

Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Origins, Current Stance and Perspective on Pakistan



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Abstract

The paper deals with Russian policy towards the Middle East, its origins, evolution, and prospects. It touches upon the historical genesis of Russian elites' perceptions of the region. It points out crucial milestones in their attitude towards the Middle East and some other important regional actors. The article draws attention to recent changes in this perception deriving from the civilisational approach invoked by the Russian elites, which could elevate Pakistan's importance in regional affairs. Finally, it gives a brief overview of Russia-Pakistan relations and proposes some spheres of cooperation where Moscow and Islamabad could contribute in forging a stable regional security architecture. The author posits that Russian re-consideration of the space, formerly called the Middle East into the core center of the Islamic world provides an impetus for broader cooperation with Pakistan. Given that Moscow and Islamabad share views on several global and regional issues, with both countries willing to collaborate bilaterally and multilaterally. Russia and Pakistan could differentiate South Asian and Middle Eastern agendas, focusing on the latter and aiming to find new grounds for cooperation.

Keywords: Russia, Middle East, Pakistan, Civilisation, Security, Elites.

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Introduction

From the Russian official perspective, the world has entered the final stage of global transformation. Moscow is claiming to be one of the major contributors for establishing a ‘fairer democratic world order.’¹ Such positioning implies proactive foreign policy manifested in raising a voice on multiple global issues, engaging in regional environments as well as intensifying ties with both traditional allies and new promising partners.

It is the Middle East where Russia started embarking on all those practices many years ago, it enjoys long-term and well-balanced stances with regard to regional issues of global importance (terrorism), a neutral position on most regional conflicts and disagreements without any overt hostilities with local stakeholders (Palestinian issue, Iran-GCC confrontation), vibrant relations with old friends (Egypt, Syria) and relatively new partners (Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE).

In this context, one could raise numerous questions: what are the origins of Moscow’s Middle East policy? Why do Russian elites put such a premium on developing ties with the region? Are there any substantive changes in the Russian grand strategy towards the Middle East and whether these alterations manifest themselves ‘on the ground’? To what region should we attribute Pakistan – the Middle East or South Asia? How do Russian elites perceive Pakistan’s role in the Middle East? Are there any points of convergence between Moscow and Islamabad in the region? The paper deals with the Russian policy towards the Middle East, its origins, evolution, and prospects. It touches upon the historic genesis of Russian elites’ perceptions of the region, points out crucial milestones in their attitude towards the Middle East and specific regional actors, and speculates on further prospects of Russian positioning in the region. The paper draws attention to recent changes in this perception deriving from

¹ “Russia, China Want to Be at Forefront of Establishing Democratic World Order – Lavrov,” *Russian News Agency TASS*, May 14, 2024, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://tass.com/politics/1787803>.

Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Origins,...

the civilisational approach invoked by the Russian elites, which could elevate Pakistan's importance in regional affairs. Finally, it gives a brief overview of Russia-Pakistan relations and proposes some spheres of cooperation where both could contribute towards forging a stable regional security architecture.

The author suggests that Russian reconsideration of the space, formerly called the Middle East and its transformation into the core center of the Islamic world, gives an impetus for broader cooperation with Pakistan in Russian perception. Given that, Moscow and Islamabad share views on most of the global and regional issues, they are willing to collaborate bilaterally and multilaterally. By separating the South Asian and the Middle Eastern agendas, and find new grounds for cooperation.

To analyse Russian foreign policy, a complex theoretical framework comprising: strategic culture (in terms of Jack Snyder); historical sociology (version of Richard Lachmann); and elite theory (based on the differentiation by Charles Wright Mills) is invoked. This combination to deal with the subject stems from the nature of the regional strategic environment.

Traditionally security-centered politics in the Middle East have been analysed by American strategist Jack Snyder's lens, who tried to point out Soviet strategic and defense community's broad perceptions, relations, and behavioural patterns, established in certain arrangement, both historically and politically.² Similarly, the Russian and Pakistani elites are also seen through the same prism. In this context, historical sociology purports to find those events that transformed into important milestones affecting elites' perceptions and, therefore, significantly contributed to altering social realities.³ Elite theory serves as a basic instrument to

² Jack L. Snyder, "*The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1977), p. 5.

³ Richard Lachmann, *What Is Historical Sociology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 10-11.

Gleb G. Makarevich

differentiate the powers-that-be and their respective interests in political, economic, and military domains.⁴

The evolution of the Russian positioning in the Middle East is mostly studied through the Russian sources, including its official government and media avenues by avoiding Russian rhetoric. The author has tried to track its origins and point out respective consequences.

This paper starts by listing reasons that drew the attention of the Soviets and, thereafter, the Russian elites to the Middle East. It touches upon Moscow's relations with the most important actors and its official positions on the most burning issues. Furthermore, the paper also carries an in-depth observation of how the region is perceived after 2022, and what conceptual and practical changes have emerged in recent years? Finally some suggestions are given on possible opportunities for Russia-Pakistan relations, while considering the rapidly changing regional environment.

For a Greater Good

Historically, Russian elites' interests in the Middle East have been associated with prestige and authority rather than materialistic dividends. For instance, during the late 18th century, Russia's ambitions in the modern independent Middle East emerged through confrontation with the Ottoman Empire for control over the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles.

Russian strategists, including Czars themselves pursued three goals. Firstly, stable control over the straits gave unbreakable access to the Mediterranean – a traditional trade route at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Secondly, the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy should be given access to the Mediterranean in case of war, otherwise the Fleet would stay in the Black Sea with the only potential rival – Türkiye. Achieving these two goals opposed the interests of Britain and France in Egypt and the

⁴ Charles W. Mills, *"The Power Elite,"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 15.

Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Origins,...

Eastern Mediterranean respectively, which made them arch opponents of Russian influence in the region since distant history.

However, from our perspective, the third goal has been of far greater importance. Russian elites had long been nurturing the idea of restoring Constantinople as a center of the Orthodox world with Russia being a protector of all this 'oecumene.'⁵ Such claims hardly could bring any benefits to Saint Petersburg but increase in spending. However, this mission has always been considered an indispensable attribute of a great power.

The diplomatic scandal provoked, the Crimean War (1853-1856) after the Russian request for exclusive rights over cleric property in the Promised Land – Jerusalem and Bethlehem.⁶ Although the mission of protecting the rights of the Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire has never been fully accomplished (significant success in this context has been witnessed only in the Balkans), such positioning seems to have left some footprint on Russian foreign policy in the Middle East with considerations referring to symbolic capital (in Pierre Bourdieu's terms) being at a premium even today.

Paradoxically, although Soviet elites abandoned the idea of securing a leading role in the Orthodox world, they still viewed global politics through the prism of their capabilities to convey another higher idea – defeating imperialism through the rise of the exploited labour masses. Moreover, they did not straitjacket themselves in regional realms, but laid claims to the global stage, pursuing the triumph of universal communist revolution. Since they failed to achieve such an ambitious goal, they had to reorient themselves towards fighting colonialism, contributing to decolonisation, and aiding new independent nations that were regarded as

⁵ Vladimir P. Potemkin, ed., "*History of Diplomacy*," *Volume 1* (Moscow: State Publishing House of Political Literature, 1941), pp. 290-291.

⁶ Vladimir P. Potemkin, ed., *History of Diplomacy...*

Gleb G. Makarevich

natural allies with progressive elites in power – the strategy that still echoes in Russian foreign policy.⁷

The Soviet elites were determined to demonstrate an alternative development project⁸ based on the social and economic empowerment of postcolonial states aimed at saving less developed states from neocolonial dependence. To achieve this goal, the USSR actively invested in regional agriculture, light and heavy industries, infrastructure, energy sector as well as nuclear energy and space exploration. For example, Moscow provided Egypt with technical and financial support to construct the Aswan Dam, a megaproject that should have boosted national energy capabilities and agriculture. At the same time, the USSR assisted in developing the Egyptian nuclear programme and launching space satellites of regional powers.

These activities laid the foundations for some countries' self-reliance in critical industries. The expertise engendered by the collaboration with the Soviet engineers and educationalists at that time still brings benefits for regional economies. However, Soviet lessons of state-owned and public-oriented economies helped new independent nations to become economically stable but did not pave the way for internationally competitive industries. The state managers lacked the flexibility to operate in market terms and increase investments. This determined national elites' future pivot to the Washington consensus in global economic affairs and general economic liberalisation. Nevertheless, regional elites and societies still value the Soviet input into regional economic development, which gives Russia a positive profile in retrospect.

⁷ Dayan Jayatilaka, "One Hundred Years after Lenin: The Necessity for a Leninist Global Strategy," *Russia in Global Affairs*. 22, no. 2 (2024): 53. DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-2-50-60

⁸ Grigoriy G. Kosach, Elena S. Melkumyan, "The Middle East in Russian Foreign Policy," *World Economy and International Relations* no. 3 (2002): 42. DOI:10.20542/0131-2227-2002-9-38-47

Russia's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Origins,...

At the same time, political, security, and defense relations were rather complicated by three factors, namely: the Cold War mindset; the Israel-Palestinian conflict; and the rise of Islamism.

The first factor served as an impediment for Soviet elites to cooperate with Western partners and allies. The case of Israel, Türkiye, Iran, and even Egypt under President Anwar Sadat demonstrated that once regional powers intensified cooperation with the West, Moscow could not regard them as trustful partners. Zero-sum game optics made Soviet decision-makers consider 'swing' regional powers to be subordinate to American imperialism. Such a perception ruled out any chance for diffusing tensions with potential or former allies.

The Israel-Palestinian conflict touched both ideological and pragmatic calculations of Soviet elites. Progressive and anticolonial Soviet discourse could not approve of Israeli actions with regard to Palestinian people. This resulted in the Soviet-Arab defense cooperation and Soviet support during Arab-Israeli wars with the USSR becoming the most significant critic of Israel in the international arena. Moreover, bipolar perception of the world contributed to further cementing of the Soviet stance in the conflict. Moscow also could not keep a blind eye on Tel-Aviv's close ties with Washington.

Finally, the proper analysis of political Islam was constrained by the Soviet ideological framework where the *Ulema* were regarded as 'reactionary forces' serving the local bourgeoisie and, consequently, American imperialism. Posturing Islamists as the antithesis to 'progressive political forces,' the USSR's policymakers could not predict that rising religious fundamentalism had been the most vital ideological platform for the region.⁹ In effect, this tendency proved the crisis of

⁹Vladimir G. Baranovsky, Vitaly V. Naumkin, "The Middle East in the Changing Global Context: The Key Trends of Centennial Development," *World Economy and International Relations* 62, no. 3 (2018): 17. <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2018-62-3-5-19>

Gleb G. Makarevich

Soviet-like development scheme and Western-oriented capitalist growth model – both strategies did not fully succeed in the Middle Eastern political economy, which made regional actors pursue some ‘third way’ suiting local realities.

Nonetheless, the complex history of Soviet presence in the Middle East gives Russia a rich legacy of interaction with global and regional powers regarding all issues on the agenda. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow's presence in the region dramatically decreased, but a later gradual comeback saw some familiar patterns.

In Search of an Adequate Role

A perceptible increase in Russia's influence in the Middle East can be observed particularly in the last decade, following the end of the Cold War. Russia lost a large amount of political and economic resources to leverage on the Middle East politics as the US began to dominate in the region.¹⁰ However, before 2022, the Russian elites managed to increase their influence through ‘security export.’¹¹ It is worth mentioning that Moscow and regional powers built their relations based on equal partnership. None of the partners in the Middle East ever condemned Russia for unilateral interference in domestic affairs. Just the opposite, all the activities were conducted in line with the aspirations of regional governments.

Russia has been applying three types of instruments to increase its influence in the Middle East: military heft and defense cooperation (military-technical cooperation); economic collaboration (oil, agricultural products, and nuclear energy); and political venues for dialogue (‘Astana

¹⁰ Oleg A. Kolobov, “Contemporary Russian Policy in The Middle East: Strategic Goals and Tactic Actions,” *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 55, no. 4 (2017): 92. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2017-4-55-83-98>

¹¹ Irina D. Zvyagelskaya, Vasiliy A. Kuznetsov, and Vitaliy V. Naumkin, “*Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony*,” (Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, 2018), 26.

format', 'Middle East Quartet').¹² Moreover, there exists an information component to Russian foreign policy in the Middle East too. Its main drivers are the TV channels 'Russia Today Arabic,' and the radio station 'Sputnik.'¹³

Politically, the Israel-Palestinian conflict still determines the whole Middle Eastern agenda and Moscow still considers this matter to be a cornerstone of its foreign policy in the region. However, in contrast to Soviet foreign policy, a new variable of rapprochement between Moscow and Tel-Aviv emerged in the early 1990s. The complex history of Russia-Israel relations can be explained through the traditional pro-Arab and pro-Palestinian course of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. However, there were also positive factors contributing to constructive and substantive political dialogue. For example, one could list the presence of the 'Russian street' (Russian-speaking diaspora) in Israel, close ties between Moscow and Tel-Aviv in the economic (information technology), cultural, public and other spheres of interaction.

Before 2022, there was one stumbling block in these relations. Russia supported the official Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad. It was further complicated by Russia's close ties with Iran, whose activities Israel considers to be the main threat to its national security.¹⁴ Russia, however, was wary of Israel's role as a strategic ally of the US in the Middle East and Israel's constant calls for the overthrow of the 'Bashar al-Assad's regime.' Nevertheless, Moscow and Tel-Aviv have managed to escape a tough conflict. This achievement alone, from our

¹² Irina D. Zvyagelskaya, Nikolay Yu. Surkov, "*Russian Policy in the Middle East: Dividends and Costs of the Big Game*," (Moscow: *Russian International Affairs Council*, 2019), 10-18.

¹³ Ziad Shahoud, "Use of Information Influence Tools on Arabic-Speaking Audience in the Foreign Policy of Russia," *Asia and Africa Today* no. 6 (2019): 50. DOI: 10.31857/S032150750005165-3

¹⁴ Hasan R. Jabbarinasir, "Iran and Israel in the Foreign Policy of Russia: Restrictions on the Way of Cooperation," *Comparative Politics Russia* 11, no. 1 (2020): 55-62. <https://doi.org/10.24411/2221-3279-2020-10004>

Gleb G. Makarevich

perspective, could be regarded as a great success of Russian foreign policy in the region.

At the same time, Russia never ignored the Palestinian cause. Its position on the issue has always been in line with the resolutions of the UN Security Council and the stances of most Middle Eastern nations, which irritated both Israel and the US. However, in the early 2000s, Russia and the European Union came up with the initiative to create a 'Middle East Quartet' with the European Union, Russia, the US and the UN as its members, whose activities were supposed to help in resolving the Palestinian issue. Eventually the Middle East Quartet in 2002, produced the project called 'The Road Map for Peace,' adopted by both the Palestinians and Israel.

However, the implementation of the roadmap was complicated by Israel's reluctance to make concessions on its settlements on the West Bank, the refusal to make contact with Hamas, which controlled the territory of the Gaza Strip, and the split within the Palestinian National Authority itself, because it failed to reach consensus on the working model for fostering relations with Israel.¹⁵ After the 'Arab Spring,' the Palestinian issue in the Middle East seemed to have lost much of its importance due to emerging crises (ISIS activities in Syria and Iraq, war in Yemen)¹⁶ with Russia's efforts to resolve the Palestinian issue having brought no expected results. Economically, a crucial factor limiting Moscow's Middle Eastern policy has been Russia's inability to invest as much economic resources as it did during the Soviet era. It still maintains traditional ties in terms of defense cooperation with Algeria, Egypt, and Syria. Russia also aspires to attain the role of a responsible agriculture supplier.

¹⁵ Alexander V. Krylov, *The Main Areas of Work of the Office of the Quartet's Special Representative for the Middle East Settlement Tony Blair in Jerusalem* (Moscow: MGIMO-University, 2009), 3-8.

¹⁶ Irina D. Zvyagelskaya, Tatiana I. Tyukaeva, "The Palestinian problem in the context of evolving balance of power," *Pathways to Peace and Security* 61, no. 2 (2021): 82. <https://doi.org/10.20542/2307-1494-2021-2-80-95>

All these activities, from the Russian economic elites' perspective, shall be based on mutual benefit. It implies maintaining relations with old friends coupled with searching for new partners and exploring new spheres of cooperation. These goals are manifested in Russia's increased interest in collaborating with the Gulf States.

This tendency could be exemplified by relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia which are characterised by their complex history explained by rarely coinciding political interests. For instance, regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabian support of the Islamic groups in the North Caucasus taking place in the 90s, and consecutive claims by Saudi Arabia against the official Syrian government headed by Bashar al-Assad.¹⁷ Similarly, in the economic field, regular disagreements on issues relating to global energy markets were often noticed.

Moscow and Riyadh have never scuttled dialogue and remained engaged on common grounds. They also strived to create new bilateral forums apart from using existing multilateral platforms to resolve problematic political issues.¹⁸ Both also developed contacts in the sphere of energy by increasing the number of signed contracts between Russian leading energy companies and Saudi Aramco serve as remarkable examples.¹⁹

Finally, before 2022, security served as the single most significant field providing Moscow authority and prestige in the region. Russia's military

¹⁷ Grigoriy G. Kosach, Elena S. Melkumyan, Alexander O. Filonik, "Russian-Saudian Political Interaction," *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 55, no. 4 (2017):128-130. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2017-4-55-127-138>

¹⁸ Elena S. Melkumyan, Grigoriy G. Kosach., Tatyana V. Nosenko, "Russia in the Foreign Policy Priorities of the Council of Cooperation of the Arabian Gulf States after Events of the 'Arab Spring'," *MGIMO Review of International Relations* 55, no. 4 (2017):145-148. <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2017-4-55-139-153>

¹⁹ Tatyana A. Shmeleva, "Russian Oil and Gas Companies in the middle East and North Africa: Interests, Projects and Prospects," Russian International Affairs Council, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiyskie-neftegazovye-kompanii-na-blizhnem-vostoke-i-v-severnoy-afrike-interesy-proekty-i-perspekt/>

Gleb G. Makarevich

operation in Syria may be treated as the main breakthrough of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East over the past 30 years. Russia managed to fully demonstrate its capabilities in the field of security by confronting terrorist groups by supporting the Syrian Army operation to defeat ISIS and other extremist organisations. Russia also managed to prevent the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad by the armed opposition, supported by the US and Saudi Arabia, and establish cooperation with Iran and Türkiye within the ‘Astana format.’ As a result, Moscow contributed towards weakening terrorism in the Middle East, enabling all the parties involved to succeed in avoiding further escalation of the conflict on the border of Syria and Türkiye, temporarily diffusing the Kurdish issue and preventing direct Israeli interference in the Syrian conflict.²⁰

Russia’s proactive foreign policy in the Middle East demonstrated Moscow’s eagerness for increased involvement in regional and global affairs. In other words, it substantiated the claims to be a pillar of a future polycentric world. After 2022, Russian elites saw a chance to invoke this experience of operating in a rapidly changing environment and reconsider the grand strategy. No wonder, conceptual rethinking applied to the Middle East as well.

Civilisational Shift?

To understand changes in Russia’s Middle Eastern policy, one shall reflect upon the reasons triggering the overall reorientation of Moscow’s grand strategy in 2022. Two crucial factors laid out the fundamentals for intensifying conflict in Ukraine and, consequently, the overall shift in the Russian elites’ perception of the world.

²⁰ Grigory V. Lukyanov, “Russia’s Military Presence and Security Policy in the Middle East after the Start of the Military Operation in Syria,” *Russian International Affairs Council*, accessed July 12, 2024, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/voennoe-prisutstvie-i-politika-bezopasnosti-rossii-na-blizhnem-vostoke-posle-nachala-voennoy-operats/>

Globally, it is the failure of NATO led by the US on one side with Russia on another to work out new fundamentals for European security.²¹ Unfortunately, its architecture has been under erosion during the last decades, leading to its eventual dismantling. Moscow tried to save it, demanding guarantees of security in December 2021, namely, banning further expansion of NATO, rolling back the military infrastructure of NATO to the level that existed in 1997, and neutrality of Ukraine. The parties failed to reach any substantial agreement and froze the negotiation process, which made Moscow regard the whole process as futile.

Regionally, the Russian leadership lost confidence in the incumbent Ukrainian elites' determination to resolve the then-frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine and bring peace to Donbass. While campaigning in 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskiy promised to put an end to the civil war at any cost, but strictly in a peaceful way. However, being under tough pressure from far-right political forces in Ukraine, Zelensky showed little willingness to comply with the Minsk Agreements (under which Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics were to become integral parts of Ukraine with broad autonomy).²² That is why the Russian establishment eventually expected no Ukrainian input into the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Shuttle diplomacy conducted by major EU leaders, Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz, brought no tangible results except 'continuity of dialogue.' This mantra seems to have exasperated the Russian leadership, making it launch a military campaign to resolve all the above-mentioned issues.²³

²¹ Andrei V. Zagorskii, *Russia in the European Security Order* (Moscow: IMEMO, 2017), p. 16. DOI 10.20542/978-5-9535-0524-6

²² Robin Dyxon, Natalie Grivnyak, "Ukraine's Zelensky Wants to End a War in the East. His Problem: No One Agrees How to Do It," *The Washington Post*, March 19, 2020, accessed July 17, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraines-zelensky-wants-to-end-a-war-in-the-east-his-problem-no-one-agrees-how-to-do-it/2020/03/19/ae653cbc-6399-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html

²³ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Policies toward Ukraine: The Context, Evolution, and Outlook," *IPRI Journal XXII* no. 2 (2022): 37-39, <https://doi.org/10.31945/iprij.220202>.

Gleb G. Makarevich

Consequently, Moscow had to usher in a long-term overt confrontation with the West, facing unprecedented economic pressure and enjoying practically frozen political dialogue with the US and Europe. In this context, Russian elites had to reconsider their perception of the world through a new framework that could explain the changing political dynamics. That was the moment when the civilisational approach seemed to be of the most use.

Alongside Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and Samuel Huntington, prominent students at the civilisational school of thought, Russian scholars and policymakers also refer to Nikolay Danilevsky, the first to argue that Russia and Europe are different in terms of cultural and political behaviour, which makes one consider Russia as a distinct and self-sufficient political actor in the international arena.²⁴

This idea has finally been embodying the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, released recently, in March 2023. The document called Russia a ‘unique country-civilisation.’²⁵ Moreover, it invokes such civilisational definitions including Eurasia; Anglo-Saxon states, and the Islamic world. The latter is treated as another ‘independent center within a polycentric world’ that is ‘friendly’ to Russia.

The present document lays a comparative premium on the OIC organisation as well as its Member States as crucial, with the Middle East as a spatial unit being on the sidelines of the discourse. However, it is the Middle Eastern nations and organisations that Russian strategists list as their priorities. For instance, Iran (tremendous rise in ties with Russia after

²⁴ Nikolay Ya. Danilevsky, “*Russia and Europe: The Slavic World’s Political and Cultural Relations with the Germanic-Roman West*,” (Saint Petersburg: Public Good Publishing House, 1871), p. 59-69.

²⁵ *The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023, accessed July 22, 2024, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab200074d6d47260531b23ba7aafdec349c576542d0db480d1252334752b5ba3cb70e60829a7de581430006101d5d50e22551576d9d91c969833833b5690be7d14e5238ca98702e6acddf3b21f6553f43b14f50fc43c8324a7bf38

2022), Syria, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the League of Arab States (LAS), and the GCC are some of the important countries prioritised in its relations. Moreover, the document also mentions Israel while referring to Russia's resolve to reconcile differences and normalise relations between the parties concerned.²⁶ However, it does not cover any Islamic state outside the traditional borders of the Middle East.

The contradiction is evident. The Russian elites, in fact, still perceive the Middle East geographically vital rather than civilisational affiliation. Paradoxically, this could be explained by their long-term involvement in the regional affairs. The Russian strategists enjoy the rich legacy of dealing with all the Middle Eastern issues as well as interaction with all the stakeholders. That is why they have a well-structured vision of the Middle East as a traditional regional complex with no civilisational shift in their perception at sight.

Watching how Moscow reacted to regional developments after 2022, we observe a proper continuation of its strategic culture. For instance, Russia condemned Hamas actions against Israel on October 7, 2023, but considered Tel-Aviv's response inadequate and was hopeless for future reconciliation and settling the issue.²⁷ Such assessments provoked further deterioration of ties with Israel. They are already extremely fragile after the intensification of the Ukraine crisis but they were coherent if we take into account Russian strategic culture.

Similarly, the Russian strategy of balancing between Iran and the Gulf nations proved its credibility, following the reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh, brokered by Beijing.²⁸ This development was similar to Moscow's efforts to increase economic collaboration with Iran and the

²⁶ Nikolay Ya. Danilevsky, *Russia and Europe: The Slavic ...*

²⁷ "Russia Condemns Hamas Actions on October 7, but Cannot Turn a Blind Eye to Gaza Shelling," *Russian News Agency TASS*, October 24, 2023, accessed July 22, 2024. <https://tass.com/politics/1695759>.

²⁸ "Russia, China Hail Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Iran — Statement," *Russian News Agency TASS*, March 21, 2023, accessed July 22, 2024. <https://tass.com/world/1592465>.

Gleb G. Makarevich

Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It significantly contributed to hedging respective political risks.

The question arises: is there any manifestation of a civilisational shift in the Russian foreign policy planning with regard to the Middle East? So far, it remains to be seen. However, it can be argued that the civilisational approach could provide Russia with the opportunity to improve its relations with other crucial members of the Islamic world, such as Pakistan. According to Russia, intensifying ties with the Islamic nation outside traditional borders of the Middle East would bring more substance to the updated Concept of the Foreign Policy. They can prove a civilisational shift in Russian foreign policy.

Better Late than Never

Before dwelling into Russia-Pakistan relations, it is pertinent to establish whether Pakistan belongs to the Middle East or South Asia? Some prominent Russian experts view Pakistan as a ‘border state’ between the two regions. Historically, culturally, ethnically, and linguistically, Pakistan has been closer to South Asia, but politically, economically, and its civilisational persona, Islamabad tends to be a part of the Middle East.²⁹ One must also agree with this Pakistan’s struggle for the Palestinian cause, and its growing cooperation with the Gulf States in the security field such as maritime cooperation. Economically also Pakistan’s ties with the Gulf countries in the field of energy and migration are pronounced.

Nevertheless, Russian elites still consider Pakistan to be a South Asian state. Diplomatically, Pakistan falls into the orbit of the Second Asian Department (2AD) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which concentrates mostly on the subcontinent issues.³⁰ Similarly, the Concept also does not

²⁹ Vyacheslav Y. Belokrenitsky, “Does Pakistan Belong to South Asia?” *Vestnik Instituta vostokovedenija RAN* no. 4 (2023): 230-234. DOI: 10.31696/2618-7302-2023-4-222-236

³⁰ *Structural Diagram of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia*, The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, accessed July 25, 2024, https://mid.ru/en/about/structure/central_office/

mention Pakistan while describing the Islamic world (in other words, the Middle East). At the same time, Russian President Vladimir Putin did name Pakistan in his Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation³¹ while listing crucial partners along with India, Iran, and the Middle Eastern nations.³²

In this context, we could assume that the Russian elites still did not find a proper place for Pakistan in their grand strategy. We argue that leaving behind former perceptions could be a first step towards further improvement of Russia-Pakistan relations. Such conceptual rethinking could be very productive, given the complex history of Russia-Pakistan ties.

Pakistan has long been on the sidelines of Russia's foreign policy agenda as it had been traditionally inclined towards the US and China while Moscow forged a strategic partnership with New Delhi. Different views on the Afghan issue in the 1980s and 1990s along with the general rise of radical Islamism also hampered bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Consequently, Russia-Pakistan relations remained scuttled due to the Cold War mindset and regional security dilemmas.³³ The situation tends to change with the emerging regional politics.

Russian experts consider 2014 a turning point in Russia-Pakistan relations.³⁴ As the ties with the West were rapidly deteriorating after the emergence of the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow was willing to diversify its contacts and intensify cooperation with all possible partners. As a result,

³¹ Constitutionally, the annual Address is expected to set strategic targets and priorities for Russian socio-economic development and national security.

³² *The President's Address to the Federal Assembly*, the President of the Russian Federation, accessed July 25, 2024, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>

³³ Vyacheslav Y. Belokrenitsky, "Main Milestones and Stages in the Development of Russia-Pakistan Relations," *Vestnik Instituta vostokovedenija RAN* no. 1 (2024): 185. DOI: 10.31696/2618-7302-2024-1-175-186

³⁴ Natalia A. Zamaraeva, "Russia in Pakistan's Foreign Policy (2022-2023)," *Vestnik Instituta vostokovedenija RAN* no. 1 (2024): 261. DOI: 10.31696/2618-7302-2024-1-260-270

Gleb G. Makarevich

in less than ten years, bilateral trade between Russia and Pakistan has grown two-and-a-half times. The parties reached an agreement on the construction of the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline from Karachi to Lahore, intended to strengthen Pakistan's energy security and diversify Russia's energy ties.

At multilateral platforms, both Russia and Pakistan share similar positions on most global issues. Both countries insist on building a multipolar world, strengthening global institutions, and overcoming disproportions in socio-economic development. The key track of interaction at the regional level is the settlement of the situation in Afghanistan which bodes on more specific and substantive details. Russia is trying to build relations with the new government in Kabul and successfully cooperates with Pakistan and China on the Afghan issue.

Nonetheless, these achievements, from our perspective, could be labelled as a real breakthrough in bilateral relations. The parties seem to have reached a 'glass ceiling' even in most successful sectors. Although bilateral trade sees constant growth, it lacks capital goods³⁵ that could bring strategic substance to economic relations, the gas pipeline project seems to be frozen, and no significant political progress in Afghanistan is also in sight.

Economically, the situation is further aggravated by structural factors such as the poor performance of Pakistan's economy³⁶ and Russian unwillingness to invest in projects without guaranteed profit. Politically, India dominates in the Russian South Asian policy as a time-tested friend and a privileged strategic partner, demanding the full attention of the Russian elites. As a result, any progress in Russia-Pakistan relations is

³⁵ Natalia V. Galistcheva, "Economic Relations between Russia and Pakistan: Main Problems and Perspectives," SSRN, accessed July 25, 2024, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4129206

³⁶ Vyacheslav Y. Belokrenitsky, "Pakistan's Economy – Reasons and Consequences of Slow-Motion Growth," *World Economy and International Relations* 68 no. 3 (2024): 72-73. <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2024-68-3-69-78> EDN: ZPOIUIJ

perceived by New Delhi as a threat to its exclusive relations with Moscow.

This combination of structural factors can be hardly mastered if Russia and Pakistan continue to be straitjacketed in the South Asian agenda. Moscow will not reassess its position on regional issues with New Delhi. It has always been a premium due to historical, strategic, political, and economic factors. Thus, Russian and Pakistani elites could think about abandoning old frameworks and recalibrating their ties on the Middle Eastern ground.

Firstly, the parties could take advantage of their cordial ties with the Gulf States. Launching trilateral or multilateral economic projects could mitigate the lack of capital and hedge the risks related to non-economic constraints. Secondly, Moscow and Islamabad could combine their efforts in diffusing regional tensions and advocate for further rapprochement between the Gulf and Iran. A fair settlement of the Palestinian issue could also be more effectively promoted. Thirdly, Russia and Pakistan could further cooperate in those security domains where their traditional counterparts would be less concerned, such as combating non-traditional security threats in the Western Indian Ocean.

All these activities in three respective domains (economics, politics, and security) shall not trigger their respective strategic partners, paving the way for actual recalibration of Russia-Pakistan relations, formerly straitjacketed in old frameworks. It is time for Moscow and Islamabad to free themselves from path dependence.

Conclusion

As the world is in great turbulence, Russian strategy in the Middle East seems consistent and coherent. Retrospectively, Moscow always advocated for peace and development in the region and a fairer settlement of all outstanding issues.

Gleb G. Makarevich

Russian elites also demonstrated constructive flexibility to overcome ideological constraints such as the Cold War mindset and attitude towards political Islam. At the same time, their traditional position on the most crucial regional issues did not see significant reassessment. On the contrary, Moscow continued supporting the Palestinians although Russia-Israel relations have been on the rise as well since long. Abandoning old ideological bias might have effectively contributed to resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict, but, unfortunately, even such a conducive environment did not produce any settlement due to other structural factors.

The year 2022 brought dramatic changes to the Russian grand strategy. Paradoxically, a Middle Eastern policy hardly saw any alterations notwithstanding the rise of the civilisational approach. Today Russian elites are more likely to have a well-structured vision of the Middle East as a traditional regional complex with no civilisational shift in their perception at sight.

Hence, we suppose that the Russian civilisational shift in its Middle Eastern policy could manifest itself by involving other significant actors of the Islamic world. Reaching out to the states outside the traditional borders of the region and their further involvement in the regional affairs would in effect reflect Russian determination to develop ties with the whole Islamic world.

The first actor on this list could be Pakistan. Russia-Pakistan ties have seen significant improvement in the recent decade, but now the parties seem to approach the limits of further collaboration. From our perspective, these limits are attributed to the concentration on the South Asian agenda, especially in the fields of politics and security.

Reorientation towards the Middle Eastern agenda could free Russia and Pakistan from traditional behavioural patterns and give impetus to their relations in economics, politics, and security without deteriorating ties with their strategic partners. ■

