

Crimea's Impact on Russia in the Middle East

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The recent focus on Ukraine's meltdown brought out a lot of analysis on how events in the broken country may affect the Kremlin's foreign policy on Syria. Many pundits argued that there would not be much of a change. That assertion may be a bit premature: the temperature throughout the region appears to be reaching the boiling point.

The events in Ukraine, especially the escalating situation in Crimea, are challenging the Kremlin at a critical juncture between Moscow and Damascus. As we know, Moscow argues that Syria is an integral part of the Kremlin's foreign policy in the Middle East.

The ideology that is driving Russian policy towards Crimea is much the same as the Kremlin's policy towards Syria. First, is the issue of Russian pride. The issue of pride is also present in some doctrinal aspects of Russian thinking about her place on the world stage. Increasingly what we are witnessing is the possible implementation of the "Russian Doctrine" or the "Sergius' Project" begun in 2005 (St. Sergius of Radonezh is considered "the eternal protector and patron of Russia at times of hardship.") around the start of Russian President Vladimir Putin's second term. The proponents of this idea are writers, publicists, historians, and philosophers from the conservative Orthodox milieu. Understanding their arguments might help explain where we are now and what may happen next. The doctrine seemed to function as a rationale for the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and now again in Crimea in 2014.

Basically, the "Russian Doctrine" seeks to illuminate Russia's role in the world and represents a swing back to pan-Slav nationalists who see Russia as "The Third Rome" in the name of Russian Orthodox Christianity. They regard the West as corrupt and dismiss Western styles of democracy. This school is now ascending over the second camp, known as Westernizers, who seek a European-style democratic state in which culture, rather than military force, plays a central role. In such a system the state would not be allowed to become stronger than society.

What is important to understand is that these ideas are not new but steeped in Russian history and are being brought forward into the 21st century and beyond. For the authors, Russia is emerging from an unequal fight against the West where Russia played by foreign rules leading to havoc (*smutnoye vremia*) at the end of the 20th century that threatened Russian "spiritual sovereignty." Both Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin seek to reverse this decline—an idea both men have been nurturing since January 2000 when Boris Yeltsin resigned and the 21st century began. Some Russian academics argue that there will not be a global order dominated by several civilizations or superpowers. Instead, the "Northern civilization" will present an alternative to the West and will replace its dominance in the world. Other countries and peoples will gravitate towards the "Northern civilization." Russian academics see Russia as the last center of the world—the Third Rome—until the end

of humanity. They reiterate the idea that Russia has been raised above other countries by God and, therefore, God demands more from the Russian Nation than from other nations. What is happening in the Near East now is part of God's design and Moscow feels to be the "UN-NATO" when regarding Syria as a special, unique, calling.

Commentators are maintaining that events in Ukraine are likely to force changes in Russia's strategic outlook thus making the Kremlin either more assertive on the Syrian question or perhaps dropping Damascus in terms of importance because of the strategic distraction of Ukraine.

Some would argue that Crimea is a strategic distraction for Russia from the Kremlin's Middle East policy; it's not. Those thinking that Russia is diverted will likely find the Kremlin acting out, challenging conventional wisdom and policy-planning that we all thought were fairly solid up until a week ago.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is a man of his word when it comes to Syria. If pundits think Moscow will toss Syria aside that would be a mistake. In fact, Russian foreign policy is likely to go into overdrive. One who believes that Russia cannot handle multiple regional crises at once is going to be sadly mistaken.

For Russian security policy, make no mistake that the Kremlin has for decades had a "what if" plan for Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. And Moscow is moving quickly, inserting troops into Crimea, drawing the ire of the West. There is talk already of U.S. President Obama not attending the G8 in June 2014 in Moscow. But the Kremlin is not stupid; the Kremlin is prepared for multiple contingencies of various degrees. So make no mistake that Putin is ready to strike out in all directions, especially in the core of the Middle East through diplomatic jolts.

Some would argue that the events in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine must be making Syria a bit nervous about receiving the necessary attention from Moscow. With certainty, Assad's patron to the North will continue to arm the regime, keep the Russian advisors on the ground, perhaps delay implementation of the chemical weapons extraction, and sustain its support of Assad in order to delay and degrade the Geneva process.

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When discussing strategic distraction, one should also keep in mind that while the Ukraine issue unfolds, Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Iraq will continue to fight extremists. And as the world watches events in Ukraine, extremists know to take advantage of the situation by launching more attacks against governments, infrastructure, and individuals. A key question is whether these extremists will see any opportunity to support their "Muslim brothers" on the Crimean peninsula, the Tatars. The Tatars faced the same type of history as other Muslim minorities in the Northern Caucasus including deportation. In the past decade, Russia, and various Ukrainian politicians have used the excuse that al-Qaeda was trying to break into the Tatar community to infiltrate the peninsula and bring jihad. These

false rumors of the past may become true in the near future. Syrian extremists, who are against Assad, may see a new opportunity to spread their chaos. These jihadis are looking for a new fight anywhere and Crimea and Russia may be their next targets. We need to be watching their discourse carefully for “support for the Crimean Tatar brothers.”

The next few weeks are likely to be filled with tension and diplomatic confrontations. We will all be watching for signals from Putin, from the Russian Foreign Ministry, and from the Russian Defense Ministry, on both the Ukrainian front and the Syrian problem. The most important point is to look at the trans-regional linkages between Russia’s intervention in Crimea, and the impact on Syria’s immediate future because these two foreign policy crises are now intertwined. Suddenly, the spring of 2014 is turning out to be very nasty for NATO and GCC allies alike.