

EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

Russian foreign policy demonstrates continuity and change. The Russian Federation has acted in several scenarios and, since 2000, with Vladimir Putin, its main objective has been to consolidate the status of the Russian Federation as a great power, in order to return to the glorious Soviet era. Maximising power and the pursuit of internal security are essential, because there is an international system in permanent anarchy.

Putin's third term was marked by the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of the Crimea, which contributed to a historical turning point in Russian foreign policy. Western sanctions due to the occupation of Crimea and military interference in eastern Ukraine have opened up a period of greater rivalry between Moscow and Washington, as well as the need for Russia to diversify its relations with emerging economies such as Iran and Turkey. This study finds out that Ankara and Tehran have a historical relationship with Moscow, despite some episodes and divergent positions that at certain moments have harmed relations. The issue of Syria, the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, agreements on oil and natural gas and relations with the Kurdish people are some of the key issues in the more or less friendly relations of the Kremlin with Ankara and Tehran. The state of Russian foreign policy and Russia's relations with regional actors in the Middle East (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Kurds) as well as the challenges Vladimir Putin's Russia has to face in the region are addressed.

Keywords

Foreign policy; Realism; Revisionism; Russian Federation; Middle East

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Introduction

The Russian Federation has acted in several scenarios and, since the political rise of Vladimir Putin, its main objective has been to consolidate the status of great power to return to the glorious Soviet era. The preference for a multipolar world order based on sovereignty and non-interference in countries' internal affairs has been constantly present in official foreign policy documents and discourses. The independence recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia or the annexations of Crimea and Sevastopol's naval base constitute a direct violation of those sovereign principles and territorial integrity. The Russian intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine (between February and September 2014), using coercion and force to take over and destabilise the territories of a neighbouring state, is a challenge to the post-Cold War European regional order. The relationship with the West has changed significantly. Moscow's hard policies there and the challenge to Washington have made Russia more credible in the Middle East. With Putin, the war in Chechnya and the Russian involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh, are explained by the need to secure state cohesion, expand its influence and protect itself against Western advances.

The key objectives of this study are: to learn about the evolution of Russian foreign policy, especially since 2000, and the state of Moscow's relationship with the Kurds, Ankara and Tehran. In the first section of this article, some of the different Russian foreign policy orientations are identified as well as their evolution along with the presidents who have been in the Kremlin since the end of the Cold War, assessing the impact of the war with Georgia (2008) and the Ukraine crisis (2014) in Russian foreign policy. The second section analyses Russia's relations with Iran and Turkey, the evolution of this relationship and its positioning in the Middle East regarding the Kurdish problem. Finally, the interrelations between Moscow, Ankara, Tehran, and the Kurds, the influence of the Kurdish issue on the Tehran-Ankara Axis and Russian challenges in the geopolitical chess of the Middle East are addressed. This article is based on academic literature, official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Kremlin, Russia and Middle East media. Support from Professors Mark N. Katz, Roy Allison and Licínia Simão as well as José Milhazes and José Manuel Félix Ribeiro is appreciated.

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1. Russian Foreign Policy: brief evolution

The role of the leaders² was always fundamental in the formulation and decision-making process of foreign policy in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)³ as well as in post-Soviet Russia, due to the strength of centralism and the characteristic authoritarian features of the Soviet system. Despite the constitution of a new state, the centralisation of political power, which in post-Soviet Russia has accentuated a strong personalisation of power, has lived on (Freire, 2014, pp. 16-17). This was a constant element of the Czarist Empire of the USSR and is still present today in Russia. This centralisation of power was (re)confirmed with the presidential election of Vladimir Putin for the third term (2012).

Czarist Russia and the USSR represent centuries of centralised governance in which the defining lines of democracy, in a broad understanding of the concept – including not only popular participation in electoral acts, but also representativeness, individual rights and freedoms issues – were never present (Freire, 2014, p. 31).

Mikhail Gorbachev is the central figure in the transformation of the USSR after the disenchantment with the governance of Leonid Brezhnev and the short leadership of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko (1982-1985). Internally, he put faith in a reformist course and externally he showed willingness to approach the West and to democratically open itself to the East.

In Russia's⁴ transition, the foreign policy reflected the constraints that Russian policies faced internally. General discontent regarding the transition process then initiated by Gorbachev⁵ contributed to Boris Yeltsin's victory in the 1991 presidential election. The first Russian president, Yeltsin, tried to fully integrate the country by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and forging a direct alliance with the US (Trenin, 2014, p.9). But quickly the policy of opening up to the exterior and modernising gave rise to centralising and controlling tendencies.

Vladimir Putin saw Russia as a great power and sought Western recognition⁶, unlike Gorbachev and Kozyrev, demonstrating his desire for domestic affirmation and to stand out in global affairs.

After the announced exit of Yeltsin, 2000 was a turning point and marked the rise of Vladimir Putin. By 2008,⁷ Putin, through his policies based on a well-defined multi-sectoral (2003-2004) presupposition, managed to introduce greater coherence to foreign policy (Freire, 2014, p. 34). Putin defined his foreign policy by adopting new documents that referred to changes, for example, in the concept of foreign policy. The 2000 Concept,

² The leaders as well as the type of leadership shaped the way in which foreign policy is formulated and the behaviour of states within the international political scenario.

³ On 25th December 1991 the USSR was officially extinguished. Fifteen new republics emerged on the world map, with a clear focus on the Russian Federation. The transition process initiated presupposed a new historical alignment and changes in the post-Soviet foreign policy due to the end of the Cold War, geographic redefinition and the new socio-economic politics.

⁴ Throughout this article, the terms "Russia", "Russian Federation", "Moscow" and "Kremlin" are used at random in reference to the same country.

⁵ In the last years as a Soviet leader, Moscow had hoped for a "common European home" and joint global leadership with the US, but these notions proved to be illusions.

⁶ Russia has, historically, sought Western recognition.

⁷ Dmitri Medvedev became president in 2008. After serving as prime minister, Putin assumed another presidential term.



for example, criticised the tendency to establish a unipolar world structure, whilst that of 2008 reinforced that unilateral action destabilises international situations (Light & Cadier, 2015, p.16). The guidelines of the Russian foreign policy, in the context of the end of bipolarity, were characterised by multi-sectorality – identifying concrete areas of action⁸ – and multipolar order⁹ – in a discourse very centred on the exercise of counterbalance to American hegemony. Putin instilled a "new realism" into Russian foreign policy (Freire, 2014, p.33) – which translates into a combination of a realist and traditional view of national interest and the pursuit of it in the international system, seeking to establish a genuinely equilateral dynamic of mutual advantage in the Russian integration in European and global structures, in the projection of Russian power and influence in the system – along with his affirmative position based on a stable internal context and economic growth. These elements support the search for recognition as well as legitimacy in regional and global policies. The foreign policy of revitalising the great power is the element that makes Putin popular in Russia (Trenin, 2016, p.2).

Generally, the impact of a leader's personal characteristics on foreign policy increases when his or her own authority and legitimacy are accepted by the population, or when they are protected from ample public criticism in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes (Freire & Vinha, 2015, p.36). Russian foreign policy is primarily the responsibility of the president, who is in charge of defining the basic lines of action underlying the position of the Russian Federation in international affairs (Freire, 2014, p.41). Thus, Putin designs, shapes and executes foreign policy decisions¹⁰ with the support of the security community.¹¹ These decisions are based on his interpretation of national interest and also on the philosophical opinions about what is right and what is wrong (Light & Cadier, 2015, p.34). Therefore, the decision-making process in foreign policy is conditioned by external, domestic and psychological factors (Freire & Vinha, 2015, p. 58).

After 2007, the Russian foreign policy entered the stage of neo-revisionism¹² (Sakwa, 2014, 30) . From a status quo state, Russia has become a distinctive type of neo-revisionist power, claiming to be a "norm-enforcer" and not just a "norm-taker" (Sakwa, 2014, 31). The election of Dmitry Medvedev as Russian president in March 2008 meant continuity of the Russian foreign policy, following the tendency of reinforcing the lines of assertive pragmatic policy, which characterises Putin's legacy. He combined growth resulting from the use of energy resources with a new foreign policy vector based on domestic modernisation (liberalism), building "modernisation alliances" aimed at various aspects, from leading scientific research to the formation of the individual (Tsygankov, 2016) (Freire, 2014, p.35).

⁸ Since 2000, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has been defined as a foremost area of action for Moscow, in which priority is given to the development of good relationships with neighbouring states and the strategic partnership. The policies of Putin and Medvedev for the CIS have developed in the line of reaffirmation of the Russian influence in the area.

⁹ In the post-2008 Russia understands the international order as multipolar and considers itself an important actor. The option for multipolarity is one of the lines of rupture with the Soviet past and is justified by the inability of the Russian Federation to be seen as a hegemonic power. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Russia's definition of multipolarity has deepened.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation develops general foreign policy strategy, presents relevant proposals to the president and implements the foreign policy of the Russian Federation. It also coordinates the foreign policy activities of the federal executive bodies and international cooperation in accordance with the Executive Order of the Russian Federation No. 1478 of 8th November 2011 on the role of the foreign policy coordination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹¹ The world view of the Security Council of the Russian Federation presents international relations in terms of an endless struggle for domination and influence among some powerful countries.

¹² Its essence is the attempt to ensure the universal application of international standards.



We must be more effective in using foreign policy instruments specifically for the pursuit of national goals, to modernise our Country, economy, social life and, to some extent, the political system, in order to solve the various challenges that our society faces. (Tsygankov, 2016, p.209)

Thus, by analysing this excerpt – from Medvedev’s speech held at the meeting with the ambassadors and permanent representatives of international organisations on 12th July 2010 – the importance of modernising the domestic economy is highlighted. It was also necessary to develop a policy that would provide conditions for foreign investment in technology that would provide economic development and create the necessary conditions for the development of non-energy areas to overcome Russia’s excessive dependence on energy exports (an economy directly dependent on prices in the international market). The years of Medvedev (2008-2012) as Russian president were not characterised by the attempt to affirm more liberal policies in the economic and social dimensions as several analysts state.

The Russian campaign in Georgia has triggered the most significant crisis in Russian foreign relations with Western countries since the dissolution of the USSR (Allison, 2008, p. 1169). The case of Georgia is paradigmatic in the context of the development of relations and the position of Moscow in the CIS. The five-day war in Georgia in August 2008 corresponded to a policy of reasserting Moscow in the post-Soviet space in the face of Western influence and, above all, before a set of US-led policies and actions, which were considered in Moscow as surpassing a policy of strategic cooperation, having direct implications for national security (Freire & Simão, 2014, p. 92). The Russian intervention in South Ossetia (Georgia) had as its central justification the protection of its nationals (Allison, 2008, pp. 1153-1154, 1167-1169). The Russian response to the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali (capital of South Ossetia) included the temporary occupation of part of Georgia, followed by the recognition of the independence of the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on 26th August 2008 (Sakwa, 2014, p. 40). This was a response to the threat of NATO enlargement. Moscow invaded Georgia driven by a policy of power projection in the post-Soviet area, with the objective of weakening the country, affirming itself in the CIS (vital area), reinforcing the strategy of constraining the presence of US military bases in Eurasia and underlining its recognition in the international system as a great power (Freire, 2015, p. 209). This Russian attitude fits into the most widely used theory to understand the phenomena of international relations – *Realpolitik* or political realism (Burchill, et al., 2013, p. 33). Kenneth N. Waltz, founder of neorealism or structural realism (1979),¹³ advocates that the structure of the international system has created a platform of competition among states seeking security, and because of its anarchic nature, sometimes that structure predisposes that states adopt expansionist and revisionist behaviours (Sousa & Mendes, 2014, p. XXIV). In this perspective, Russia assumes a constant impulse to assert its power and guarantee security (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 11).

¹³ A successful attempt to overcome the approach of classical realism and to develop a more rigorous and neo-economic explanatory model of the structural constraints of the competitive and anarchic system of IR.



Pragmatism was recurrent in Putin and Medvedev's foreign policy statements, and, in practice, perhaps except for the Georgian war, it was the hallmark of their policy before 2014 (Light & Cadier, 2015, p. 18). In 2011, Medvedev finally admitted that Russia's main motivation for sending troops to Georgia had been to avoid its membership in NATO (Allison, 2014, pp. 1269-1270). The result of this military incursion was a slight revisionism, oriented towards the marking of a different *vis-à-vis* position with the West as well as towards the idea of multipolarity and demonstration that its influence in the post-Soviet space remained. (Marques, 2016, p. 46).

Putin returned to the Kremlin¹⁴ for a third term (May 2012) almost immediately after the Arab Spring and in a context of internal decline marked by a new phase of difficulties in relations with the West (Freire, 2015, p. 211). The Ukraine crisis was responsible for some of these difficulties. Since February 2014 the Kremlin had been in a war mode with Putin as the leader (Taussig & Ryan, 2016). It all began when Russia occupied the Crimea in March 2014 to remedy a historical injustice¹⁵ (Allison, 2014, p. 1286). In fact, Putin reacted like this to the events that took place in Kiev, in late 2013 and early 2014, that led to the fall of Viktor Yanukovich from the presidential post when he refused to sign the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement (Milhazes, 2017, p. 24). According to Putin's account of the initial operation of Russia in the Crimea, the NATO factor certainly stands out (Allison, 2014, p. 1273). The main objective was to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO (Sakwa, 2014) and, ideally, to recover it for the Euro-Asian integration project – to compete with the EU – whose main element is the reunification of what Moscow considers "the Russian world" (*Russkii mir*) (Trenin, 2014, p. 6). The intervention in Ukraine appears as an extreme expression of a policy of strategic denial, based on Putin's increasing effort to demarcate the CIS order as a "no-go zone" for NATO (Allison, 2014, p. 1269). The reunification of Crimea and [Russian] actions in Donbass provoked a wave of sanctions (Sakwa, 2014, 113). The Russian policies suffered an immediate and strong negative reaction from the US and its allies (Trenin, 2014, p. 8). The Russian military intervention in Ukraine was based on the constant Western (NATO and EU) advances in Eastern Europe, negatively influencing Russian's perception of them as a threat to Russia's security (Marques, 2016, pp. 8-9). The Putinist challenge to the "sovereign right" of the Atlantic security system along with expanding Russian borders was clear and provoked a response in sanctions and other pressures whose ultimate logic was to change the regime in Russia (Light & Cadier, 2015, p. 69). The Ukraine crisis and the formal annexation of Crimea (18th March, 2014) by the genuinely revisionist Russian state (Sakwa, 2014, p. 116)¹⁶ stand as the turning point in Russian foreign policy and a defining moment in Russian history.

In contrast with 2000, when the EU was at the top of the list, it was now below the BICS (Brazil, India, China and South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and even below relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Light & Cadier, 2015, p. 72). The domestic political goals of protecting the regime from outside influence, of consolidating the regime's internal cohesion and

¹⁴ The centralisation of power, which hinders the democratisation of Russian political structures and the consolidation of a truly pluralist regime, remained with Putin.

¹⁵ In 1954, Nikita Khrushchev took the initiative of transferring the Crimea (and Sevastopol) to Ukrainian jurisdiction. The annexation of the Crimea is Russian revenge for its defeat and post-Cold War victimisation.

¹⁶ Offensive realism assumes that states want to maximise their power and that, especially hegemonic states, must do so through expansionist policies and the imposition of their power and interests on weaker and enemy states.



renewing Putin's support base have affected Russian foreign policy since 2012. These goals also contributed to a stronger nationalist rhetoric in foreign policy discourse, an increasing characterisation of Europe as a threat (confrontational attitude towards the West), an increasing investment in soft power and a renewed attempt to build the post-Soviet space as a buffer zone (Light & Cadier, 2015, p. 213).

2. Asia Orientation: the Greater Middle East

Euroasianism, personified in Putin, acquired clear relevance on the agenda of Russian foreign policy after becoming popular with Yeltsin and with the pragmatic Yevgeny Primakov. The identification of Russia as a Eurasian country reinforced the growing importance that Eastern relations took under Putin's leadership.

Central Asia has been prominent in Russian foreign policy, particularly in strategic issues related to Caspian energy and the importance of regional dynamics in stabilising Afghanistan and Pakistan. Strengthening cooperation, for example, with Iran¹⁷ is central to understand the eastern dimension of Russian foreign policy (Freire, 2011, p. 58). Iran and Turkey, influential regional actors on the border between the Caucasus and the Middle East, have become fundamental to Russian foreign policy in the Middle East (Freire, 2011, p. 208). In the context of the extension of the geographical relations, "Russia intends to develop and deepen relations with Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan" (Freire, 2011, p. 231).

The use of force has once again become an active instrument of Russian foreign policy within and beyond the former Soviet space (Trenin, 2016, p. 3). Even though other actors are sometimes considered, the state is the main actor of power competition due to its ability to mobilise and organise essential community resources to defend itself or to expand militarily (Reis, 2016, p. 6). The intervention in Syria, posing a challenge to Washington, is an example of Putin's unpredictability. Moscow has broken a post-Cold War US monopoly regarding the global use of force and has staged a spectacular geopolitical return in a region that it abandoned in the decaying years of the USSR (Trenin, 2016, p. 1). For Tsygankov (Tsygankov, 2016, 243), Moscow intervened with a desire to resume relations with the West, to support al-Assad (Lund, 2016), to be recognised as a great power, to maintain Syria as its geopolitical and military strength and to take commercial advantages related to arms' sales in Damascus (Berman, 2016).

Nikolay Kozhanov categorised the objectives and reasons that influenced Moscow to increase its activity in the Middle East in three groups: economic (to compensate for the negative political and economic implications of the tension experienced with the West,¹⁸ and to protect the interests of Russian gas and oil corporations through energy agreements); political (to promote dialogue between the main actors of the Middle East and the Russian vision of the future of the IR system); security (to restrict potential threats to Russia's security in non-European parts of Eurasia by combating international terrorism, Islamic radicalism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and cross-

¹⁷ Until 1935, the current Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was known by the official name of Persia. By decision of Muhammad Reza Shah, in that year, the country changed the official designation for Iran and, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution that resulted in the deposition of the Shah, Muhammad Reza, adopted its current name. Iran and IRI will be used throughout the article.

¹⁸ The European countries chose, for example, to suspend the South Stream natural gas pipeline, a new and important energy channel with which Moscow expected to increase its market share in Europe.



border crime) (Kozhanov, 2015). The growing terrorist threat poses a great danger, and combating it is very important to ensure security in Russian cities and in the international community.

According to Richard Sakwa, Putin's disillusionment with the West (after Ukrainian events in 2014) implied not only a shift to a greater Asian orientation, but also a much more substantive attempt to give shape and substance to a reenergised view of Russia as a bicontinental power (Light & Cadier, 2015, p. 70). Russia has focused on countries (Iran and Turkey) with economic, geopolitical and military advantages. The policy of containing Western advances through alliances and partnerships is a goal. According to the new Foreign Policy Concept,¹⁹ Moscow wants to strengthen its relationship with the Arab world by participating in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC):

Russia intends to further expand bilateral relations with the States in the Middle East and North Africa, including by relying on the ministerial meeting of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum, and continuing strategic dialogue with the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf.(Russia, 2016)

The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, in view of the growing importance of the Islamic variable in equating power relations in a new multipolar order, had already made reference to the strengthening of Russia's relations with Islamic countries, with participation as an observer state in the Islamic Conference and in the League of Arab States (Freire, 2011, p. 231). Russia's desire to get closer to Arab partners in a context of the growing threat of Islamic radicalism fits into counterterrorism. Russia's relations with regional actors, in particular Syria, Iran and Turkey, are revealing Russian interests in the area and complexity in bilateral and multilateral relations (Freire, 2011, p. 211). The Kremlin has been pursuing the goals of the "new Russia" to assert itself and consolidate power.

Subsequently, the evolution of Russian relations with Turkey and Iran as well as their relations with the Kurds are analysed.

a) Ankara

From the numerous wars between the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire to recent energy agreements between Ankara and Moscow, the relationship between Turkey and Russia has always been marked by great ambiguity (Barrinha, 2014, p. 253).

Currently separated by the Islamic republics of the South Caucasus, Turkey and the Russian Federation were, until the end of the bipolar system, countries with common borders, parallel ambitions and antagonistic alliances.

Between the years of 1676 and 1917 the two countries were opponents in twelve wars. The war of 1768-1774 would have a special meaning since the heavy defeat of the Ottoman forces meant the end of hegemony in the Black Sea (Barrinha, 2014, p. 254). During the second half of the 20th century until the end of the Cold War, **it** was

¹⁹ The concept was approved by Putin on 30th November, 2016.



characterised by the imbalance between the USSR and post-imperial Turkey concerned with the consolidation of the republic.²⁰

In the 1960s Russia and Turkey (re)approached, since Russia opened up politically with Nikita Khrushchev and Turkey was dissatisfied with the US regarding the Cyprus issue. Only in September 1984 did the Turkish government, led by Turgut Ozal, sign an energy agreement with Russia in the issue of natural gas. This agreement is still regarded today as a milestone in the relationship between the two countries (Barrinha, 2014, p. 256). A year and a half later, it was the turn of the Russian company Gazexport and Turkey's Boots to sign a trade agreement for a period of 25 years (Barrinha, 2014, p. 256). The end of the Cold War had as fundamental consequences for the Turkish foreign policy, on the one hand, the resizing of its relations with the former Soviet space of Turkish cultural roots and, on the other hand, with the Middle East (Barrinha, 2015, p. 478). The relationship between them, during the presidency of Yeltsin, was characterised by bilateral cooperation. In the context of the emergence of new powers and a post-American world, Turkey came into direct contact with Brazil, the People's Republic of China, India and the Russian Federation.

The strengthening of internal legitimacy, the existence of a basic doctrine associated with the new minister for foreign affairs, strong economic growth and the progressive affirmation of new poles of power in the international system contributed to a change in Turkey's attitude concerning its foreign policy (Barrinha, 2015, p. 485). The change was reflected in an attitude of more global activity.

For Moscow, the relationship with Turkey is part of a strategy of simultaneous expansion of economic relations and constraint of the influence of the West in its neighbourhood. On the Turkish side, this approach is related to a new way of doing foreign policy with the Justice and Development Party and the minister for foreign affairs, Ahmet Davutoglu.

Energy has been the area that has most united these two states in the last decades.²¹ In this energy context, there are two issues that characterise the Turkish-Russian relationship: on the one hand, the economic relationship between the two countries; on the other, the geopolitics of the issue (Barrinha, 2014, p. 259). Gas and oil pipelines have had fundamental importance in the energy relationship. Russia's top priority is the Turkish Stream Gas Pipeline (substitute of the abandoned South Stream project), which is expected to supply 15.75 billion cubic meters of gas to Turkey by 2020 as well as to Southeast Europe (Baev & Kirişci, 2017, p. 7). According to Putin, its implementation will significantly increase the energy security of Turkey and Europe, boosting the chances of exporting Russian gas to Turkey. Erdoğan's decision to grant the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation (Rosatom) the rights to build the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant in southern Turkey is controversial. As Pavel Baev and Kemal Kirişci note, it would grant Russia "control over a significant portion of Turkey's electricity production" (Baev & Kirişci, 2017, p. 7). In contrast to Turkey's energy diversification goals, the projects will aggravate its dependence on Russian energy (Taussig, 2017). Turkey imports between 50% and 55% of its gas needs from Russia (Baev & Kirişci, 2017, p. 6).

²⁰ Its consolidation was marked by the well-known principle of Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk" Pascha: "Peace at Home, Peace in the World".

²¹ In January 2015 Putin travelled to Istanbul to propose the construction of a gas pipeline from Turkey to the borders of Europe.



Regarding security and conflict issues, bilateral relations have been characterised by geopolitical dynamics such as the Iranian nuclear issue, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Balkan War (1990) and the Eastern Mediterranean issue (Cyprus and Syria). Turkey and Russia have convergent perceptions regarding the world order, development of energy projects and cooperation in enhancing security in the Black Sea. This relationship can be explained by the strong and stable leaderships of Putin and Erdoğan as well as by the international scenario, which is favourable to the rise of emerging powers after the crisis of 2008, acquiring a growing prominence in the international scenario (Barrinha, 2014, p. 268).

These countries' agenda have, since 2011, focused on the Middle East and, particularly, on the Arab Spring, which is differently read by Putin and Erdoğan. Baev and Kirişci (Baev & Kirişci, 2017, p.4) state: "Turkish leadership hailed the popular uprisings as a 'grand restoration' of Islamic civilization and expected the formation of a 'Muslim Brotherhood belt', stretching across Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria". Erdoğan tried to reorient Turkey as the leader of an emerging Islamic civilisation in the Middle East (Taussig, 2017). However, Putin understands political Islamism as a real threat to Russia's security (RO). He distrusts Erdoğan's support and connections with radical Islamic groups in Syria, and it is interesting for him that this ideology fails regionally.

Turkey and the Russian Federation diverge on the paths to be taken on the Syrian conflict. Ankara, since the beginning of the crisis, has tried to reach a common position with Moscow, but it has been difficult. On the one hand, Moscow wants Syria to remain as an area of influence, which allows it to guarantee access to the Mediterranean coast,²² re-routing and increasing its influence in an area of strategic multidimensional interest (Freire, s.d., p. 41). For Ankara, the potential for a Kurdish entity to emerge along its long border has been assessed as the main threat to security that could arise from conflict (Çandar, 2017). Turning to the Kurdish question, Moscow insisted that the Kurds should integrate the process of political solution with Syria. Despite Erdoğan's disapproval, Moscow furthered ties with the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), a strong Kurdish operational faction in Syria that elaborated a new Syrian constitution, granting significant autonomy to Kurdish regions (Taussig, 2017). Russian protection of the PYD gave rise to the Kurdish problem with Ankara. Recently, the historic agreement between a Russian state oil company, Rosneft, and the Kurdistan Regional Government – to buy Kurdish oil – shows that Russia sees the Kurds as important actors in the future of the Middle East. Through the activities of Rosneft, Moscow gained influence over Turkish and Iranian interests on the Kurdish issue and, potentially, reaffirmed its influence of oil and gas exports on not only Ankara but also on major economies in southern Europe (Jaffe, 2017) (Barmin, 2017). In Syria and Iraq, Russia favours the real autonomy of the Kurds (Trenin, 2017), despite the rather ambiguous (Azizi, 2017) Russian reaction to the Kurdish referendum (25th September 2017). The independence of Iraqi Kurdistan would probably be detrimental to Russian regional interests. It would cause a disagreement between Russia and Turkey and Iran, two actors with whom Moscow is aligned in the Middle East (Barmin, 2017).

²² In 1971, the USSR installed a naval support and maintenance base for the Syrian port of Tartus. This naval base is the only one that is outside the so-called post-Soviet space and is endowed with a greater capacity of projection in the Eastern Mediterranean area. This naval base, the only one of warm waters, is important for Russian ambitions to play a greater geopolitical role in the Eastern Mediterranean area and in the Middle East.



Russian-Turkish relations have experienced a tense period since the 2015 incident, when a Russian warplane entered Turkish airspace and was overthrown by Turkish forces near the Turkish-Syrian border.

Moscow imposed economic sanctions on Ankara,²³ which, according to initial estimates, cost Turkey US\$ 10 billion in lost trade at a time when the Turkish economy was declining (Tank, 2016). However, bilateral relations have been restored since August 2016. At the end of a meeting in November, Putin said that “in regards to Russia-Turkey cooperation, you could say our relation has been practically fully restored” (ru, 2017). Ilshat Saetov, from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, told *Al-Monitor* that, although Moscow forgives Ankara, he does not trust Turkey anymore (Chulkovskaya, 2017).

During the conference held on 3rd May 2017, Putin said that only political and diplomatic means can contribute to the solution of the Syrian conflict. Russia, Turkey and Iran, despite their competing interests, deepened their cooperation in Syria by launching the Astana format in early 2017 to enact a ceasefire and negotiate the end of the conflict. Putin again stated the strategic importance of Ankara and referred to the importance of normalising their relations:

Turkey is an important and promising partner of Russia. For some time, the durability of our bilateral relations, as we know, has been tested. We can now confidently say that the period of recovery for the ties between Russia and Turkey is over and we are returning to normal cooperation between the partners. Our countries are firmly committed to strengthening cooperation in many areas, according to the spirit and as mentioned in the treaty on the foundations of bilateral relations, which will have its 25th anniversary at the end of May. (ru, 2016)

Russia and Turkey have taken important steps to improve their relations since the 2015 incident. In addition, Putin signed a law (31st May 2017) removing some of the restrictions imposed on Turkey²⁴ after the meeting with his Turkish counterpart ((RFE/RL), 2017) (ru, 2017). On 1st December, Russia completely lifted the ban on imports of Turkish tomatoes (Chulkovskaya, 2017).

Regarding Syria, it should be noted that the Astana meetings, as well as the memorandum on de-escalation zones, contributed to reducing violence in the country, according to Putin and Erdoğan.

b) Tehran

According to Mark Katz, despite their differences, Russia and Iran have cooperated in Syria concerning arms sales and economic affairs. Tehran, in the post-Cold War context,

²³ 4Russia banned, for example, imports of Turkish tomatoes. Ankara imposed large import duties on Russian wheat in March but resumed purchases after the meeting of the presidents in May 2017.

²⁴ The sanctions were imposed on Turkish companies operating in Russia and Turkish nationals who wanted to work in Russian territory.



was obliged to abandon the principle of “neither West nor East” in regards to its foreign policy and established the principle of “North and South” (Simão, 2015, p. 415). Its position meant openness to the republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The relationship with Iran is crucial because Russia can neutralise Iranian influence in Chechnya and other Islamic areas defined as a threat, particularly in the Caucasus. In offensive realism, Tehran is an ally to counterbalance the Western threat, since Moscow has sought to project itself as a great power after decades of reduced influence and status.

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a key country in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caspian²⁵ as well as in the Kremlin’s economic and security interests (Trenin, 2016). Moscow is prepared to establish relations with the regime of Ali Khamenei²⁶ regarding trade, energy and security.

Tehran has not always been a reliable partner for Moscow. For example, in December 2008, the Russian government was strongly surprised when – despite the agreements established with the Persian regime – the IRI voted against St Petersburg, making it favourable for Qatar to be the site of the executive and secretariat of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). The Iranian voice seemed to be decisive in the voting by the members of the organisation (Kozhanov, 2015). Russia intended to be influential in the international gas market but, as mentioned above, it was not.

Since Putin became the president again in 2012, Russian-Iranian relations have experienced a significant turnaround, in contrast to the substantial cooling of the bilateral dialogue that characterised the last two years of Medvedev’s presidency (Kozhanov, 2015). His view of the Kremlin’s top priorities in the international arena was greatly affected by the failure to restore relations between Washington and Moscow and the beginning of tensions with the West concerning Syria. Disappointed with the attempts to overcome obstacles in the relations with the West, Putin was determined to develop relations with non-Western countries (Kozhanov, 2015). Iran’s geostrategic position has allowed it to influence the development of the situation in the Caspian, Caucasus, Central Asia and Middle East. This reality forced Moscow to discuss various foreign policy issues with Iran, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, the stability of Tajikistan,²⁷ NATO activities in the South Caucasus (cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan), the presence of non-regional powers in the Middle East and Central Asia, the construction of trans-Caspian pipelines and the instability in the Caucasus. The IRI support was considered relevant to the success of Moscow’s activities to strengthen Russia’s post-1991 regional position.

In September 2014, Lavrov designated the IRI as a “natural ally” in the struggle against the religious extremists of the Middle East (Kozhanov, 2015). The departure of Ahmadinejad and the election of Hassan Rouhani did not significantly affect the tendency of deepening cooperation. The results of the Arab Spring in the region demanded Moscow to be more active when contacting the IRI after the victory of Rouhani²⁸ in 2013.

²⁵ Russia is a good market for Iran’s products.

²⁶ He was the president of the IRI between 1981 and 1989, elevated to the category of Ayatollah and appointed as supreme leader by the Assembly of Experts.

²⁷ In the mid-1990s, the regimes of Moscow and Tehran banded together to halt the civil war that then broke out in Tajikistan.

²⁸ He wanted, in his first term, to strengthen relations with the West, which alarmed the Kremlin.



In 2014, the tension between Russia and the US and EU, resulting from the Ukrainian crisis, contributed to strengthening the Kremlin's cooperation with Iran (Kozhanov, 2015), and also their economic and geopolitical ties with non-Western countries (Borshchevskaya, 2015). In the context of this tension, Russian companies had to look for new commercial and investment opportunities in the IRI.

In August 2016, at a summit held in Baku, Putin, Hassan Rouhani and Ilham Aliyev from Azerbaijan committed themselves to the development of a 7,200-km-long trade corridor linking the countries via rail (Trenin, 2016). For the Kremlin, IRI offers significant economic opportunities due to its population size and potential for growth in technology, education and culture.

The Caspian Sea region is one of the oldest oil producers in the world and is growing rapidly as a natural gas producer (EIA, 2013, p. 1).

The Caspian issue encompasses political, economic, diplomatic and military aspects (Sazhin, 2016, p. 13). The legal status of the Caspian area has been a complex topic because there is no agreement on whether the "body of water" is defined as a "sea" or a "lake". There is currently no defined legal definition for the Caspian since coastal states²⁹ should unanimously agree on a definition (EIA, 2013, p. 4). Sergei Lavrov said, after a recent meeting [4-5th December 2017] Caspian states, that after more than 20 years of negotiations, an agreement on the status of the Caspian was "practically ready" to sign (Pannier, 2017). In 2003, Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan signed a number of bilateral agreements concerning the boundary lines of the areas adjacent to the Caspian. However, Iran (considering the Caspian a lake) did not recognise the legitimacy of the tripartite initiative, calling for equal division of 20% of the seabed and the surface of the Caspian (Sazhin, 2016, p. 14) (EIA, 2013, p. 5). There are contradictions between Moscow and Tehran in their territorial division: there is no consensus on the governance regime for navigation in areas under national jurisdiction (Kozhanov, 2015).

Iran and Russia were united in the negative attitude towards the Trans-Caspian project, supported by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Neither Russia nor Iran want the failure of the European gas transport project for the future Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Caspian and Sea-Azerbaijan-European routes (Sazhin, 2016, p. 15).

Regarding the Syrian conflict, Moscow and Tehran are not fully aligned, since their political strategies are different. They want to prevent the overthrow of the Assad regime and maintain state institutions (Sazhin, 2016, p. 16), but there is a fundamental divergence with regard to their objectives. Moscow has defended the integrity of Syria:

Russia supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic and pluralistic state with all ethnic and religious groups living in peace and security and enjoying equal rights and opportunities" (see more detailed information in Sazhin 2016 and the Foreign Policy Concept)

²⁹ Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran.



When Putin intervened in Syria,³⁰ supposedly to combat *Daesh* and to prevent Assad's defeat, he meant to secure military and economic interests, particularly natural gas pipelines crossing Syria (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 243) (Tank, 2016). One of the main objectives of the Russian intervention has gained US recognition concerning the fact that Russia is a great power (Trenin, 2016). On the other hand, the Iranians intend to maintain a friendly regime in Damascus, preserve the crucial links to Hezbollah, the Lebanese armed movement, and strengthen influence in Assad-controlled Syria (Trenin, 2016). Tehran is aware that the political survival of the Syrian regime will allow it to maintain the dream of regional leadership and promote the "Shiite bow" (Pinto, 2015, p. 117).

Concerning the Kurdish issue, whilst Russia supported Syrian Kurds as well as their hopes for a federal solution that would give them autonomy in Syria, Iran and Turkey opposed these aspirations (Katz, 2016).

Russia is looking for a result that may, eventually, include some political commitment, consider the factions in conflict in Syria and the important regional actors, whilst preserving their interests. The potential for discord between the IRI and Russia lies in regional geopolitics, in the debate on the legal status of the Caspian Sea and in gas exports.

In the foreseeable future, Moscow and Tehran will need each other to achieve their broader goals, even though they recognise that cooperation has clear limits. Understanding its limits can make the relationship sustainable and moderately successful, despite a sordid history (for the Iranians) and deep and persistent mistrust. With Rouhani and Putin, important steps have been taken to strengthen bilateral cooperation, particularly with the implementation of major projects, including the launch of the second Bushehr bloc and the thermoelectric plant in Bandar Abbas as examples of new links between them ((IRNA), 2017). It should be noted that the Bushehr nuclear power plant produces electricity with full capacity.

In the economic context, the major challenge for Moscow is to manage relations with Shiite Iran, whilst deepening dialogue with Saudi Arabia (Trenin, 2016). In fact, good management of relations with major oil producers is important for the Russian economic development. But the excellent line of communication with Tel Aviv, the good relations with Cairo and Riyadh and the relationship with the Kurds constantly test Russian diplomacy and balance of power.

Final considerations

The sanctification of the great status of Russia's power and the declared preference for a multipolar world order has been a constant. There was a clear shift in Putin's political position and rhetoric, adopting a more ideological, more conservative and nationalistic tone with the start of his third term. With the Ukraine crisis and its consequences, changes in Russian foreign policy are marked by a clear distance from the West and the search for new allies and partners, mostly in the Middle East and North Africa, where Western domination could be challenged.

³⁰ Since then, Moscow has coordinated operations with Damascus and Tehran as well as with Iraq. Russia has obtained permission from Iran and Iraq to use airspace for air strikes.



Putin's recent diplomatic initiatives regarding Syria and meeting with all the Middle East leaders mean he wants to avoid the costs of continuing conflicts and increased security risks for Russia. For Waltz, it is clear that states seek, above all, to maximise their security. Active diplomacy in Syria serves to strengthen its domestic image before Russian presidential elections of 2018. According to Katz, the diplomatic marathon may be a sign of Putin's fear that, in case the Syrian conflict continues and the regional situation worsens, Russia's ability to control the situation and its image as a great power will deteriorate.

Moscow's relations with Ankara and Tehran have been strengthened by energy agreements and counterterrorism cooperation, despite their differences. Iran and Turkey, being able to approach one another - if Ankara seeks a new course of collision with Israel (a full supporter of the Kurdish independence), Tehran will move even closer to Ankara - will remain limited in the ability to act together in the Middle East, in addition to the common anti-Israel and anti-Kurdish stance. Moscow seeks to present itself to the countries of the Middle East as a pragmatic, non-ideological, reliable, experienced and sensible player capable of assessing regional issues through diplomatic and military means and also adopting an ambiguous stance. It strengthened economic ties with Iraqi Kurdistan (through Rosneft) and with the Syrian Kurds, intending to project an image of great power there. Iraq's instability, the Syrian conflict and the physical collapse of *Daesh* present new challenges but also new opportunities for the Kurds.

The potential contradictions of these "bridges" that Moscow has established in the geopolitical kaleidoscope of the Middle East are intriguing. Some of them represent a "hidden dialogue" with Washington that might make Tehran and Ankara very suspicious and also the fact that allies and opponents constantly change.

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