view security threats coming from the south. A particular worry is the resurgence of the Taliban, which threatens to revert Afghanistan to its late-1990s role of the principal regional destabilizer. Should this happen, Moscow's protégés in Central Asia may grow insecure, their populations restive, and local insurgencies could reappear. Russian

security experts view both Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq as training grounds for international *jihadis*. Moscow is becoming gradually satisfied that Iraq is on its way to an eventual political settlement, and the drawdown of U.S. forces, even their ultimate withdrawal, will not lead to chaos. Afghanistan, by contrast, is a growing concern. Should Western forces precipitously withdraw from the Hindu Kush, Russians reason, this would not only boost the morale of the Muslim radicals, but also free up battle-tested fighters for other potential engagements, including in Russia.

Russia's other main security concern is nuclear proliferation. From the 1990s on, Moscow had been particularly wary of Pakistan's nuclear ambitions, which it believed were not taken seriously enough at the time by the United States and its allies. The emergence in 1998 of a nuclear-armed Pakistan vindicated Moscow's fears. The Russian view of Pakistan is exceedingly wary. They see it as an unstable state, a home to, and occasionally—through Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—an accomplice of Islamist extremists, and nuclear proliferators: A. Q. Khan, of course, was no freelancer. Historical memories are not far behind: during the decade-long Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, Pakistan served as a support base for the *mujahedeen*, as it is now a refuge for the al Qaeda and Taliban leadership. It is not wholly forgotten either that, throughout the cold war, Pakistan was America's ally, a base in the 1950s for U.S. spy planes that were sent over the Soviet Union.

Russia certainly does not want to see Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. However, in contrast to the relatively recently formed Pakistan, Moscow sees the former Persia as a key fixture of the regional setup, and essentially a rational player, albeit a most difficult partner. Russia is interested in a solution to the Iranian nuclear problem that would keep Tehran's program certifiably peaceful, complete with monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). As a quid pro quo, Russia believes, the international community needs to pay heed to Iran's legitimate security interests, and help establish an inclusive security system in the Gulf. The worst possible outcome, from

Moscow's perspective, would be a U.S. (or Israeli) military attack against Iran that would delay, but not destroy, the Iranian nuclear program, and make sure Iran emerges as a nuclear-weapons state. This would destabilize the region, increase Islamist militancy, and destroy the nonproliferation regime.

In economic terms, Russia, as a leading energy producer, sees the oil- and gas-rich countries of the Middle East as partners and competitors at the same time. It shares an interest with them in maintaining the oil price at sufficiently high levels, and it hopes to regulate competition in the gas market, for example, by persuading Iran, when it starts exporting gas, to pump east to India instead of west to Europe. Gazprom sees the Nabucco project—building a gas pipeline from the Caspian to Europe—as a direct competitor of its own South Stream plan, and wants to make sure Nabucco has no commitments from the Caspian gas producers. For their part, Russian companies have interests in oil and gas projects in countries such as Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria, and others.

Several countries in the Middle East also are among the few consumers of Russian high-technology exports. Russia is completing the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran, and has similar plans for Syria; it proposes to build railroads in Libya and Saudi Arabia; it even leases and sells commercial airplanes to Iran. From Soviet times, Russia has been a major arms exporter to the region. Iran, Syria, Algeria, and other countries continue to buy Russian-made weapons and materiel.

RUSSIA'S POLICIES IN THE REGION

After a decade's near-absence from the region, Moscow's policies again have become markedly more active. During his presidency, Vladimir Putin made two trips to the region, in 2005 and 2007, and paid a visit to Tehran, the first one since Stalin's wartime allied conference journey. However, Russia's regional

policies are not yet embedded within some overall strategy and are largely driven by a set of pragmatic considerations. Russia's principal objectives are to advance its economic interests, and to counter threats to Russia's national security.

RUSSIA AND THE U.S. ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Unlike the Soviet Union, and despite its own multi-polar rhetoric, Russia does not see itself locked in a conflict with the United States over regional dominance. In the wake of the September 11 attacks, Moscow materially assisted the United States in defeating the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Since then, Moscow has concluded Status of Forces Agreements with NATO that regulate Western military transit across the Russian territory to Afghanistan. Russia calls for closer cooperation with the United States on the Afghan drugs issue: the quantity of smuggled drugs and the number of drug addicts in Russia have been growing exponentially since the fall of the Taliban. Moscow also would want the United States to recognize Russia's primacy in Central Asia, and establish formal relations between NATO and the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. With the United States reluctant to extend such recognition, Moscow has joined Beijing in calling for the termination of U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Russia welcomed Uzbekistan's 2005 decision to close the U.S. bases, and financially rewarded Kyrgyzstan in 2009 for a similar move.

Even before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Moscow consistently had called for nonmilitary means of resolving the issue of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. In 2003, Russia strongly protested against the U.S. invasion, calling it a "grave mistake," but within a few months it helped legitimize the U.S. military presence in Iraq within the UN context. Moscow was never particularly eager to see the United States leave Iraq before establishing a modicum of domestic order in that country. After the formation of the Iraqi national

government, Moscow has been quick to reestablish its links with Baghdad. In particular, Russian oil companies, which had lucrative (but nonperforming, due to the sanctions) contracts under Saddam Hussein, want to get a piece of the oil bonanza. Russia sees postwar Iraq as potentially a key country in the region, in terms of oil and geopolitical position, and seeks to revive the strong pragmatic relationship with that country that flourished from the 1960s through the 1980s.

ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS

Moscow's relationship with Israel, severed between 1967 and 1991, is already flourishing. Over the past decade, the two countries saw each other facing similar dangers and engaged in close anti-terrorist cooperation. Even though it maintains no leverage on Israeli politics or policies, the Kremlin maintains close ties with both government and opposition leaders in Israel. Ordinary Russians, particularly of Jewish origin, and Israelis have developed even stronger informal ties. From 2008, the visa regime between the two countries has been abolished. Russian tourists flock to the Holy Land and the beaches of Eilat. Many former Soviet émigrés start businesses in Russia. Outside of the former Soviet Union, Israel probably has the highest concentration of Russian culture anywhere in the world.

Russia has embraced the Israeli position in the dispute with the Palestinians, to be sure, but the experience in Chechnya makes it more sympathetic to Israel's security concerns. At the same time, Russia does not want to lose the Arabs altogether. It wants to be seen as an honest broker—more impartial than the United States—between the Israelis and the Arabs. Alas, others do not share this view. Israel still looks at Russia with residual suspicion, and the Arabs want to play it off Israel and the United States. For years, however, Moscow has been a party to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, in the Quartet format (the United States, Europe, Russia, and the UN). Within it, Russia supported the Annapolis process and persistently has been promoting a

follow-up event in Moscow, something the U.S. and Israel have been skeptical about. For Moscow, the Quartet is largely a means of demonstrating its great-power credentials: its real interests and commitments in the Israeli-Palestinian situation are incomparably smaller than those of the United States and the European Union.

Russia seeks to maintain working relations with all relevant players in the region. It refuses to shun anyone of importance: not Hamas, and not Hezbollah. The leaders of the former had made well-publicized trips to Moscow, which, however, turned out to be fruitless. Certainly, Russia prefers to deal with the likes of Mahmud Abbas and Fatah, but it argues that the popularity of Hamas in Gaza should not be ignored. In practical terms, however, Russia has little to offer the Palestinians except armored combat vehicles and automatic rifles. During the Israeli operation in Gaza in January 2009, Russia remained largely passive, supporting a UN Security Council resolution and sending a representative to the region, and its government-owned television coverage of the conflict was studiously even-handed.

Likewise, there is no special sympathy in Moscow for Lebanon's Hezbollah, but, in order to keep its standing among the Arabs, Russia condemned Israel's "disproportionate use of force" in its 2006 invasion of Lebanon. Moscow keeps regular contacts with Muslim, Christian, and Druze factions in Lebanon. Following the 2006 war, it sent an engineer battalion—made up of Chechens!—to repair roads and bridges, and later offered to provide heavy weapons to the Lebanese armed forces.

Syria often appears as the last surviving member of the once-strong group of Moscow's regional allies. Having forgiven Damascus its \$3.7 billion Soviet-era debt, Moscow continues to supply its military with a full range of weapons. As it slowly expands again beyond the coastal zone, the Russian Navy looks at the possibility of using the facility at Tartus as its strong point in the Mediterranean (potentially alongside another facility at the Yemeni island of Socotra, off the pirate-infested Somali coast, where a Russian ship is on patrol).

Yet, the Russian-Syrian relationship is anything but an alliance. Moscow does not want to be involved in a potential conflict between Syria and Israel, and Damascus is looking for options in Europe and the United States. The Russians are not happy with their arms being transferred by the Syrians to Hezbollah or Iran, which spoils their relations with Israel and the United States. Russia supports a peace settlement between Israel and Syria and did not react painfully to the indirect Syrian-Israeli talks facilitated by Turkey. Moscow did not seek to undermine the international investigation into the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which is blamed on the Syrian secret services, and Hariri's son frequently travels to Russia. Today, Moscow's interests in Syria are mostly of a business nature. Besides the arms sales, they include gas pipeline and nuclear energy projects.

In Egypt, Russia's business is essentially business. The trade turnover is \$2.5 billion, and the number of Russian holidaymakers who choose Egypt as their destination is about 2.5 million per year. Cairo is also a partner in any discussion of the Middle East peace process, where Moscow seeks to play a visible role. Russia was surprised by the sudden improvement in U.S.-Libyan relations as Tripoli renounced its nuclear program in 2003, and later followed Western countries in concluding commercial deals with Libya. As a payment for entry into the Libyan market, Moscow had to forgive Libya the \$5.7 billion it owed the Soviet Union. Russia also sought to pursue commercial opportunities in Algeria, in the gas sphere and defense contracts, but with only modest results. The specter of a Russian-Algerian collusion in the gas market mobilized the Europeans, first of all, the French.

THE WIDER MUSLIM WORLD

Old Soviet ideological rigidity is gone. Over the years, Russia has learned to work with former enemies, such as the Afghan *mujahedeen*, who later formed the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, which Moscow aided and armed. It has been able to modify substantially its long anti-Israeli (and anti-Semitic)

bias, which the Russian Federation had inherited from the Soviet Union. In Lebanon, Russia keeps contacts with the often-conflicting factions, and with Syria. Avowedly atheist in its Soviet period, and with the Orthodox Church now in an informal position of the highest moral authority in the land, Russia has won an observer status with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Originally, Russia's outreach to the Muslim world was a means to dampen Muslim opposition to the Russian actions in Chechnya. Moscow sought to present its campaign there as aimed at terrorists, who only use Islam as a cover for their unseemly activities. En route to the OIC 2005 summit, President Putin made a point of stopping in Grozny to declare Russia a protector of Islam. Indeed, Moscow has allowed a widespread Islamicization of Chechnya, only making sure that Islam there is of a mainstream kind, and the republic is outwardly loyal to the Federation. The Russians realized, of course, that the more radical members of the OIC wanted to use Russia's association with the organization as a means to poke the West in the eye. Moscow has managed to steer clear of the controversy, but has definitely enjoyed assuming the role of a "balancer," which fully agreed with its vision of a multipolar world.

Over the past decade, Russia activated relations with the conservative Gulf monarchies, virtually nonexistent in the times of the Soviet Union; at the top of the list came Saudi Arabia. Moscow clearly understood the importance and prestige in the Muslim world of the country that had the holiest Muslim sites in its territory. In an effort at procuring international legitimacy for the Moscow-loyal Chechen leaders, the Kremlin organized their pilgrimages to Mecca, which is now regularly visited by thousands of Russian Muslims. Russia also wanted to make sure there was no Saudi support to the radicals in the Muslim republics in the North Caucasus or on the Volga. As Russia and Saudi Arabia are the world's number one and number two oil exporters, energy dialog between OPEC's leading member and the biggest non-OPEC producer is a natural area of cooperation.

Qatar, a leading gas producer, has joined Russia and Iran in the Big Three that promotes consultation among the gas-rich countries. Moscow has resisted Tehran's attempts to turn the forum into an OPEC-like cartel structure, which anyway it could not become, absent a world gas market. Similarly, economic interests tie Russia to the United Arab Emirates and Oman. To promote Russian-Arab trade links, which still are rather weak (around \$7 billion prior to the world economic crisis), there is a special committee headed by Evgeni Primakov, an Arabist and a former prime minister with many contacts in the region.

IRAN

It was Iran that was Russia's gateway to the OIC. Russia's policy toward Iran recognizes the country's growing importance as a regional power. Moscow certainly has benefited economically from Iran's long-strained relations with the West, and the U.S.-imposed sanctions. The Bushehr nuclear reactor has been mentioned. Iran also has emerged as an important market for Russian military exports, from tanks to submarines to air defense systems. On the civilian side, Russia appreciates Iran's importance as an oil and especially natural gas producer. In logistical terms, Iran is Russia's natural transit corridor to the Gulf, the Middle East, and South Asia.

Russian leaders have few illusions about the nature of the Iranian government, or the ease of dealing with it. Every Russian child learns, at junior high school, about the 1829 massacre of the entire Russian embassy to Tehran, including the ambassador, Alexander Griboyedov, a renowned playwright. Iranians generally are perceived as cunning, scheming, and notoriously hard to read. The arrival of the mullahs in power in 1979 inspired awe among the then-Soviet authorities, who feared an export of Islamic revolution into their Muslim borderlands. Some Russians also are aware of the Persians' historical grudges against their country for the annexation of the Persian-ruled Caucasus and the more recent attempt by Stalin to extend the Soviet reach to the Iranian Azerbaijan.

Having seen their own Bolshevik revolution mutate, the Russians have been quick to note that the Iranian Islamist ideology has turned into the tool for domestic political legitimization of the regime, rather than a guide to action. Moscow's practical experience with Iran has been largely satisfactory. In the wake of the Soviet Union's break-up, Iran made no serious attempt to project its influence into the ex-Soviet republics, which Moscow still considers its domain. Moreover, Moscow and Tehran jointly managed in 1997 to achieve an end to the bitter civil war in Tajikistan, the only Persian-speaking republic in the former Soviet Union. On the all-important issue of Chechnya, Iran took a stand rather sympathetic to Moscow's, and kept the OIC, when it chaired it, from censuring Russia. Unlike Turkey, Iran never allowed Chechen fighters to train and recuperate in its territory. All this convinced the Kremlin that they are dealing in Tehran with a rational, calculating, geopolitically savvy leadership, not a rogue regime.

From that perspective, Iran's nuclear ambitions appear as part of a policy aimed at restoring Iran's role as a regional power. Few knowledgeable Russians doubt that Iran is ultimately in pursuit of nuclear weapons, not just peaceful nuclear technology. They doubt, however, that Iran seeks nuclear weapons in order to annihilate Israel. Iran, they reason, is an essential loner: no friends in the region—Syria being a circumstantial, and thus an uncertain fellow-traveler—and no allies beyond, as neither China nor Russia falls into that category. During the George W. Bush presidency in particular, the Iranian regime felt threatened by the United States, which has forces on Iran's western (Iraq), eastern (Afghanistan), and southern (the Gulf) borders. Iran's neighbor Pakistan is a nuclear weapons state, and so is Israel. As North Korea has demonstrated, it is the possession of nuclear weapons that is the only serious guarantee of non-aggression against even the most despicable regime. Add the pride of a major nation that boasts 2,500 years of uninterrupted statehood and does not want to be held down by the self-appointed guardians of the international order as it prepares to rise to its rightful place in the world. Next-door India, another recent nuclear arrival, is an inspiring example.

This insight does not mean, of course, that Russia generally is permissive and complacent about Iran's nuclear program. It sees the dangers of proliferation in the world's still most combustible region. Moscow has demanded that the spent fuel from the Bushehr nuclear reactor, when it becomes operational, be sent back to Russia. The Russian security services have been on a hunt for Iranian agents eager to get access to Russian nuclear weapons secrets. Russia has supported four UN Security Council resolutions on Iran, three of which impose light sanctions on that country, and has been a key member of the "Six" (alongside with the other four permanent members of the Security Council and Germany) that deal with the Iranian nuclear program.

A solution to that problem, Moscow insists, can be politico-diplomatic only. The Russians believe that a country the size of Iran and with its resources cannot be prevented by force from acquiring nuclear weapons, should it really decide to go for it. Thus, the only way to prevent Iran's nuclear weaponization is to reach an agreement with Tehran that would address its security concerns and satisfy its legitimate technological ambitions—that is, mastering civilian nuclear technology—while foregoing the nuclear weapons option. Thus, Russia aims for the international community's grand compromise with Iran: security and civilian technology in exchange for weapons abdication, under strict international control administered by the IAEA, reporting to the UN Security Council. As in the North Korean case, which Moscow believes could be a model, the way to the multilateral agreement should be paved by a bilateral understanding between Tehran and Washington: while the nuclear program is an international concern, Iran's political conflict, which lies at the root of it, is with the United States.

Having rejected the military option out of hand, Russia has little faith in the effectiveness of UN sanctions as long as they pointedly exclude oil exports. (Since so much in Russia depends on the oil price, at least some important figures in Moscow probably would not mind a boycott of Iranian oil exports, should it become feasible: a purely hypothetical proposition.) As to the very mild salami sanctions—slice by slice—Russia believes they can only irritate Tehran.

Moreover, once they are pronounced nonworking, these can serve as a pretext for the United States and/or Israel to launch an attack against Iran. Without doubt, there are people in the Russian establishment who would welcome such a development, which they hope would only cripple the United States still further, and send the oil price up again, but the leadership is more cautious.

On the Iranian nuclear issue, Russian and U.S. goals coincide: no nuclear weapons for Tehran. So far, however, Moscow's and Washington's strategies have been only partially compatible. During the Bush presidency, the Russians have been ever-suspicious of a U.S. attack against Iran, and were careful not to approve anything, within the UN context, that could have provided legitimacy for such action. The United States, for its part, has been suspicious of Russia arming Iran, especially providing Tehran with air defenses, submarines, and cruise missiles. Moscow's "foot-dragging" on the UN sanctions issue was seen as evidence of Russia's double play.

Yet, under President Barack Obama, a more proactive U.S. diplomacy toward Iran can engage Russia as a valuable partner. Moscow, of course, should not be expected either to "bandwagon" on the U.S. position, which it would not; nor to "deliver" Tehran, which it could not. Yet, the coordinated policies of Washington and Moscow would send a convincing message to Tehran, and strengthen the hand of the more pragmatic figures within the regime. Such coordination, which would have the full support of Europe, would be an incentive for China to join in, or at least not to be seen as an impediment. The validity of that supposition will be tested in the first years of the Obama administration. So far, Barack Obama has demonstrated something that George W. Bush would not: in order to get Russia's help on an important security issue, Washington has to be helpful to Russia's own security interests.

On the Iranian missile issue, Russia and the United States are also close on the target, but wide apart on the trajectory. Since Iran's longer-range missiles can reach into the Russian territory, Russia is genuinely concerned. Moscow's 2000 idea of a European theater missile defense system viewed Iran as the likely

source of missile threat. At his meeting with George W. Bush at Kennebunkport, Vladimir Putin offered Russian radar facilities and missile defense assets for creation of a joint U.S.-Russian missile defense system. The Bush administration, for its part, opted for U.S.-only missile defenses in Central Europe which, Moscow maintains, are too close to the Russian territory and, if expanded and upgraded, can impair the Russian strategic nuclear deterrence capability.

How this issue will develop under the Obama administration is exceedingly important for the general condition and trend in the U.S.-Russian relations, but it will have repercussions for the Middle East. Reaching for an accommodating formula for the Polish and Czech sites that would assure the Russians that their strategic crown jewels are not threatened would arrest the downward slide in the relationship between the former Cold War adversaries; an agreement on joint—in reality, parallel and coordinated—U.S.-Russian missile defenses, though much less likely, would be a major step in projecting security and stability to Europe's immediate neighborhood. Another issue that depends on the U.S.-Russian interaction over Iran concerns the ratification by the U.S. Senate of the so-called 123 Agreement with Moscow on nuclear energy cooperation.

It stands to reason that many important Russian and U.S. interests concerning Iran do not coincide, and some may even conflict. Moscow certainly would not want to see the U.S.-Iranian relationship go back to the 1950s and 1960s, when Iran was America's ally against Moscow. Yet, on the nuclear and missile issues, there is enough commonality in the two countries' positions to allow productive cooperation in support of Russia's and America's core security interests.

AFGHANISTAN

Early on, Moscow viewed the Taliban as a clear and present danger to the security and stability of its vulnerable southern flank. Unable to break the Taliban's grip on power through its own efforts, and having seen its enemies-turned-allies in the Northern Alliance driven right up to Afghanistan's northern

border with Central Asian states, Moscow fully supported the U.S.-led operation, Enduring Freedom. Putin raised no objections to the “temporary” basing of U.S. forces at former Soviet airfields in Central Asia, something that the official Russian military doctrine formally considered a threat to Russian national security.

Once the Taliban was driven out of Kabul, where a Western-friendly Karzai government was installed, Moscow resisted the temptation to start playing a spoiler role in inter-Afghan politics, not to speak of sending “peace-keeping forces” into the country. The “Afghan syndrome,” borne out of the ten-year-long war that the Soviet Union could not win, and had to withdraw, was, and still is, very strong.

More recently, Russia has become increasingly worried about the prospects for the U.S./NATO operation in Afghanistan, and about the greatly increased flow of drugs from Afghanistan into Russia. In Moscow’s view, the West is repeating some of the mistakes that the Soviets committed in the 1980s, in particular, in trying to impose a foreign system onto the still largely feudal local society. Russia, however, does not want to see the West’s back in Afghanistan. Should that happen, Moscow again would be faced with the Taliban danger on the periphery of Russia’s borders, with the prospect of a spill-over into Central Asia.

Seeing NATO’s future and Obama’s legacy at stake in Afghanistan, Russia has made it clear it is prepared to cooperate with the West there, if America and Europe address Moscow’s own concerns over NATO’s further enlargement in the East, to Ukraine and Georgia. As noted above, Russia has agreed to provide its territory and airspace for Western military transit to Afghanistan, which could be crucial, if the Pakistan route becomes too dangerous. It can also use its influence with some Afghan warlords, which it has been supporting since the 1990s. Moscow also can point to its close political and security relations in the Central Asian countries; its prominent position within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has recently shown an

increasing interest in Afghanistan; and to its special relations with China and India, as well as Iran.

If, as is likely, the Ukraine/Georgia NATO accession issue fades on its own merits—not as part of a deal struck between Moscow and Washington—the potential for Russian-Western cooperation on Afghanistan could be exploited more fully. Dealing with the issue of drugs production and trafficking will not be easy, given Western fears that it will undermine the stability of the Karzai government. Yet, the problem is real, and the drug addicts' population in Russia is growing fast. The West is also reluctant to uphold Russia's preeminence in Central Asia by establishing a formal dialog between NATO and the CSTO. Ironically, however, engaging the CSTO might well lead to the opposite result: the raising of the international profile of its major members, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

IN LIEU OF CONCLUSION

As is evident from the brief description of Moscow's policies in the region, Russian and American interests partially overlap. Terrorism networks continue to be a common threat. There is a solid basis for bilateral cooperation within the Middle East Quartet; on the Israeli-Syrian peace treaty; and in Lebanon. Potentially the most important, even crucial areas of U.S.-Russian regional cooperation lie in Afghanistan and Iran. The arrival of the Obama administration offers a realistic chance of Moscow and Washington joining efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and reach an acceptable agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue. Exploiting this potential, however, will be anything but easy.

On a number of issues Russian interests collide with those of the United States. Moscow sells conventional arms to Iran and Syria. It seeks to enter the arms markets long dominated by the United States. It would not favor a full rapprochement between Tehran and Washington, as this would severely

undercut Russia's own interest. Russia opposes the building of the Nabucco pipeline from the Caspian to Turkey to Europe. Russian companies eye the markets of several U.S. friends and allies, and see the established Western interests there as their competitors.

Even despite the Georgia war, a full-blown confrontation between Russia and the United States has been avoided. The two countries are competitors and rivals, but they also share some key interests. Cooperation between them is possible and even desirable, but the model for that cooperation is yet to be devised. It cannot be Moscow simply bandwaggoning on Washington's policies, as in the 1990s. It cannot be the strategic partnership loudly proclaimed after the September 11 attacks, but never actually practiced. It needs to be serious, pragmatic, and case-by-case efforts that each party undertakes to further their interests, while seeing bilateral cooperation as a key facilitator.

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