

Russia's Grand Strategy in Afro-Eurasia. Skillful Diplomacy. What Could Go Wrong?

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Russia's 21st-century grand strategy is all about becoming the supreme "balancing" force in Afro-Eurasia through the skillful diplomatic management of the hemisphere's multiple conflicts, though the greatest danger to this vision comes not from the US' Hybrid Wars, but from Russia itself if its diplomatic and expert community representatives don't rise to the occasion in properly explaining this strategy to the masses.

Russia seems to have become one of the favorite topics nowadays of anyone who's even remotely interested in international politics, and apparently everyone has an opinion about the country's grand strategy. Those inclined to believe the Western Mainstream Media usually hold one of two contradictory positions in mistakenly believing that Russia is either hell-bent on militarily conquering the world or is just a few years from an all-out collapse as a result of [systemic mismanagement](#) at home. On the other hand, many followers of [Alt-Media](#) wrongly think that Russia has a self-appointed mission to save the world from American-led unipolarity in all of its manifestations and that the 5-D chess grandmaster President Putin is flawlessly winning victory after victory. All three trains of thought unfortunately fail to account for the reality of Russia's grand strategy, which can best be summarized as endeavoring to become the 21st-century's supreme "balancing" force in Afro-Eurasia through the skillful diplomatic management of the hemisphere's conflicts.

From The "Ummah Pivot" To The "Golden Ring"

This ambitious vision owes its origins to the ["progressive" faction of the Russian "deep state"](#) (its permanent military, intelligence, and diplomatic bureaucracies) that courageously decided to throw off the Soviet shackles of the past and initiate game-changing rapprochements with non-traditional partners such as Turkey, [Saudi Arabia](#), [Azerbaijan](#), and Pakistan in what can colloquially be called the "Ummah Pivot". These foreign policy pioneers "filled in the (geographic) gap" that their predecessors left unattended to after they "bookended" Eurasia with their own post-Cold War rapprochements with Germany in the West and China in the East, so it makes sense that the time would eventually come for Russia to look South towards the Muslim-majority countries lining that part of the Eurasian Rimland. As all of this has been happening, China unveiled its One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity that provides the infrastructural basis for connecting these disparate geopolitical nodes together and building the structural foundation for the emerging [Multipolar World Order](#).



Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan summit in Tehran in 2017

Having been rebuffed in Western Eurasia by the EU's anti-Russian sanctions that Brussels was pressured by the US into implementing, Moscow "rebalanced" its hitherto European focus and diversified its diplomatic efforts through the "Ummah Pivot", which has seen the creation of two new trilateral partnerships. The first one centers on Syria and concerns [Russia, Turkey, and Iran](#), while the second one is all about Afghanistan and involves [Russia, Pakistan, and China](#). The combined geostrategic potential of these five multipolar Great Powers "[circling the wagons](#)" to protect the Eurasian supercontinental core is the "Golden Ring", which represents the ultimate integrational objective of the 21st-century and would symbolize the institutional union of many of the Eastern Hemisphere's most important continental powers. Of the highest strategic significance, the fulfillment of the Golden Circle would allow its members to trade with one another via forthcoming overland Silk Road routes that crucially avoid the US Navy's dominance along the Eurasian Rimland.

Peripheral Problems

Nevertheless, the supercontinental maritime periphery is still very important because of China's dependence on sea routes for trading with Africa, whose future is intertwined with the People's Republic because the latter absolutely needs the continent to become robust enough of a developed market to purchase the country's overproduced goods. Beijing's greatest competitors in the [Afro-Pacific space](#) are Washington and its "[Lead From Behind](#)" coalition of the "[Quad](#)", which have unveiled the so-called "[Asia-Africa Growth Corridor](#)" (AAGC) to [counter](#) the New Silk Road. Making everything all the more tense, China and the other four Golden Circle Great Powers need to prepare themselves for responding to [externally provoked identity conflicts](#) in the Silk Road's geostrategic transit states ([Hybrid Wars](#)), and while the Eurasia Core can more or less count on multilateral solutions to these challenges via the SCO or any other related structure, Africa has no such security options.

China is therefore compelled to build up the military capacities of its Silk Road partners there and [potentially even deploy its aircraft carriers along the coast](#) in the worst-case scenario to "Lead From Behind" in assisting the locals in their counter-Hybrid War campaigns, but it's interestingly at this point where Russia could play a pivotal role in restoring stability to Africa. Moscow is already experimenting with a [new policy of using "mercenaries"](#) to support the internationally recognized but fledgling government of the Central African Republic in its quest to reclaim the civil war-torn country from the myriad bands of militants that are occupying the vast majority of it, and the success of Russia's version of its own "Lead From Behind" strategy would be the "proof of concept" needed to convince the rest of Africa and China that Moscow could provide much-needed security services in protecting their Silk Road projects.

The African Angle

As was explained in the hyperlinked analysis above, Russia's involvement in African conflict resolution processes could expand from the initial military phase to a secondary diplomatic one in making Moscow a key player in any forthcoming political settlements there, provided of course that its national companies can be guaranteed privileged access to the said nation's marketplace and resources. This win-win tradeoff could appeal to African elites and their Chinese partners alike, both of which don't have the combat or diplomatic experience that Russia has earned through its anti-terrorist campaign in Syria and attendant Astana peace process to handle the coming Hybrid War challenges ahead. So long as Russia

exercises prudence and avoids getting caught in any potential quagmires, then it can continue to “do more with less” in “cleaning up” the [many messes](#) that are predicted to be made all across Africa in the coming future.

Together with the military dimension of this “balancing” strategy comes its traditional diplomatic one, which Russia is already practicing to a degree [with China’s Indo-Japanese rivals](#). The reinforcement and betterment of bilateral relations with each of these American-aligned Great Powers is to both Russia and even China’s advantage because it could allow Moscow to exercise “moderating” influence on each of them in the event that the US succeeds in getting them to provoke a crisis with Beijing. Taking it even further, though, Russia should [explore opportunities](#) to become a full-fledged member of the AAGC in order to “piggyback” off of these two much more entrepreneurial countries’ progress in Africa, especially when considering that China isn’t helping Russia gain access to this marketplace (though that could change if it becomes Beijing’s strategic security partner in the continent). “Balancing” between the two economic “blocs” would be to Russia’s premier advantage, and it could even yield benefits for its underdeveloped [Far East and Arctic regions](#).

Strategic Review

Reviewing the grand strategy that’s been expounded upon thus far, Europe’s rejection of Russia as a result of American pressure motivated Moscow to commence the “Ummah Pivot” in solidifying the Eurasian Core through two interlinked trilateral partnerships that collectively form the basis of the Golden Ring Great Power nexus. By leveraging its centralized position in Eurasia, Russia aims to become the [irreplaceable transit state](#) for most continental connectivity ventures as well as the neutral “balancer” for constructively resolving the Hybrid War chaos that the US has wrought all across the landmass, thereby flexing both economic and diplomatic muscle through this strategy. Moving beyond the Eurasian Core and into the Rimland, Russia’s multi-vectored relationships with India and Japan can skillfully be put to use to acquire a market presence in Africa that would complement its unofficial military one via “mercenaries” and thereby allow it have a chance at “balancing” that continent’s affairs too.

No Narrative, No Chance

For as nifty as this approach may sound, there’s a lot of risk inherent in it, particularly when it comes to American-encouraged Hybrid Wars in the Eurasian Heartland and [divide-and-rule infowar operations](#) designed to break the Golden Ring, but these can still be managed on the state-to-state level with enough multilateral coordination and trust. More difficult to handle, however, are the consequences of Russia’s soft power “shortcomings” in traditionally “failing” to properly explain its “balancing” strategy to the masses, thereby leading to discontent and confusion that in turn provides a fertile environment for devious US-backed NGO operations aimed at sowing discord between the society and their elites. Russia assuredly communicates its “balancing” intentions to each of its “deep state” counterparts, just as it has a history of doing, but the Russian Federation hasn’t been able to match the USSR when it comes to getting its message across to average folks in each of those countries.



Armenia is a [perfect example](#) of what went wrong with Russia's soft power strategy and deserves to be concisely analyzed as a case study. Russia's "[military diplomacy](#)" of preserving the regional balance of power by selling arms to both Armenia and its neighboring foe Azerbaijan is a sound strategy in the geopolitical sense but a risky one when it comes to Russia's image in the minds of each of its partners' populations. Azerbaijanis don't mind much since Russia was regarded as previously being closer to their enemy until recently, but the Armenians were understandably upset when they learned that their CSTO mutual defense ally was arming their adversary. Even if the majority of its citizens wouldn't ever "come around" to seeing Russia's side of this situation, Moscow could have at least invested enough soft power resources and effort in trying to explain its grand strategic intentions in this situation, but it didn't and this in turn fueled Pashinyan's "[protest](#)" movement against the ruling Armenian authorities.

It's not just Armenia either, but many of Russia's traditional partners are uneasy over its newfound "balancing" relations with their historic rivals. The Serbian, Syrian, Iranian, and Indian publics would rather that Russia didn't cooperate so closely with [Croatia](#), Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, but seeing as how it already is, the "least" that Moscow could do, many of them feel, is try to explain to them why this is occurring even if they don't ultimately end up agreeing with it. Unfortunately, that's not happening, at all, and the consequences of this soft power "ineptitude" is that people are losing trust in Russia.

Instead of having a chance to consider it as being a skillful player on the "19th-Century Great Power Chessboard" in "balancing" everything and therefore counteracting the destabilizing effects of American foreign policy, the country is coming off as overly "self-interested", "untrustworthy", and superficially "no different from the US".

Global Risks

Russian strategists and policymakers are indeed adhering to a Neo-Realist paradigm of International Relations, but their country's grand interest in maintaining stability in Afro-Eurasia and consequently securing the New Silk Roads that are expected to form the foundation of the emerging Multipolar World Order fully overlap with each of its partners', though all of them should accept that each party must "compromise" on something or another in order to reach the Moscow-mediated "deals" for bringing this win-win future about. This "inconvenient" reality might not be popular among their publics but it's nevertheless what has to happen in order for Russia's model to succeed, though the actual problem arises when people aren't made aware of any of this by their leaders and then all of a sudden hear on the news or come across rumors (whether true or not) that their country might be on the verge of "sacrificing" something dear to them.

Had the proper "preconditioning" and "perception management" been implemented prior to this happening, then the potential for the US or other hostile third parties to exploit this sentiment in stirring unrest like they did in Armenia after Russia's repeated weapons deals with Azerbaijan would be a lot less because there'd at least be a "constructive" narrative already available to counter the newly created destructive one that's been weaponized by Moscow's foes. Regrettably, because Russia prefers to deal mostly with its partners' "deep states" when it comes to these issues and tends to "neglect" public opinion in those countries, this soft power vulnerability is now present all across Afro-Eurasia and waiting to be exploited by the US, which wields considerably stronger sway in "winning hearts and minds" on the local level, even if it has to rely on indirect (NGO) means to do so. Russia's partners, especially those with [nominally "democratic" systems](#), are therefore at risk of

being “blackmailed” by demagogic mobs.

Concluding Thoughts

It can't be stressed how important it is for Russia's grand strategic vision of “balancing” Afro-Eurasian affairs to be clearly expressed by its diplomatic and expert community representatives in order to prevent the US from weaponizing “public pressure” against it inside of each of its partners' societies. Sensitive issues such as arms shipments to both Armenia and Azerbaijan or cooperating with Turkey in northern Syria need to be discussed at the local level and not just with each traditional partner's “deep state” so as to retain public trust in Moscow's international measures by making at least some degree of effort in trying to explain these policies to the masses. The lack of any narrative whatsoever from the Russian side in these regards leads to an informational void that is quickly filled by the US and its unipolar allies, which endangers the long-term sustainability of Moscow's “balancing” efforts because of the risk that its partners might cave to externally manipulated “public pressure” ([Color Revolutions](#)).

For as ambitious as it sounds, it's certainly possible for Russia to pull off its strategy in repairing the damage that the US made all across the hemisphere (especially in its non-European quarters), but only so long as there are equal measures of “deep state” and public trust in its initiatives. Nobody, let alone average folks, should ever be under any false impressions about Russia's motives in doing this, which are first and foremost to secure its own interests but also overlap with the primary ones of each of its many partners when it comes to the general goal of advancing multipolarity, but false expectations about Moscow's “commitment” to them will only lead to a sense of disappointment with time which will inevitably be capitalized upon by its American adversary. Along the same lines, having no understanding whatsoever of what Russia is up to is equally dangerous because it could also result in the same disruptive outcome.

Therefore, Russia needs to prioritize its soft power outreaches and must urgently make attempts through its diplomatic and expert community representatives to communicate its “balancing” intentions beyond its partners' “deep states” and directly to their people. Regular citizens must be made aware of Russia's global vision so as not to be as easily manipulated by America through the exploitation of the existing narrative void and/or their false hopes that wishfully arise from it, though it must nevertheless be accepted that not everyone will agree with Moscow's “balancing” means regardless of its intentions. That's perfectly alright because the importance is in making the narrative known so that subsequent soft power efforts can be invested in promoting it among the public, which is why the first step must immediately be undertaken in making people aware of this message to begin with so that follow-up plans can be implemented for advancing it in the future and strengthening this grand strategic vision at all levels of Afro-Eurasian society.

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