

Russia in the Middle East: Return of a superpower?

Written by Eric Walberg

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The US "withdrawal" from Iraq last year and the planned "withdrawal" from Afghanistan in 2014 cannot help but change the face of Central Asia and the Middle East. But how does Russia fit in, asks Eric Walberg

The world is living through a veritable slow-motion earthquake. If things go according to plan, the US obsession with Afghanistan and Iraq will soon be one of those ugly historical disfigurements that -- at least for most Americans -- will disappear into the memory hole.

Like Nixon and Vietnam, US President Barack Obama will be remembered as the president who "brought the troops home". But one cannot help but notice the careful calibration of these moves to fit the US domestic political machine -- the Iraqi move to show Americans that things on the international front are improving (just don't mention Guantanamo), the Afghan move put off conveniently till President Barack Obama's second term, when he doesn't need to worry about the fallout electorally if things unravel (which they surely will).

Of course, Russia lost big time geopolitically when the US invaded Afghanistan, and thus gains as regional geopolitical hegemon by the withdrawal of US troops from Central Asia. Just look at any map. But American tentacles will remain: Central Asia has no real alternative economically or politically anymore to the neoliberal global economy, as Russia no longer claims to represent a socialist alternative to imperialism. The departure of US troops and planes from remote Kyrgyzstan will not be missed -- except for the hole it leaves in the already penurious Kyrgyz government's budget and foreign currency reserves. Russia is a far weaker entity than the Soviet Union, both economically and politically. Thus, Russia's gain from US weakness is not great.

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Besides, both Russia and the US support the current Afghan government against the Taliban -- as does Iran. In fact, in case US state department and pentagon officials haven't noticed the obvious, the main beneficiary of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq has been Iran, again by definition. The invasion brought to power the ethnic Persian Tajiks in Afghanistan, and the invasion of Iraq set up a Shia-dominated government there.

Similarly, when the US invaded Iraq, Russia lost politically and economically. The US cancelled Saddam Hussein's state debts, which hurt the Russians and Europeans but not the US. The US just happened to be boycotting Iraq for the previous decade and took pleasure from shafting its sometime allies for ignoring US wishes. However, once Iraqi politicians begin to reassert some control over their foreign policy, Russia will be seen as a much more sympathetic partner internationally.

Ironically, on many fronts, Iran now holds the key to readjusting the political playing field and establishing rules that can lead away from the deadly game being played by the US, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, with broader implications for broader nuclear disarmament, EU-US relations, but above all, for the continued role of the dollar as world reserve currency. This encourages Russia to maintain its alliance with Iran over vague (and empty) promises of US-Russian world hegemony as envisioned by the now-discredited Medvedev Atlantists in Moscow.

Russia's relations with both Central Asia and the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union have been low key. In the Middle East, it maintains relations with Palestine's Hamas, and, as a member of the so-called quartet of Middle East negotiators (along with the EU, the US and the UN), insists that Israel freeze expansion of settlements in the Occupied Territories as a condition of further talks. It appears to be trying to regain some of the goodwill that existed between the Soviet Union and Arab states, supporting the UN Goldstone Report which accused Israel of war crimes in its 2008 invasion of Gaza.

It embarked on a diplomatic offensive with Arab states in 2008, offering Syria and Egypt nuclear power stations, and is re-establishing a military presence in the Mediterranean at the Syrian port, Tartus, though Syria's current civil war, with Russia and Iran lined up against the West and the Arab states could leave Russia on the losing side. Western attempts to portray Russia as the power-hungry bad guy in Syria do not hold water. Russia is concerned about heightened civil war in an evenly divided population, with rebel groups openly armed by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's Arab and Western foes. The hypocrisy in the Arab world is appalling: Gulf monarchies and Saudi Arabia loudly demand that Egypt's new government swear off any attempt to "interfere" in their internal politics, but brazenly arm Syrian rebels.

Russia is still struggling to leave its own tragic civil war in Chechnya behind, and to make sure there's a place at the table for its Muslims. With its 16 million Muslims (about 12 per cent of the population), it has expressed interest in joining the Organization of Islamic Conference. Its unwillingness to let Syria slide into civil war does not gain it any brownie points among its own separatist Muslims in the Caucasus and elsewhere, but it is not willing to carve up either Syria or the Russian federation in the interests of some fleeting peace.

The importance of Jewish financial and economic interests in post-Soviet Russia -- both the

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banking and industrial oligarchs and the Kosher Nostra mafia -- ensures that Israel gets a sympathetic hearing from Russian leaders. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is a Russian Jew who emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1978.

Israel is also able to take advantage of the persistence of Muslim unrest and dreams of independence in the Caucasus within Russia to prevent Moscow from taking any strong position to pressure Israel. Russia's prickly neighbor Georgia harbors Chechen rebels and Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, uses Israeli and US military advisers. Of course, the US benefits from Israeli pressures on Russia. This is a key feature of the current Great Game, where the US and Israel act as the new imperial "centre".

It is popular to call this era a new Cold War. However, history never repeats itself. There certainly is a new tension in world politics following 9/11, and the failure of the newly aggressive US to successfully assert its hegemony around the world, including Russia, keeps the fires of chauvinism hot in the US. On the US right, Russia is seen merely as the Soviet Union reborn, a ruse to hide the KGB's agenda of world communist control. For the saner Obamites, it is a more diffused Cold War, dominated by a new US-Israeli imperial centre, the "empire-and-a-half", with shifting alliances of convenience, though with a strong, new opposition player on the horizon -- a savvier, more articulate Islamic world, with Iran, Turkey and Egypt in the first rank.

The desire by both the US and Israel to overthrow the Iranian government is now the only common goal left in this "empire-and-a-half", but it is a common goal only because Israel is in the driver's seat. Israel resents Iran as an existential threat not to Israel itself, but to Greater Israel and regional domination. Iran serves as a powerful example, a third way for Muslim countries, and is most definitely a rival to Israel as Middle East hegemon.

Among the new Arab Spring governments, it is only Egypt's that worries Israel. Just imagine if Egypt and Iran start to cooperate. Add in Shia-dominated Iraq, Turkey and Russia, as Russia has good relations with all four, and common objects on the international scene. Suddenly the Middle East playing field takes on a totally different appearance.

A rational US policy to join with Russia and China to accommodate Iran could save the teetering dollar, or at least give the US a chance to prepare for an orderly transition to a new international currency. If Russia, China and Iran defuse the current nuclear crisis between the US and Iran peacefully, with a nod to Turkey and a resolve to make Israel join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, this could pave the way for a new Eurasian playing field. If and when the US withdraws from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India will be drawn in as well.

This would set off a chain of events that could change the whole nature of the current Great Game leading to a Russia-India-Iran-China axis (Russia-India-China summits have already been held yearly since 2001), leaving Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Israel to sort out their regional conflicts outside of a new, very different great game. US interests would be considered but without US diktat, forcing, or rather allowing the US to put its own house in order. Iran would

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finally be accepted as the legitimate regional player that it is. If the US cannot bring itself to make a graceful exit from its self-imposed crisis in the region, this will only accelerate its decline.

Russia inherits fond memories across the Middle East region as the anti-Zionist Soviet Union's successor. It now has the chance to gain long term credibility as a principled partner not only in the Middle East but to non-aligned countries everywhere, and should hold the fort, the anti-imperial one, against what's left of empire.