



Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies

Interview with Dmitri Trenin

*Author of **What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?** (Polity Press, 2018)*

March 1, 2018

As you mention in the book, Russia has successfully managed to straddle the region's multiple divides. What would you put this strategic success down to? Has Russia developed a closely-knit network of strategists, Arabists and diplomats at the highest echelons of power? Or is its strategic nimbleness mostly due to individual leadership?

The ingredients of Russia's success in Syria 2015-17 have been: superior regional expertise; close cooperation among the diplomatic, military, and intelligence departments of the Russian government; clear operational goals and objectives; political will to succeed.

Russia seems to have no grand strategy in the MENA, rather clear positions on specific situations. Could this change over the next years and given Russia's raised profile? Or does Russia simply not have the appetite and resources for grand strategies in the region?

A region-wide strategy with more than purely national interests in mind would require significant material resources and an ambitious overarching goal. That looks unlikely at the moment, the more so that the going in Syria has gotten harder, not least because the United States actively resists Russia scoring a diplomatic success atop its recent military victory.

There has been a lot of talk on a US retreat/withdrawal from the region (possibly in light of its pivot to Asia). Does the Russian leadership share this notion or does it take it with a grain of salt? Is the Trump administration's recent announcement to station 2,000 troops in northern Syria indefinitely a reversal of Obama's more distantiated approach?

The Russian leadership views the U.S. global hegemony having entered a decline phase. Barack Obama's retrenchment policy continues under President Trump, even if some U.S. actions point in the opposite direction: not only in Syria, but also in Afghanistan. This leads Moscow to conclude that the U.S. lacks a consistent foreign policy strategy, which only supports the thesis of the declining U.S. hegemony – despite the enormous resources and clear U.S. superiority in a lot of areas.

Russia has indeed managed to gain the respect and admiration of many regional countries. But what are the main dangers lurking now that it's more visible?

There are multiple dangers. One is the U.S. role of a spoiler, seeking to undermine the Astana process and present the Sochi meeting as a failure. Another one is Russia's own allies, whose interests do not always coincide with Moscow's and often clash with those of other Russian allies. Recalcitrant Assad, mercurial Erdogan, the ambitious Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps are not very easy or comfortable partners. Russia's situational alliances in the region are brittle, as the downing of the Russian plane by Turkey in 2015 demonstrated. Other powers in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are actively pursuing their interests. A major danger is the re-emergence of the Islamist extremist threat, thwarted in Syria and Iraq, elsewhere in the region. Particularly dangerous, from the Russian point of view, would be its revival in Afghanistan, on the borders of Central Asian states, Russia's neighbors and close partners.

Do you think there is room for regional cooperation between Europe and Russia? Or does Europe seem bound to eternally identify with the Euro-Atlantic relationship?

In principle, Russia and the European Union should be strategic partners, if not allies, in handling the issues in the MENA region: their interests coincide to a significant degree, and are complementary elsewhere. On such issues as the future of the JCPOA or the status of Jerusalem Russian and European positions are virtually identical, while both differ much with those of the United States. However, the European countries' membership in NATO and their close ties to the United States, the leader of the alliance, puts severe restrictions on Europe's ability and freedom to cooperate with Russia.