Institute of European Right

COMMENTARY

Strategic Interplay: Linking Russia's Actions in Ukraine and the Middle East

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*On November 8th, in Vilnius, the Institute of European Right convened a high-level roundtable titled "**Strategic Interplay: Linking Russia's Actions in Ukraine and the Middle East**". The gathering brought together experts and policymakers to examine the interconnected dynamics of Russia's actions across these critical theatres. This paper draws from the insights and analyses shared under Chatham House rules, presenting an assessment of Russia's strategy and actionable recommendations for a Western response.*

Executive Summary

- Russia's geopolitical strategy hinges on exploiting interconnected theatres of conflict—Ukraine and the Middle East—to undermine Western influence and maintain its status as a global power.
- Moscow's dual play stretches Western alliances by leveraging energy markets, fostering instability, and aligning with adversarial actors. It also continuously exposes vulnerabilities within transatlantic cohesion.
- Russia's foremost aim is to sustain its influence and assert its unique role as a key player in what it regards as its "near abroad," with a secondary goal of challenging U.S. global dominance across all possible domains.

Recommendations

- Recognize Russia's actions in the Middle East and develop proactive, initiative-taking measures to prevent Russia from fostering instability or exploiting existing instability (e.g. in Syria).
- Work consistently towards a strategic and coherent unified political and military approach to these strategic global security issues among all the Western capitals.
- Strengthen resistance to Russia's war in Ukraine by boosting military aid to Ukraine, permitting Western weapons use across Russian territory, and intensifying economic and political pressure, including unfreezing $300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets.

Nota bene: A Russia suffering a strategic military defeat in Ukraine would not only ensure a safer and more prosperous Europe but also contribute to a calmer and more stable Middle East.

1. Russia's Dual Play: A Strategy of Interconnected Theaters

Russia's geopolitical strategy is neither accidental nor opportunistic; it is the product of a deliberate and interconnected approach to leveraging conflicts in multiple theatres for maximum advantage. Nowhere is this duality more evident than in Moscow's. These regions represent two sides of a cohesive strategy designed to undermine Western influence, secure Moscow's global standing, and exploit opportunities created by instability.

The Middle East has long been a strategic proving ground for Russian ambitions. From its 19th-century rivalry with Britain in the Great Game to Cold War interventions, Moscow has consistently used the region as a platform for power projection beyond its immediate borders. Iconic episodes, such as the Soviet Union's alignment with Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis and its intervention in Syria in 2015, illustrate the enduring importance of the Middle East to Russian strategy. These ac-

tions not only reinforced Moscow's role as a counterweight to Western powers but also allowed it to position itself as a mediator capable of engaging with adversaries and allies alike, from Iran to Israel.

Concurrently, Russia's war in Ukraine is an unambiguous declaration of its intent to reshape the European security landscape. By destabilising NATO's eastern flank and asserting dominance over its post-Soviet periphery, Moscow seeks to redress what it perceives as decades of Western encroachment. Yet the toll of this prolonged conflict has amplified Russia's dependence on its manoeuvres in the Middle East. By fostering instability in the region, Moscow aims to divert Western attention and resources, fragment alliances, and align with actors such as Iran and China to challenge the U.S. on a global scale.

Energy policy serves as a crucial link between these two theatres. Russia's dominance in Europe's energy supply chain and its strategic positioning in Middle Eastern energy markets provide it with unparalleled leverage. By manipulating oil prices and exploiting supply disruptions, particularly during heightened conflict, Moscow finances its military campaigns while maintaining influence in both regions. This dual leverage underscores how deeply energy dependency ties Europe and the Middle East into Moscow's broader geopolitical calculus.

Russia's ability to entangle the West in multiple crises is not without risk. Balancing its ambitions in Ukraine and the Middle East requires delicate management of alliances, many of which are fragile or transactional. Nevertheless, this dual play reflects the Kremlin's recognition that no single region can provide the means to achieve its global objectives. Instead, Moscow uses the interdependencies of these theatres to amplify its reach and strain its adversaries' capacity for a unified response.

The dual focus on Ukraine and the Middle East reveals not only Russia's strengths but also its vulnerabilities. By addressing these dynamics holistically, the West can disrupt Moscow's ability to exploit these regions as mutually reinforcing theatres of influence, turning the dual play into a double bind.

2. Historical Background on Russia's Influence in the Middle East

The Tsarist era laid the groundwork for Russian engagement in the Middle East. Trade routes, access to warm-water ports, and leverage over the declining Ottoman Empire were the primary objectives of imperial strategy. These goals evolved during the Soviet period, where ideology merged with pragmatism to position Moscow as the champion of anti-colonial and Arab nationalist movements. The 1956 Suez Crisis was a watershed moment in this transformation. By aligning itself with Nasser's Egypt, the Soviet Union seized an opportunity to weaken Western influence and present itself as an ally to emerging nations. Arms deals, military alliances, and rhetorical support became the pillars of Moscow's influence.

Yet, not all of Moscow's ventures succeeded. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 revealed the perils of overreach. The invasion drained Soviet resources and exposed the limits of its power. This miscalculation marked a turning point, forcing subsequent Soviet and Russian leaders to adopt a more cautious and calculated approach. The intervention in Syria in 2015 illustrates this re-

calibration. Unlike its Cold War-era ideological posturing, Russia's contemporary engagement is unapologetically transactional. By rescuing the Assad regime, Moscow not only secured its last significant ally in the region but also guaranteed a military foothold in the eastern Mediterranean, with bases in Tartus and Latakia. These assets have ensured Russia remains a relevant military and political force in Middle Eastern affairs.

Energy markets have long been central to Russia's strategic calculus in the region. Moscow's ability to manipulate oil prices and maintain influence within OPEC, provided it with both economic stability and geopolitical leverage. This dual role—as both a producer and manipulator of energy markets—ensured that Russia remains a significant player in shaping global energy dynamics.

For a long time diplomacy was where Russia's Middle Eastern strategy most clearly revealed its pragmatism. Moscow's ability to engage with opposing actors, such as Israel and Iran, underscored its preference for flexibility over ideological rigidity. The Kremlin's relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu's government, characterised by close coordination despite Moscow's parallel support for Iran's military ambitions, exemplified this balancing act. By presenting itself as a neutral mediator, Russia ensured its indispensability in resolving regional crises, even as it deepens ties with actors antagonistic to one another.

For Moscow, the Middle East is not merely a region of interest; it is a proving ground for its ability to challenge the U.S.-led global order and assert itself as a power that cannot be ignored. This approach, deeply rooted in history and recalibrated for current realities, underscores the enduring significance of the Middle East in Russia's geopolitical vision.

3. War Against Ukraine and Moscow's Strategic Gambit in the Middle East

Central to Moscow's strategy is the exploitation of Middle Eastern instability to divert the attention of the United States and NATO from Ukraine. The October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel exemplify this approach. By creating or amplifying regional crises, Russia seeks to overstretch Western capacities, forcing policymakers in Washington, Brussels, London and elsewhere to grapple with competing priorities. This gambit aligns with Moscow's long-standing goal of undermining the coherence of Western alliances, but it also exacts significant costs. Balancing these regional crises requires deft management of partnerships with actors whose objectives are neither aligned with Moscow's nor each other's.

The Russia-Iran relationship is emblematic of these complexities. Tehran has supplied drones and military aid vital to Russia's operations in Ukraine, yet their alliance remains a fragile one. Iran, dissatisfied with Russia's equivocal support for its broader ambitions in the Levant, views Moscow as an unreliable partner. For its part, Russia regards Iran as a tactical utility rather than a strategic ally, a perspective that limits trust and renders the partnership transactional at best.

Complicating matters further is Russia's entente with China, its principal partner in challenging U.S. global dominance. While the two powers benefit from a shared interest in undermining Western influence, their economic priorities in the Middle East diverge. China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy markets incentivises stability, whereas Russia thrives on volatility that drives up oil prices. This divergence introduces friction into an ostensibly cooperative relationship.

The deterioration of Russia's relationship with Israel provides yet another layer of complexity. Historically, Moscow and Jerusalem maintained pragmatic ties. However, Russia's tacit support for Hamas and other actors hostile to Israel, coupled with its deepening ties to Tehran, has strained this relationship to breaking point. The October 2023 attacks revealed the extent of this deterioration, isolating Moscow diplomatically and undermining its ability to pose as a neutral arbiter in the region.

It can even be said this way: just as Russia sacrificed its strategic energy partnership with Germany due to its paranoia towards Ukraine and the illegal war it launched against it, Russia has chosen to sacrifice its warm, pragmatic relations with Israel in an effort to divert American attention away from Ukraine. From this, at least two conclusions could be drawn: Russia's primary goal is to maintain influence over what it perceives as its "near abroad," and secondly, to undermine U.S. global influence in every possible arena.

In this way, the Middle East has become a theatre of necessity rather than choice for Moscow, where short-term gains are often pursued at the expense of long-term influence. For Russia, the war in Ukraine has turned the Middle East from a domain of strategic ambition into one of tactical improvisation.

In summa

As mentioned, at the heart of Russia's strategy lies an ambition to undermine U.S. global influence by fostering instability across multiple regions. Moscow's maneuvers in Ukraine, the Middle East, and its tacit alignment with disruptive ambitions in Taiwan reveal a strategy designed to stretch Western resources, fragment alliances, and exploit political divisions within the United States and Europe. This approach, though opportunistic, reflects both the strategic calculus of a constrained power and the vulnerabilities of a global system struggling to maintain cohesion.

Although Russia's resources are increasingly constrained, it does not diminish the risks Russia poses. The regime's ability to weaponise instability, particularly in fragile regions, ensures its influence will persist even as its conventional power wanes. For Western policymakers, this underscores the need for a dual approach: reinforcing military and economic support for Ukraine while countering Russian influence in the Middle East and other theatres. Europe, in particular, must step up, assuming greater responsibility within NATO, while at same time acting in political and military unison with the United States.

All reasonable and effective measures should be employed to apply political and economic pressure on Moscow, with the immediate priority being the unfreezing and utilization of $300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets.

Additionally, bold initiatives must be taken to respond decisively to Russia's actions, demonstrating that "We, the West, mean business," while also making asymmetric moves to counter Russia.



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