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Putin's Multipolar World and What it Means for U.S. Strategy

by

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Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin's overarching goal is to create a multipolar world in which Russia is a leading entity. He will attempt to do this by regaining his control over Ukraine, expanding his interests in the Middle East, strengthening partnerships with China and undermining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Putin is a strong believer in the Spheres of Influence concept in which larger nations will attempt to exert leverage over smaller nations to advance their own strategic interests.¹ While Russia's efforts may appear to be belligerently hostile to the Western world, they are not without reason. From Moscow's doorstep, Russian strategic analysts have been observing the actions of what they feel is an unchecked NATO, beginning with its intervention in Bosnia and ending in the Libyan bombing campaign.² Putin believes that by creating a multipolar world, Russia will be in a better position to resist NATO's seemingly aggressive behavior. However, if he wants to solidify Russia's position as a leader in a multipolar world, he will not only try to resist NATO but will also endeavor to create a rift in the alliance by attempting to demonstrate to its members Russian diplomatic and military superiority over the United States.

Regaining Ukraine

With the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, the new Ukrainian government immediately sought closer ties with the European Union (EU). Russian observers feared that it would only be a matter of time until Ukraine followed in the footsteps of Estonia and Latvia by seeking NATO membership.³ The Russian military intervention in the Donbass region, as well as the annexation of Crimea, prevented Ukraine from being able to fully embrace the EU and made it strategically unsavory for NATO to become fully involved with the nation for fear of a conflict with Russia. While American military involvement has been limited to offering training to the Ukrainian military, it remains highly unlikely that NATO would become any further involved in Ukraine than it presently is.

While the Russian military has not openly advanced its operations in Ukraine, it can be assumed that President Putin will take further steps in the near future to bring the country back into Russia's orbit. This is evident by the *casus belli* that Putin used to annex Crimea: that Russian-speaking Ukrainians were being oppressed by the government and were seeking to rejoin Russia.⁴ While the legitimacy of this reasoning is vehemently debated by Western strategists, the Russian government supported its cause by holding a referendum in which supposedly over 95 percent of Crimean voters chose to rejoin the Russian Federation.⁵

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However, when the People's Republic of Donetsk sought accession into the Russian Federation early on in the conflict, they were turned down.⁶

There are many plausible reasons why Putin would annex Crimea while urging the break-away republics to remain in Ukraine. First, Crimea was sovereign Russian territory until 1954 when Nikita Khrushchev ceded it to Ukraine. This would have been the equivalent of Presidents Eisenhower or Kennedy giving portions of Maine to Canada. However, the break-away republics have not been a part of Russia since Ukraine gained its independence in 1917. Second, rebuilding the war-torn republics would have further strained a Russian economy weakened by recently imposed economic sanctions.

These reasons, while valid for denying the break-away republic's requests for accession into the Federation, do not match the Russian narrative of a systematic oppression of Russian-speaking people in Ukraine. The People's Republic of Donetsk is, by and large, ethnically Russian and is struggling to fight a war of attrition against the Ukrainian government. If Moscow's mission was to protect ethnic Russians, then why not annex the break-away republics and end the conflict through hard-power resources? The answer is simple: Putin is an expert at legitimizing his strategic ambitions, and the Donbass region is an open sore on the Ukrainian–Russian border, one that can easily create a new, legitimate reason for using Russia's newly modernized army.

It is arguable that Putin is not done with Ukraine. While he has reclaimed Crimea and destabilized the Ukrainian–Russian border, he cannot afford for the rest of the country to slip out of Moscow's orbit. Failure to pull Ukraine back into Moscow's sphere of influence means the country's eventual acceptance into NATO. It goes without saying that a NATO Ukraine is against Russia's vital strategic interest. Without a doubt, neither NATO nor the EU will attempt to include Ukraine in either organization while it is in a shooting war with Russian-backed separatists. However, NATO is still sending aid such as military training to Ukraine.⁷ The longer it takes Putin to defeat the government in Kiev, the more involved it becomes with NATO. Therefore, U.S. policymakers should plan for an eventual Russian foray into the rest of Ukraine in the near future. While the Russian economy is improving and such an attack would set back what gains the Russian market has made, it would achieve three things. First, it would demonstrate that Russia is once again a military power that should be respected. Second, it would force the NATO states to question America's ability to defend them if attacked as well. Finally, it would, as proven by polls following the annexation of Crimea, make Putin wildly popular among his people.

A Warm-water Port: Russian Interests and Influence in the Middle East

Syrian Intervention. One of the driving factors for Imperial Russia's long-standing feud with the Ottoman Empire was its recognition of the fact that it could never become an overseas empire without the establishment of a warm-water port. This realization led to a series of Russian–Ottoman wars from Tsar Peter the Great to Tsar Nicholas II. Putin also, in his biography, stated that he had hung a portrait of Tsar Peter the Great above his desk in every office he had occupied throughout his career as a Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) agent, lawyer and politician.⁸ Given Putin's desire to reestablish a multipolar world, the strategic importance of the Russian port at Tarsus, Syria, and his appreciation for Russian Imperial history, his decision to militarily intervene in the Syrian civil war should have come as no surprise to Western strategic thinkers.

Putin's *casus belli* for intervening in Syria was to create stability in a war-torn country, prop up what he deemed to be a legitimate government and defeat terrorism within the nation's boundaries. While Western powers bemoaned his intervention as merely a ploy to expand his power in the Middle East, there was nothing they could do legally to counteract him. As in Georgia in 2008, Putin had used humanitarian and counter-anarchical reasoning to justify military action. While the West was correct in its assertions that Putin was attempting to expand his power base within the region, again, there was nothing it could do about it except notify Russia of pending operations to avoid "fratricide."⁹ Putin had used the international precedents established by Western powers—the use of military intervention to establish peace or to prop up a struggling government to prevent further chaos—to justify his actions. However, the Western powers did not appreciate that Putin had used those precedents to inhibit their own interests.

Based on current U.S. involvement in Syria, American politicians and thinkers appear to believe that there is a way to remove Syria's President Bashar al-Assad and create a democratic government in Syria. However, they should realize that this is impossible without directly confronting Russian military assets and Syrian government assets within the area of operations. Assad cannot be removed from power while the Russian military is still present in the theater. That being said, even if he could be removed and Russia disappeared from the theater of operations, the West would spend years attempting to facilitate the new government's control over the rest of the nation. It is more feasible and economical for U.S. planners to accept the reality that a tyrannical government will remain in power in Syria and simply cease operations within the country. If they did so, the Russian military would be forced to spend larger quantities of money, manpower and munitions to assist the Assad regime in retaking and stabilizing the country. Meanwhile, the United States would be able to refocus on assisting the strained Iraqi government in retaking its country from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and ensuring that another rebellion does not ignite within its boundaries.

An Emboldened Iran. Moscow's intervention has had multiple effects on U.S. hegemony within the Middle East. First, it is no secret that Russia, not the United States, is calling the shots in Syria. The Russian Air Force and its supported Syrian Air Force fly almost daily sorties against U.S.-backed ground targets while U.S. air forces are restricted to bombing only extremist rebel targets and have been forced to leave the Russian-backed government targets untouched.¹⁰ Second, U.S. influence within the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz has been openly challenged by Iran on many occasions. Almost immediately following the Iranian nuclear deal, U.S. Sailors were captured by Iranian naval forces and paraded on international television. More recently, U.S. warships have been forced to fire warning shots at Iranian vessels who were performing "aggressive maneuvers" within U.S. vessels' area of operations. These hostile actions by a defiant Iran are meant by the regime to show their neighbors that the United States is no longer the sole power broker in the Middle East. Moscow's presence within the region has emboldened the Iranians into further challenging U.S. interests.

Using Turkey as Political Leverage. Russo-Turkish relations were at an all-time low following the downing of a Russian fighter jet over Turkish airspace in 2015. That, combined with the two nations' violent history toward one another, means that the West should not expect a Turkish-Russian military alliance any time soon. However, Putin's support for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan immediately followed the failed coup in the summer of 2016. That, coupled with the West's protest of Erdoğan's actions, has at the very least undermined Turkey's relationship with NATO and at worst put Erdoğan on a course of eventually aligning his interests with that of Russia's. The latter would prove detrimental to further U.S. operations in the Middle East. Putin will most likely continue to support Erdoğan politically and economically by eventually removing the sanctions imposed on Turkey following the downing of the jet in 2015. The removal of the Russian economic sanctions should be viewed as a signal to Western powers that Moscow is attempting to further undermine Turkey's relationship with NATO. Currently, the West has only two alternatives when considering President Erdoğan's policy toward the coup plotters: turn a blind eye to maintain NATO's current strength, or continue to condemn Erdoğan's treatment of his enemies. The former option would make NATO appear hypocritical as it has already forcibly removed brutal Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi, while the latter would force Turkey to question its commitment to the organization.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Putin will continue to invest political and economic capital into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a means to cultivate a multipolar world despite the distrust that exists between it and the organization's other key member: China. While Cold War-era analysts did not take into account the animosity between China and the Soviet Union, it cannot be entirely discounted when analyzing the strength of the SCO today. However, China's growing energy requirements—combined with Russia's and China's mutual distrust of the West in regard to their own strategic interests—serve as substantial motivators for the two nations to get along.

Moscow and Beijing recently signed a series of pacts that prohibited cyber attacks between the two nations while at the same time promoting economic cooperation, such as Moscow's promise to augment Beijing's

growing energy requirements.¹¹ These compromises come at a time when the United States' global hegemony is being directly challenged by China and Russia. Both nations have been attempting to consolidate power within their spheres of influence after aggressive initiatives to modernize their military to compete with that of the United States.

The SCO fits perfectly into Putin's overarching strategy. As he has stated many times, he does not desire to make Russia the global hegemon; he believes that a multipolar world, with multiple regional hegemonies, is more beneficial to advancing Russia's interests.¹² While Chinese–Russian diplomatic history means that the two nations will share a mutual distrust of one another throughout the foreseeable future, an agreement between the two of them—or at least the appearance of an agreement—would make the United States more wary of opposing their short-term objectives. Collaboration between the two nations would make the United States reconsider both military and diplomatic resources in the near term.

NATO

Putin does not need to destroy NATO to create a multipolar world. He needs NATO to destroy itself for him to solidify Russia's place as a leader in a multipolar world. NATO is an alliance based entirely on trust—trust that if one nation invokes the Article 5 agreement, its NATO allies will honor that agreement regardless of the threat. If the Article 5 agreement is ever invoked by a NATO country and its allies do not rush to its defense immediately, the alliance is over and its members will begin to look for new means of assuring their survival.

NATO's reason for existence came under scrutiny the moment the Soviet Union collapsed. Many American politicians since then have questioned U.S. involvement in an organization for which it foots the majority of the bill while those who receive its protection pay so little. Even now, during a period of Russian aggression in the Baltic Sea and massing military formations on the Ukrainian–Russian border, American politicians and now President Donald Trump have called for the United States to rethink its role in the organization.¹³ This—combined with the recent “Brexit” referendum and nationalist parties throughout other European states demanding their own referendum on membership in the European Union—makes the NATO alliance appear even weaker to its outsiders.

Moscow undoubtedly understands that this is potentially a turning point in the strategic capability of Russia's longtime adversary.¹⁴ If more European nations follow Britain's example and leave the European Union, it could signal that their desire to defend one another has also decreased. Without European support for NATO, the United States would be hard pressed to be able to defend the Baltic States or other current NATO allies from the conventional and unconventional threats posed by Moscow.

As stated above, Moscow does not need to destroy NATO to create a multipolar world. Putin is doing that through his actions in Syria and Ukraine and with the SCO. Putin must undermine NATO; more important, he must undermine the belief that the United States can protect the NATO states. Moscow has been doing this through aggressive naval and air maneuvers in the Baltic Sea and in any other way it can exhibit the fact that its modernized military is capable of committing to near-peer combat with the United States.

Now more than ever, the United States needs to show its commitment to its NATO allies; more specifically, it needs to show its commitment to NATO's Eastern European members. A 2014–2015 study by the Rand Corporation showed that Moscow could occupy Latvia and Estonia in their entirety in less than one week's time.¹⁵ It also stated that it would take too much time for NATO to launch a counterattack even remotely capable of retaking the Baltic States.¹⁶ This has been brought to further attention by a simulation performed by the Potomac Foundation in January 2017 which determined that a conflict between Russia and NATO could be ignited by Russian military operations in Belarus.¹⁷ Taking these scenarios and Russia's superior air defense and artillery systems into consideration, if accurate, Russia would have only a short time to set up a capable defense within the Baltic States and Belarus.¹⁸ To breach these defenses would cost NATO and the United States countless lives and economic resources.

To effectively counter the Russian threat to the Eastern European NATO members, the United States must invest time and resources in training the militaries of the Baltic States and Poland. It should also consider stationing larger troop formations in countries such as Germany. Currently, U.S. forces are being sent on temporary training rotations to Eastern Europe to participate in coalition wargames and other forms of training. This practice is not large enough to show American resolve in defending its Eastern European allies, as the number of aggressive encounters with Russian naval vessels and aircraft have only increased over the past year. The only way to demonstrate America's determination to defend its Eastern European allies is to station a large enough body of troops on the European continent that it could launch an effective counterattack 72 hours after Moscow begins hostile operations (conventional or unconventional) against the Baltic States.

Conclusion

American strategic planners should expect Moscow to continuously work toward creating a multipolar, international system. It will do this by attempting to bring Ukraine completely back into the Russian sphere of influence; whether it does this through diplomatic or kinetic resources is irrelevant. Russia's military intervention in Syria means that Moscow will remain a key player within the Middle East for years to come and that its allies, primarily Iran, will continue to antagonize U.S. operations in the area in an effort to make the American military appear weak within the region. As China becomes more assertive in the South China Sea, it will continue to build economic and military partnerships with Russia to help them achieve their strategic interests. Russia will also benefit through this relationship, as a partnership with China will make the two powers appear more threatening toward the West. Finally, Russia will continue to antagonize NATO and American military assets within the vicinity of the Baltic States to undermine the rest of the NATO states' trust in America's ability to defend them.

American strategic planners can counter these threats by stationing larger numbers of forces in Europe where they could defend the Baltic States in the event of a Russian military incursion. U.S. planners should concede the fact that the Syrian government will remain in power as long as it is supported by the Russian military. After doing so, U.S. planners should cease operations in Syria and allow the Russian and Syrian government to stabilize the country themselves, forcing the Russian government to spend resources that it does not have to prop up Syria's failing government. To prevent Moscow from expanding its foothold in the Middle East, the United States must shore up its relationship with its remaining Middle Eastern allies. More specifically, it should focus its attention on assisting Iraq in the liberation of its remaining cities from ISIS and on working to create a stable, legitimate government in that country.

Ultimately, Western planners must realize that the past three decades have been an anomaly in world history. Never before in the history of the world has one power, such as the United States, held global hegemony. In fact, the world is returning to a state of normalcy, a state in which multiple powers are in competition with one another for finite resources. To spend resources and lives to totally prevent this correction would be as futile and costly as attempting to change an ocean's tides. Western planners and thinkers must learn to adapt to this old, yet new, reality.

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