

How Russia Crafted a Three-Dimensional Strategy to Regain Global Influence

Steven Metz | Friday, April 27, 2018

Near the end of a recent report

(<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/04/23/isis-al-qaida-regrouping-in-libya-whats-us-strategy-congress-asks/>) on the resurgence of both the Islamic State and al-Qaida in Libya was an almost offhand mention of Russian special operations forces active along the country's border with Egypt, helping provide weapons to Gen. Khalifa Haftar, whose forces dominate eastern Libya. This seemingly minor fact is, in reality, emblematic of important trends in Russia's revanchist foreign policy.

When Moammar Gadhafi controlled Libya from 1969 to 2011, he was an excellent customer for Soviet weaponry and military advice. But in the chaos after his overthrow and death, the Russian Embassy in Tripoli was attacked and all diplomats and their families withdrawn. Moscow seemingly had written Libya off. But it is now re-entering this chaotic political environment in North Africa as part of a three-dimensional global strategy designed to strengthen Russia politically, enrich it economically and allow it to punch above its weight in a rapidly changing security environment.

The first dimension is intimidation. Focused on nearby nations, particularly those that were once part of the Soviet Union or the old Russian empire, this is designed to ensure that neighboring governments are friendly and subservient—or at least fearful of Moscow. It reflects Russia's need for security buffers around its periphery, the result of geography that allowed it to be invaded many times in the past.

Russian intimidation takes a number of forms, including economic pressure, cyberattacks—such as the 2007 one on Estonia and the 2017 ones on Ukraine—proxy aggression by local allies—often ethnic Russians scattered across the old Russian and Soviet empires—and in extreme cases such as Georgia in 2008, direct military intervention. Today, Ukraine is the primary target of Russian intimidation, but other nearby nations with less ability to resist have, to one extent or the other, gotten the message. Even countries that have not followed the example of Belarus and become completely compliant toward



Russian President Vladimir Putin, flanked by top officials, attends a military parade during Russia's Navy Day celebration, St. Petersburg, Russia, July 30, 2017 (AP photo by Alexander Zemlianichenko).

Moscow still attempt to avoid its ire as much as possible.

The second dimension of Russia's strategy is weakening the Western-engineered global order, particularly around the Mediterranean. As with the intimidation of Russia's neighbors, this reflects Soviet strategy from the Cold War. Part of it is political obstructionism, using Moscow's veto at the United Nations Security Council to delegitimize or stymie collective American and European efforts to prevent genocide during the Libyan civil war and put pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave power, or at least negotiate an end to his nation's disastrous civil war.

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Russia also uses an array of methods to directly weaken the United States and European nations, relying heavily on information warfare to stoke Western political divisions and undercut confidence in political institutions. Social media “troll farms” and Russian-peddled “fake news” have influenced Western elections to a significant, perhaps even decisive, degree. While Russia did not create the hyperpartisanship and eroding national will that are crippling the United States and other Western nations domestically, it has exploited them more effectively than the ideologically hidebound Soviet Union ever could. This is made possible by the absence of a firm collective defense against Russian political warfare by the United States and its European allies, and by the existence of Western political leaders, movements and organizations willing to tolerate Moscow's manipulation so long as it benefits them.

The third dimension of Russia's global strategy is its most transactional: creating and protecting markets for arms sales. That's really why Moscow is attempting to return to Libya and, more importantly, why it protects Assad. Other than arms, few Russian manufactured goods are competitive in the global economy, forcing it to rely on raw material and energy exports. But Russia's leaders know that a great power—a status they desperately want—must do more than sell commodities.

Russia can pull this move off in part because its weapons are competitive in the global market and because it has no qualms about who its customers are. Buyers like Haftar and Assad in Syria have few other choices. But as Russian arms have proven their use in the Syrian civil war, Moscow has been looking to make inroads with nations that used to buy weapons only from the United States and Europe. This includes (<https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2017/11/18/russia-arms-sales-middle-east-countries-spike-record-high-levels.html>) the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In fact, Russia now sells arms to more than 50 (<http://www.businessinsider.com/this-how-many-countries-buy-weapons-from-russia-2017-7>) countries and political

organizations.

Since these three components of Russian strategy are mutually reinforcing, they form an effective and coherent global plan. By weakening the West politically, if not strategically, Moscow expands its potential market for global arms sales. Arms exports in turn produce cash that can be used to strengthen Russia's own military and to mute any opposition at home to President Vladimir Putin by creating a cash flow to fuel the loyalty of Russian elites. Rather than threatening Russia or being something that Moscow wants to help address, the ongoing collapse of the old order in the Middle East and North Africa is creating new and expanding markets for Russian weaponry and, in turn, influence.

In the near term, though, Russia probably doesn't want the complete demise of the existing global order since that would result in chaos, but it does want to weaken the system. It is like a parasite that would itself perish if its host died. This suggests that as long as the United States and its European allies remain uncertain about their role in maintaining the postwar international order, Russia will pursue the three-dimensional strategy that has made a nation with deep political and economic weaknesses into a global player.

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