



Russian Geopolitical Interests in the Middle East in Post Arab Spring Period

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Abstract:

This article aims to assess the Russian geopolitical interests in the Middle East following the post Arab Spring period. The Arab Spring has reshaped Middle East's geopolitics by engaging the leading world powers in the region's developments, both directly and indirectly. In this regard, this study seeks to assess the geopolitical implications of "Arab Spring" turmoil in light of Russia's involvement in influencing geopolitics of the region. Since the Arab Spring, Russia has possessed valuable assets for asserting its strategic aura in the region, the most important of which is its unwavering commitment to the preservation of national identities and state order in the Middle East. In-depth analysis of the conflict also underscores Russia's influence in the Middle East as well as influence of its foreign policy in the region. United States already maintains a strong presence in the region, which may be viewed as having seemingly contradictory, given the interests of global powers. This study investigated how Russia created an equilibrium to maintain a strategic balance of power as well as the bandwagoning in the entire region.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring, Geopolitics, Balance of Power, Foreign Policy, United States, Russia.

INTRODUCTION

This study assesses Russian geopolitical interests in the Middle East after the Arab Spring, since different issues in contemporary global politics are directly associated to social, political, religious, economic, and cultural debates in the Middle East. Studying and examining the issues that influenced the fragile relationship between global powers (i.e., the United States and Russia) during the Cold War period is of paramount interest to the students of politics and international relations.

There is a wide range of literature examining recent events, as drastic changes in the Middle East occurred as a result of the Arab Spring and the subsequent period. The Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015 marked a turning point in Moscow's Middle East policy (Charap, Treyger, & Geist, 2019). Russia, which had been notably absent from the Middle East for the previous couple of decades, intervened to save Bashar Al-Assad's regime re-establishing itself as a

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major player in the region's power politics. As a result of its provocative use of military force, Moscow has established itself as a leading player in the Middle East.

It has been noted that American influence has waned since 2008, i.e., following Russia's entry into the Middle East. This shift has sparked concern around the world and triggered a huge debate about what's causing it (Layne, 2009). The Middle East has become a central determining point of convergence for the United States and Russia in the post-9/11 era. The Russian military presence in the Middle East is explained in this scenario by a number of geopolitical and security factors. The Middle East has evolved into a focal point for major world and regional powers in recent years (Altunışık, 2020). The goal of this study is to conduct an in-depth examination of Russia's role in the region, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Given the global status of United States as a major player in international politics, a researcher's radar cannot ignore her presence in current events. Similarly, the Middle East is significant because of its resources, diversity, history, religions, and the existence of a long-standing conflict between Russia and the United States. The escalating conflict between Moscow and Washington, on the other hand, has received little attention. Following the events of September 11, 2001, political transitions resulted in a significant shift in the foreign policies of states all over the world, particularly in the Muslim world (Trenin, 2018). Under these conditions, the Middle East is associated with extremism, conservatism, and authoritarian regimes, which is a serious issue of concern for the West, particularly the United States. With this backdrop in mind, the United States, as a major superpower and guarantor of peace, became so involved that it has threatened the interests of other powers, particularly those that are at conflict with US interests.

This study will fill in the gaps in the existing literature on Russia's presence in the Middle East, which has disrupted the region's geopolitical status quo. In this context, an extensive literature review was conducted to assess the geopolitics of the Middle East region and how global powers intend to secure their interests in the region. It was noted that Russia in the Middle East has evolved a geopolitical setting in the Middle East by engaging in Syria, whereas the US was already present, and this once again created a conflict between the US and Russia in the region (Stepanova, 2016). The intervention took place as the United States began to withdraw from the Middle East, raising questions about its future role in the region. The civil wars in Libya and Syria, as well as the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, have caused geopolitical realignment and instability, allowing Russia to rebuild and forge new relationships.

This research takes into account neo-realism's theory of international relations as well as its practical application with reference to the structural alliances of the global powers. The recognized notion of the Middle East has evolved from one of an American-emulated Western democratic means to an unfinished agenda of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which has certain political limits. However, the growing involvement of Russia and other players in the Middle East has compelled a reconsideration of American grand strategy in the region (Baev, 2015). The Middle East encompasses several conflicting issues amongst the global, regional and domestic actors which was one of the most significant limitation encountered by the researcher while conducting this research. Aside from the lack of data on a specific study due to the newness of these trends, a detailed analysis has been made to examine Russia's objectives, and and policies in the Middle East.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study relied on qualitative research methods. More specifically, thematic analysis is used to examine the current state of Russian involvement in the Middle East in terms of current interests and future objectives. A qualitative method entails describing specific situations in detail. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting data pattern's themes. This method seeks to elucidate an issue or the significance of an idea. The researcher was able to capture and organize the data into patterns that provided meaning and answered the research questions by using thematic analysis in conjunction with the theoretical framework. The current analysis is based on in-depth literature review of United States and Russian assertions in the Middle East.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The structural viewpoint argues that imperialism reduced the once-independent Middle East to the periphery of the Western-dominated world system. As that of the location of both Israel and the world's intensive petroleum reserves, the Middle East remains an exceptional hot spot for external intervention, which has kept the notion of anti-imperialist nationalism alive long after decolonization (Bahgat, 2010). The region can still be regarded as a unique "Penetrated System."

With reference to theoretical framework, this study is based on Neo-Realist assertions. A major concept of international relations theory, i.e., neo-realism is applied on this research. This study makes use of a variation in international politics. Theories, concepts, and paradigms evolved over time and across space and time. As a matter of fact, their importance and interpretations are relative and context-dependent. Hence, this study adhered to the realist school of thought in a broader sense of theories. Kenneth Waltz's(Waltz, 2010) in his book "*Theory of International Politics*" introduced neo-realism, also known as political realism and structural realism, as a theory of international relations. The nature of the international structure, according to Neorealism, is defined by its ordering principle, anarchy, and the distribution of capabilities measured by the number of great powers within the international system. The international structure's anarchic ordering principle is decentralized, which means there is no formal central authority. In this system, every sovereign state is formally equal.

These states agree with the premise of self-help, which means that they seek their own interests and will not subordinate to the interests of other states. States are assumed to want to ensure their own survival at the very least, as this is a prerequisite to pursue other goals (Bessner & Guilhot, 2015). The primary factor influencing their behaviour is survival, which ensures states develop offensive military capabilities for foreign interventions and to increase their relative power. Because states can never be certain of the intentions of other states in the future, there is a lack of trust between states, which forces them to be wary of relative power changes that could allow other states to threaten their survival. This lack of trust, based on uncertainty, is called the security dilemma. The reality of Middle Eastern politics is that the region's states do not share identical, interchangeable strategic priorities, nor is the regional dynamic one of "Israel vs. everyone else." Each state in the region has its own set of interests and perceptions of threat; additionally, interstate understandings and alliances formed over time are not static, but rather shift in response to regional political developments(Fukuyama, 2018).

EVOLVING DYNAMICS OF POWER TRANSITION & ARAB SPRING

Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Middle East has been in constant turmoil. Contrary to the United States' intentions to make about political transformation in Iraq by establishing liberal democracy and using it as a model for the rest of the region, Iraq's situation has deteriorated (Jones, 2012). Terrorist and violent activities began in Iraq and the rest of the region. It also aided in the formation of terrorist organizations such as ISIS, which posed a security threat to the entire region. The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2010, resulted in the overthrow of many dictatorships in the MENA region, as well as mass protests in many countries such as Lebanon, Bahrain, and Jordan, among others. Despite the fact that many authoritarian regimes were overthrown as a result of these protests, they resulted in violence, civil wars, and political uncertainty rather than bringing stability to the region through political transformation (Kurzman, 2012).

Since the Arab Spring, the regional dynamics of power and order have shifted dramatically. New regional players like Turkey, the UAE, and Qatar, as well as non-state actors like ISIS, have emerged. An increase in sectarianism, a decline in US influence in the region, and growing Iran-Saudi Arab rivalry and quest for regional dominance all influenced the region's changing security and political environment (Lafi, 2017). The Arab Spring has resulted in the collapse of various regimes in the Middle East, and the power vacuum created by the regime collapse in Iraq has not been adequately filled, paving the way for non-state actors such as ISIS.

Many Shia groups, including Hamas and Hezbollah, which are backed by Iran, have resurrected as a result of the rise of ISIS. The traditional balance of power in the Middle East has completely shifted as a result of these events. Although the Cold War has been over for nearly three decades, its legacy continues to have an impact on the Middle East. This period of superpower competition arrived at the same time as most Arab countries were freed from the yoke of European colonialism, and it is now crucial to understanding the changing dynamics of the region. The most visible change in Arab societies has been a redefinition of political space. This has been demonstrated repeatedly in the years since 2011, from recent protests in Lebanon and Iraq to the Algerian Hirak movement. Protests and demonstrations of public outrage are increasingly seen in North Africa and the Middle East as potential precursors to an uprising, if not a revolution. The undeniable politico-religious violence fueled by jihadi movements that has erupted since 2011 is social and generational in nature. Jihadism reflects the fact that regional political realities are currently at an unprecedented crossroads, with a shift away from traditional religion, governments' struggles, and a slew of social, economic, and psychological tensions weighing on entire populations desperate to see their hopes comprehended (Hahn, 2007).

Russian Interests in the Middle East

Russia has been actively involved in the Middle East since the nineteenth century. For a brief period, his policy is disrupted by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Russia, on the other hand, has taken a more assertive stance in the Middle East, contradicting US policy by arming radical regimes. The Arab Spring has implications for both Russia and the United States, as Russia believes that the United States and its allies are supporting Islamist conquests in the Middle East. Because of its strong ties with the Middle East, Russia's influence has been reduced. This has also increased

hostile acts against the United States, as many non-state, transnational, and local actors have gained influence. In this regard, Russian policy is viewed as anti-American due to its support for the Assad regime and Iran. Due to Russian influence in the Middle East it is more difficult for the US to support rogue states (Cohen, 2012).

With regard to the historical context, Mehmet Akif Koç (Koç, 2020) explained that the Middle East appeared as the key chessboard between the era's two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, where the proxy conflict was established through the Cold War's pursuit for regional allies. The Soviet Union's post-World War II policy was twofold: one was to protect its southern borders by installing pro-Soviet regimes, and the second was to confront Western powers both internationally and regionally, while benefiting from the Arab people's growing anti-colonialism. The Middle East remained a focus of attention for Soviet policymakers throughout the Cold War. However, the USSR established relationships with regional states that serve Soviet interests and adopted a regional approach that was consistent with the Cold War assumption of confrontation. Under the extreme conditions of the Cold War, Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, and Libya appeared to be Moscow's main allies. However, it lost influence in the region soon after the Soviet Union fell apart at the end of the Cold War. It was assumed that the Soviet Union's decline as a superpower began with its withdrawal from the Middle East at the end of the Cold War. Yet it can be assessed that under President Putin's leadership, it has re-emerged as a player in the Middle East, where it aims to reclaim its status as a great power outside of the former Soviet Union. Russia's involvement in Syria was seen as a serious obstacle to its return to the international stage.

Vance Serchuk, contends that Russia's reemergence as a great-power rival to Washington is as surprising as it is perplexing in the Middle East. The US allies were in high-level talks with Russia about regional developments, while Russia is more involved in arms supply within the region. The United States and its allies saw Russia as a Middle Eastern power broker. It is also believed that Russia is employing Cold War tactics and is in direct competition with the US (Serchuk, 2005). Furthermore, Robert. G. Rabel argued that Russia's presence in the Middle East and support for Syria's manifests its desire to reclaim a dominant global role. Russia has effectively become a focal point for American allies attempting to protect their national interests (Grabeł, 2010). Russians want to demonstrate their presence in the region by going against US allies, through sectarianism, and instability. The Russian strategy in the Middle East, as discussed by James Sladden, can be divided into two approaches: through its economic, military, or diplomatic resources, which can be seen through time, space, and her actions in terms of preemptive or mitigating, and also in terms of a short-term approach as an opportunistic (Johnston et al., 2020). As a result, Russia in the Middle East does not establish fixed states and goals, but rather seeks to expand beyond Syria by maximizing short-term goals and adopting a flexible approach. Russia's current involvement in the Middle East can be viewed as an emerging strategy based on its current actions and interests. It would be guided by broader foreign policy principles and behaviours. In this article, the author also explained foreign policy in relation to Russian strategy in the Middle East but was unable to connect it to the geostrategic impacts that lead to balancing or bandwagoning.

According to John McLaughlin, the role of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and Europe, as well as their strategies and policies in the Middle East, is no less difficult because the

Middle East itself is in flux and turmoil, and they themselves are undergoing power transitions. Because everything is currently unclear as to who is allied with whom and what will happen next. As in the Middle East, not all Russian interests overlap with those of the United States, as both seek to address common threats posed by Islamic extremists. Besides, the United States has furthered its relations with the regional allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia. In addition, Russia's growing involvement and support for Syria has influenced the Syrian conflict. In terms of regional issues, Russia is building on a long-standing alliance relationship and recognizes all of the changes taking place in the Middle East (Hughes, 2019). He linked the occurrence of Russian involvement in the region from a different perspective, stating that Russian influence in the region is not affecting, balancing, or bandwagoning the region, and that her current status is still uncertain, as Russia maintains relations with US allies as well as jagged states declared by the US.

Adam Robert asserted that the Arab Spring was a major challenge in contemporary times, particularly in the context of its development in the wake of the autocratic regimes (Roberts, 2018). Social and political movements, have played a significant role in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. In many states, the Arab Spring resulted in regime changes and public demands for reform, which could set off a chain reaction in other parts of the region. Tunisia's constitutional change, Yemen's and Syria's civil wars, and Egypt's, Morocco's, Jordan's, and Bahrain's reforms are just a few examples. The author went on to explain how civil resistance led to social disorder and regimes' inability to control people.

Syrian uprising was perceived as similar to various revolts in the Arab world that the US was trying to give Russia a push from the region because Russia's approaches in Arab Springs reflected more controversial. Despite the fact that Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood was on the official list of terrorist organisations, Putin invited Egypt's new President, Mohamed Morsi, to Moscow as the Arab Spring presented an opportunity for Russia to implement its own pivot to the Middle East. This indicated that Russia was willing to assist its old allies while also accepting the new realities that emerged as a result of the Arab Spring pragmatic process; this non-ideological pragmatism was also evident in the Libyan case. Russia is gradually transforming the region from a Western zone of influence to a battlefield of ideological and political rivalry between Washington and Moscow, and it is aware that in order to broaden this strategic advantage, it must maintain its presence in the Middle East. As a result of this, Russia's influence in the Middle East must be maintained by supporting old allies while adhering to the old ideological expansionist policy (Litsas & Tziampiris, 2018).

An Analysis of Russian Policy in the Middle East

This study focused the American and Russia's growing involvement in the Middle East, in post-Arab Spring period. Although Russia has played an important role in balancing Middle Eastern geopolitical setup due to its presence in Syria, it takes a long time to directly affect US hegemonic goals because it has yet to establish its footprints in the region. Russia's current presence in the Middle East is that of a neutral actor, not a confrontationist. It thrives on forming informal alliances that continue to change depending on the situation. The most significant policy shift was the actual change in relations between Russia and the United States, which will affect Russia's stance toward the Middle East (Karasik, 2018). Russia's involvement in the region is more militarily and security-oriented. Russia avoids ground operations most of the time, but provides air support to their local

allies in the form of military advice, technical assistance, and intelligence (Tsygankov, 2019). Because of Russia's informal alliances in the Middle East, including its strong presence in Syria, strengthening military bases, re-approachment with Iran at the same time, and strengthening ties with Israel and Egypt, it has been able to maintain relations with GCC countries and has received a positive response from the weak states to align with.

It is an acknowledged fact that Russia's policies in the Middle East have an impact on the geopolitical settings of the region because its policies are constantly changing, forging informal alliances, and moving with the pace of time, which is also seen as similar with the US as it observes Russian moves in the Middle East. While analyzing Russia's presence in the Middle East, one cannot ignore the US' long-standing position in the region; however, because Russia is not directly challenging the US dominance and continues to avoid confrontation with the US and other players in the region, any direct action against Russia will be disconcerting for the US. Except for Syria, the US presence and dominance can be seen throughout the region. Russia's presence, on the other hand, is limited to Syria. On a broader level, Russia's strategy is critical in terms of informal alliances that will aid in greater influence, including dialogue with the US. Russia's position in the Middle East provides small states with an opportunity to balance with Russia against the threat. According to the study, Russia is currently focusing on increasing its influence in order to reclaim its former status (Casula & Katz, 2018). Regarding Russia, a critical component of its strategy was to strengthen ties with Middle Eastern states with which it had close ties in order to avoid complete isolation caused by rising tensions with the West. For example, Moscow guaranteed Israel's neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian dispute through its dialogue with Tel Aviv and promised to ensure that the issue of Iran's nuclear programme would be resolved in such a way that no threat would be left for Israel.

CONCLUSION

Because both the US and Russia's policies are constantly changing, it would be premature to say anything about the challenge that Russia and the US face in dominating the region. As Russia employs Syrian forces on the ground, it provides them with a wide range of weapons and ammunition. Informal alliances have opened communication channels for all parties in the Middle East, as they do not have permanent friends and foes in this region, and their adversaries and friends change over time. And because it is presumed that 'it is better to attack the bad guy in his nest than to be a sitting duck for it,' hence it can be assumed that Russia's Syrian operation is a down payment for any future engagement. It would be a mistake to believe that Russia wants to completely consider replacing the United States' role in the Middle East. Russian leaders most likely want to be seen as a regional power broker and on an equal footing with the United States.

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