Watching Ukraine

There is a widely held perception in the Middle East of the US as a tired and retreating hegemon

THE SWIFT-MOVING crisis in Ukraine, punctuated by defiant Russian action designed to separate Crimea from the rest of the country, is being watched with keen interest throughout the Middle East.

Predictably, the positions adopted by governments and commentators reflect the existing deep divisions regarding the ongoing war in Syria. The Assad regime and its allies – some Iranian officials, Hezbollah and affiliated anti-American pundits – were quick to embrace the Russian narrative of a Western plot to undermine Ukraine's legitimate institutions and bring it into the Western orbit. The Syrian leadership is likely to be further emboldened in its no-holds-barred fight for survival, and may also find new reasons to delay handing over its chemical weapons stockpiles for destruction.

BAZ RATNER / REUTERS

A Russian soldier on the Ukrainian border, March 1

Conversely, Saudi and other Gulf officials and commentators – the primary supporters of the Syrian opposition – have been withering in their criticisms of Russia's violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. Turkey, on the other hand, has kept a low profile. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's support for the Syrian opposition has not produced the desired results, while family ties to Crimea's Muslim Tatar population, a likely target of Russian nationalists there, threatens to make Russia's actions a domestic Turkish issue. Given Erdogan's deepening domestic woes and Turkey's continued heavy dependence on Russian natural gas, the Turkish strongman, who is ironically often compared to Russia's strongman Vladimir Putin, would undoubtedly prefer to see this crisis somehow go away.

More broadly, the deepening confrontation between Moscow and the Western alliance carries echoes of the Cold War, and even beyond (Crimean War, 1854-1856). As has always been true in the past, Middle Eastern players are keen to understand the motivations and intentions of these powerful global protagonists, and will calibrate their own responses accordingly. The questions being asked are these: Do Russia's actions and the inability, thus far, of the US-led Western alliance to effectively penalize Russia, let alone roll back the clock, provide further proof of the already widely held perception of the US as a tired and retreating hegemon? Has Russian behavior been guided by this perception?

Clearly, the US Administration's desire to avoid further large-scale open-ended military engagements in the Arab and Muslim worlds has raised serious questions about American leadership among its regional allies, particularly in the Gulf and Israel. And Putin's Russia of 2014 is not Yeltsin's Russia of 1991, or even Putin's Russia of 2003. In fact, one could argue that Russia's actions in Ukraine are part of a larger pattern, a willingness to brazenly challenge American interests when Moscow detects American irresoluteness.

Examples include: 1) The 1961 erection of the Berlin Wall just four months after the disastrous Bay of Pigs operation and two months after Khrushchev took Kennedy's measure at the failed Vienna summit and Cuban missile crisis the following year; and 2) The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, after the US had failed to prevent the fall of its Iranian ally and had become embroiled in the Tehran Embassy hostage crisis.

Against this reading, one should note the analysis of Prof. Michael McFaul, who served briefly as Barack Obama's ambassador to Moscow, which stresses that Putin's actions in Ukraine stemmed from a fear of US power and a belief that the US and the EU were conspiring to pry Ukraine out of the Russian orbit. And maintaining Moscow's predominance in this sphere, Russia's "near abroad," is deemed an absolutely vital interest, one which has not always been sufficiently respected by Western decision-makers who perhaps got overly used to Russia's weakened posture in the years after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Veteran US diplomat and former Obama adviser Dennis Ross has declared that by showing leadership in imposing a political and economic price on Russia for intervening in Ukraine, Washington can open a new conversation with its regional allies – the Arab Gulf monarchies and Israel – regarding what to do about Syria, the efforts to curtail Iran's nuclear program, and ensuring that Egypt does not become a failed state. To that end, Riyadh should be prompted to spend its money in more constructive ways than funding Egypt's desired purchase of three billion dollars of Russian arms (an effort by the Egyptian leadership to distance itself from what it deems to be a fickle if not hostile US). Firm leadership could also send a signal to Iran to avoid a strategy of deepening ties with Russia.

Regardless of how things play out, the traditional intersection of great power geopolitics and internal and regional Middle Eastern conflicts will remain an enduring theme. What is new is that Russia's moves against Ukrainian sovereignty are the latest in a series of actions (e.g. its support for separatists in Georgia and Moldava, but also the West's support for Kosovo's secession from Serbia) that have challenged the legitimacy and durability of territorial boundaries enshrined in the UN Charter.

In this regard, the Middle East's centrifugal forces manifesting themselves in the failing states of Syria, Iraq Libya and Yemen fit right in. ■

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