Whenever there’s an examination of Russia’s resurgence in Middle Eastern and African affairs, the narrative is always about weapons, economic competition, and Cold War-era detente. Few analysts or reporters examine the non-transactional elements of the policies of Vladimir Putin. To really understand the recent successes of Mr. Putin and Russia, we must understand the somewhat obscure aspects of Russia’s foreign policy.

A perfect example of how trade statistics dominate western thought process on Russia policy can be found at almost any Washington or London think tank. Take this Chatham House report last year by Dr. Alex Vines OBE, for instance. The Africa Programme at Chatham House is not immune from the disease that causes western experts to oversimplify and underestimate Putin’s external policies. To quote Dr. Vines:

“Russia has, for several years, been quietly investing in Soviet-era partnerships and forging new alliances by offering security, arms training, and electioneering services in exchange for mining rights and other opportunities.”

As you can see, Vines is totally focused on transactional aspects of Russia’s relationships, adhering to what political scientists refer to as “rentierism” - or the new imperialism. As you may know, the concept of the rentier state is Marxist, thought to have come into practical use in the time of Lenin. But while the so-called rentier mentality which
dominates much of the Middle East and Africa does affect Russia and policy, the deeper implications of Russia’s new relationships are equally important.

Dr. Vines, Chatham House, and nearly all the west’s other analytical stables discuss Russia’s wielding of soft power. This is true because their approaches and understanding of world affairs is from purely a businessman’s or a general’s world perspective. This is the part of the reason west-east relations are so mucked up. Every reporter on a policy beat in New York or Washington can write a biography on Vladimir Putin and “what he wants,” but there’s no one who really understands how Russia’s president is winning at world detente.

In much the same way business relationships are fostered in a highly competitive economic environment, Russia’s successful policies often win out because of the more subtle factors. In Africa, for instance, the history of the Soviet Union’s, and later Russia’s criticisms of Cold War-era neocolonialism play a role. Make no mistake, ideologically, Mr. Putin’s efforts and outreachs are far more appealing than those of the US, France, Britain, Germany, and others with the Anglo-European mindset toward these nations. As for the Middle East, Mr. Putin’s policies win out in large part because of a more “fraternal relationships” - like the one between Russian and Middle Eastern Islamic communities. Samuel Ramani and Theodore Karasik point these out in a report last year at LobeLog.

The western discussion centers around accusing Russia and Mr. Putin for what US policies are centered around. It’s as if the greatest minds in the western world cannot fathom establishing cultural or ideological linkages with people of these nations. The Americans, French, Brits, and Germans look at Russia policy success as bankers and weapons dealers, from a superiority and exceptionalism standpoint. While Russia seems to address the Middle East and Africa on a more equal footing.

Finally, the political dysfunction that now eats away at the United States’ reputation, is not a factor that we should underestimate. Donald Trump’s administration treats no one as equal. Only Israel and at times Saudi Arabia seem like favored nations if not full-fledged equals. Speaking of brotherhood and loyalty, Mr. Putin’s loyalty to and rescuing of Syria’s Assad has not gone unnoticed in these regions. At the same moment the US-led coalition tries to stabilize it’s invaded satraps, Putin continues a more than forty-year tradition of sticking by the Syrian leadership.

And the Russian president has capitalized on this aspect to expand Russian influence worldwide.

Russia is supplanting western powers as the more “reliable partner” for many reasons. And it does not hurt that Donald Trump and his European allies continually stumble over their archaic ideas about emerging countries. Sure Russian business will prosper from this dynamic shift in Africa and the Middle East, but the profit will not be nearly as one-sided as it is with the neocolonialists. This AI-Monitor report puts it this way in a discussion of Mr. Putin’s “Gulf Security Plan”:

“He [Putin] might believe his is ultimately the only meaningful diplomatic channel; his stock rises, even if incrementally, simply by playing on traditionally American turf; and the Gulf states, and maybe even the United States and the EU, might eventually come around to avoid an unwanted crisis and conflict.”

In short, Putin and Russia have been so successful, winning nowadays is about watching the US and allies make mistakes as much as it is about created dynamic policies. For those unfamiliar, the Russian concept for the Gulf area is a strategy that will work. That is if the western hegemony can agree to try a new game for peace and prosperity in these regions. I find it interesting that the official documentation of this Putin plan is framed in the form of an invitation to Washington and the others, to take part in a broader coalition for peace and security. Obviously, the Anglo-European cabal did not accept.

“Russia’s proposals are in no way final and represent a kind of invitation to start a constructive dialogue on ways to achieve long-term stabilization in the Gulf region. We are ready to work closely with all stakeholders in both official settings and in sociopolitical and expert circles.”

Yes, Russia wants trade and economic wins in both the Middle East and Africa. No, Vladimir Putin does not want to leverage regions and continents in a global domination game intended to destroy America and allies. Destroying markets, after all, is not a way to do good business. As for analyzing Putin, the experts should examine the other variables of his success. That is, even if the goal of think tanks is to find an enemy’s weakness. So far, Putin does not seem to have any.

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