
18. Ideally, the president or National Security Staff provide the DOD with strategic-level guidance that includes the strategic narrative. In the event the narrative is not provided or unclear, the narrative is not provided or unclear, JDN 2-13 (2013) suggests several ways to extract the strategic narrative from other high-level documents.


What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?
reviewed by 2ndLt Sam Sasser, Co E, TBS

Following the exit of the Golden Horde from the Russian steppe in the 1300s, Russia adopted the role of bridging the vast cultural divide between Europe and Asia. It has never completely acceded to the norms of either culture, instead choosing to be a conglomeration of the two to form its socio-political identity. Consequently, Russia’s path to modernity was inconsistent with any of the Asian or European great powers. This is apparent in the way Russia conducts its relationship with the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Throughout its complicated history, Russia has endeavored to assert territorial, economic, or political control over parts of this region—such as Iran at the turn of the 19th century or Afghanistan during the Cold War.

To this day, Russia’s development as the Eurasian bridging point informs the manner in which it interacts with the world, in particular the West. In his book titled, What is Russia Up To in the Middle East, Dmitri Trenin utilizes this historical context to analyze the strategic calculus of the Putin/Medvedev/Putin administrations toward the region over the past eighteen years. The picture he paints is one of astounding flexibility, political and military foresight founded in a desire to avoid the pitfalls of the West in polarizing the region (in choosing one side of the Shia/Sunni divide, for instance), and a surprising amount of engagement with the domestic Russian populace—particularly the Muslim contingent—in making its Middle Eastern policies.

The structure of the book is categorical. Trenin divides the exposé into five sections, beginning with the history of Russian engagement in the region to provide a strong foundation for comprehension of its modern mindset. The focus of the book henceforth (three sections, entitled “War,” “Diplomacy,” and “Trade,” respectively) is firmly rooted in the manner in which the Syrian civil war revitalized Russian interest and involvement in the region—following a near three decade, post-Soviet lull—and places Russia squarely at odds with the prevalent, Western-oriented power structure. The author emphasizes the way the Russians perceive themselves, the social and political direction in which their society is moving, and the dexterity of how Russians have managed their relations in the region. Trenin argues that the flexibility through which the Russians developed a system of tenuous alliances has worked in its favor; however, success in this region is not assured. Although the Russians have been successful at pitting their allies against one another, so too have their allies succeeded in exploiting the Russians to their own advantage.

The book’s conclusion emphasizes how the Russians are too pragmatic to see themselves as the global replacement for the U.S. but, rather, that they wish to assert themselves as the regional hegemon—both to further their economic and security interests and to challenge the status quo of the liberal institutionalist international system. Having been published in 2018, this book is incredibly relevant to today’s global issues and should be considered by anyone who wants to understand the complexities and future challenges of the re-engagement of Russia in the Middle East/Southwest Asia.