

## **Russian Military Forum: Russia's role in the Middle East – Informed by a greater strategy?**

A DISCUSSION OF RUSSIA'S RISING INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST HOSTED BY THE CENTER FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES (CSIS)

**The Russian Military Forum is a series of meetings that discuss Russia's military foreign policy objectives and strategies. The second panel of the series, held on September 25, 2015, focused on Russia's increasing role in the Middle East. Just before Russia decided to actively intervene in Syria on September 30, long-time Russia experts Michael Kofman, Stephen Blank, and Anna Borshchevskaya were invited to shed light on Russia's foreign policy strategy, also discussing the implications of the Russian policy for the Middle East, as well as for the U.S. in general.**

Following a period of exclusion, Russia has exploited change in the Middle East, enhancing its relations with various states.

Among others, Russia supplied arms to the Syrian government and moved weaponry and troops to Latakia, an Assad stronghold. However, speaking at the Russian Military Forum, Michael Kofman laid down that the country has not pursued a larger strategy.

Instead, he suggested that Russia was merely acting opportunistically by expanding her military presence and endorsing military and economic deals. Conversely, Stephen Blank argued that Russia indeed pursued a greater strategy. Together with Anna Borshchevskaya, the Senior Fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council contended that any move of Russia is informed by its quest to assume a role versus the U.S. comparable to that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

### Russia's strategy

Elaborating on Russia's long-term aims, Blank explained that the primary aim of Russia is to fill the power-vacuum left by the dismantling of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the conflict in Syria can be

understood as a border issue for Russia. Consequently, Russia has a vital interest in stabilizing the region by intervening actively in the conflict. Secondly, Blank contended, that Russia seeks to prevent the U.S. from obtaining a superior position in the region, since Russia generally sees the U.S. as a threat. Russia also perceives the U.S.'s incompetent actions and strategy as a cause of protracted wars. Thus, Russia has a vital interest in intervening in Syria more proactively than the U.S. Finally, Blank argues that a minor aim of Russia is to prevent terrorists from returning to Russia's borders. To achieve these aims, Russia needs to have good relations with the Middle East and accordingly will step in where the U.S. loses ground. While Blank did not foresee the airstrikes that Russia carried out from September 30, he explained that a long-running military presence of Russia in Syria was to be expected.

Alternatively, Michael Kofman illustrated that Russia does not possess a greater strategy and that it is in fact merely acting upon an opportunity. He argued that Russia's rising influence is related to the fact that since the Arab Spring, Russia is easier to align with than the West, and that the countries of the Middle East now are in a position to neglect an alliance with the U.S. and NATO. Similarly, Russia pursues military and economic deals from which the Middle Eastern countries profit. Benefiting as well from the shift of alliances, Russia expands its military presence in the region. Consequently, Russia and the Middle Eastern countries are developing a transactional relationship. Kofman concluded that these factors do not originate from a unified strategy. Despite deviating from Blank in his basic assumptions, Kofman came to a simi-

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lar conclusion: That Russia is reluctant to wage a war in Syria and that it instead will seek to install a greater presence on the ground.

#### Implications for the Middle East

After analyzing the reasons for Russia's increased role in the Middle East, the experts elaborated on the development's implications for the region. The panelists agreed that the deals sought by Russia are more attractive to the region than all-encompassing alliances. Consequently, an inflow of arms and weaponry was to be expected. Furthermore, the Russian position towards Assad was discussed. Here, it was concluded that Russia would support Assad and that a change of regime was not to be expected under these circumstances. What the experts were reluctant to address, however, is whether Russia and the U.S. could and would combine their efforts to promote stability in the region, and how the diverging positions concerning Assad would influence such a discussion. Kofman added that such a collaboration was not pertinent as Russia apparently lacked the will to more actively take sides in the conflict. Which, according to him, was illustrated by the fact that Russia did not do so.

#### Implications for the U.S.

Finally, the panelists discussed the implications of Russia's policies for the U.S. Blank argued that the U.S. needed to take Russia's firepower seriously. The experts called for the U.S. to develop a strategy in order to hold its own against Russia. Solving the conflict in the Middle East and stabilizing the region were not mentioned in this respect. Different than the U.S., Borshchevskaya explained that Russia was respected in the region for at least sticking to its position and that it was testing the U.S. how far it could go within that position.

The forum concluded with a discussion of the consequences of a possible military intervention by Russia in Syria. Even though the experts had called for the U.S. to more actively engage in the conflict, they agreed that a military intervention by Russia would

be to Russia's disadvantage. Whereas Borshchevskaya concluded that such a move would most likely create a frozen conflict, Blank pointed to the possible negative consequences for Russia, such as the possibility of losing the war in Syria. Finally, Kofman emphasized that Russia would lose face in the U.S. following a military intervention in Syria. Nevertheless, he pondered that if such a move went wrong, Russia would lose the war and the U.S. would be spared of another failed intervention. Which of these predictions will come true remains to be seen in the coming weeks and months.