



SMA Reach-back Report

Global Power Competition

Question (R6.2): *In the event that the US/Coalition is challenged by another global power [Russia for the purposes of this response], what are the second and third order effects in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility?*

Contributors

Mr. Edward Chow, Center for Strategic and International Studies; Dr. Frederick Kagan, American Enterprise Institute; Mr. Vern Liebl, Center for Advanced Operational Cultural Learning, USMC University; Dr. Spencer Meredith III, National Defense University; Dr. Abdulaziz Sager, Gulf Research Center; Mr. Mubin Shaikh, Independent Consultant; Ms. Katherine Zimmerman, American Enterprise Institute

Executive Summary

Ali Jafri, NSI Inc.

As Russia continues to challenge United States' power and influence around the world, its activities in CENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR) represent a useful lens with which to view this conflict. In Iraq and Syria, both Russia and the United States (and its Coalition) have been drawn into this layered conflict to challenge or defend the status quo with varying degrees of success and impact. While experts question whether Russia can challenge the United States globally, it can likely operate on the margins of United States interests, with a series of surgical and lower-level policy decisions. To that point, some respondents, including Edward Chow of the Center for Strategic and International Studies and Vern Liebl of the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning at Marine Corps University, argue that they do not consider Russia a true peer and challenger of US global influence. Instead of global dominance, Russia is seeking to "marginalize US power and influence in regions they deem important to their interests" (Chow). Contributors agreed, though, that Russia is well positioned to capitalize on opportunities for growth and influence in the Middle East. This report looks at Russia's interests, actions, and likelihood of success in challenging US global influence through these conflicts.

Conditions Favoring Increased Russian Influence

In order to better understand the opportunities available to Russia in CENTCOM's AOR, experts provided context on the current situation in the region. Dr. Spencer Meredith III of the National Defense University's College of International and Security Affairs took note of how Russian opportunism has taken advantage of an environment that allows them to exert outsized influence on events in the CENTCOM AOR. Mr. Liebl noted that Russia is "winning" in the information operations domain, particularly as they have widely publicized successful humanitarian initiatives, specifically the effective

missions by Russian Explosive Ordinance Detail (EOD) teams that have benefitted Syrian citizens. According to Dr. Abdulaziz Sager of the Gulf Research Center, this along with other recent Russian activities has afforded them greater credibility among more states in the region. This is reinforced by the successful continuation of a narrative that paints the United States as a regional destabilizer (Meredith). In Liebl's estimation, this success has been made possible by US forfeiture of the regional narrative space, which is accompanied by waning American influence, wavering commitments, and relinquishing leadership.

This environment of waning influence has also been influenced by what is seen as wavering commitment on the part of domestic policymakers in the United States according to both Dr. Frederick Kagan and Ms. Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute. They concede the possibility that domestic public opinion could swing towards wanting to partner with Russia instead of countering them in the area. Experts have also argued that the US has abandoned its leadership role in the Middle East. Specifically, in negotiations related to Syria, Libya, and Yemen, Dr. Kagan and Ms. Zimmerman note that the United States has not been leading the process. The current environment of sliding US leadership and subsequent Russian usurpation could have consequences stretching across a number of domains.

Effects of Russia Achieving its Objectives in the Middle East on US Strategy and Interests

Military

Mr. Chow argues that the Russian military seeks to diminish US military capabilities in the region. This would be achieved by maintaining their current bases, but also by expanding their operational footprint into Iran, among other states (Chow). Any actions aligned towards this objective could threaten US assets and limit US freedom of movement—an interest that the United States would seek to protect (Kagan, Zimmerman). Russia has worked to be perceived as a reliable partner, which might make states in the region more willing to allow Russia to base facilities and operations within their jurisdictions, according to Dr. Sager. Additionally, Russia is likely to bolster arms sales to regional actors (Sager, Kagan, Zimmerman). Dr. Sager notes that the cost difference between Russian and American systems, as well as the lack of strings attached to Russian purchases privileges the Russian Federation in this arena. Additionally, skepticism by Gulf States of the United States' commitment to the region has led some countries in the region to hedge their bets and seek deepened relationships with Russia (Kagan, Zimmerman).

Energy

A primary arena in which Russia is well positioned to capitalize on fluid regional dynamics is in global energy markets. Both Chow's and the Kagan-Zimmerman responses suggested that Russia would seek to develop closer relations with Saudi Arabia (and other oil producing states). Such a Russian move could decrease US leverage in Saudi Arabia (Kagan, Zimmerman). Additionally, while this may complicate US economic interests, it may also produce an opportunity for the United States to work with other large oil-consuming states, such as China and India in a context that reflects the common interests that these states share (Chow). Looking beyond Saudi Arabia, increased Russian activity in other regional energy markets (such as Libya) could imperil certain European energy markets, such as Italy (Kagan, Zimmerman). The competitive regional energy landscape has prevented such Russian activities from becoming an inevitability, but they do remain a possibility.

Both the South Stream and the (planned) TurkStream pipelines also represent a major inflection point in the region's power dynamics. If Russia is to capitalize on the market access that the TurkStream pipeline

would provide, it could decide to mitigate the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in order to appease Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Meredith). Similarly, the TurkStream pipeline offers an opportunity for Russia to strengthen its hand in the region. This pipeline provides an alternative route to European markets that circumvents Ukraine, and any political pitfalls therein. It also opens up a new front of market vulnerability for the European Union, who will be subject to a fickle Russia as an energy gatekeeper, although US LNG can mitigate this (Meredith). This pipeline would have the dual impact of deepening Russo-Turkish relations, while also motivating Iran to seek a closer relationship with Russia to deepen their energy partnership (Meredith). A renewed Russo-Turkish relationship could also prompt those countries to support each other in projects away from this region.

International Diplomacy

Russia stands to make international diplomatic gains in the new environment discussed above. In the aftermath of the Iraqi state's campaign against Da'esh, there remain opportunities for Russia to help stabilize political and security events in the country (Chow). Additionally, through initiatives supporting international negotiations, Russia could create alternative fora that run parallel to the United Nations and other Western-oriented organizations (Kagan, Zimmerman). Indeed the diplomatic vacuum mentioned by Dr. Kagan and Ms. Zimmerman serves as an inducement to Russian behavior in this arena and persists despite local wariness of Russian involvement and regional states' lack of conviction of the viability and benefits of a long-term relationship with Russia. Additionally, Russia may also be constrained by limited diplomatic resources that would prevent them from involvement in a large number of different initiatives (Kagan, Zimmerman). Russia may also seek to seize the mantle of combating global terrorism and fighting global jihadist movements (Chow). This also reflects concurrent domestic Russian priorities in Chechnya and elsewhere (Liebl).

The current situation in the CENTCOM AOR also provides challenges and opportunities for Russia as it considers its bilateral relationships there. Egypt has allowed Russian military aircraft to use Egyptian bases and airspace. While this represents an opportunity for Russia, it is part of a longstanding Egyptian strategy of playing the United States and the Russians (and previously the USSR) against one another (Liebl). In Syria, Russian interests include the preservation of the Assad regime. To that end, they are leading peace talks on their terms (Liebl). Complicating a potential US response is the notion that Russian activities have been more effective in Syria than those undertaken by the United States (Sager). Similar to the Egyptian strategy of balancing Russian and American interests against each other, Iraq is playing a similar game (Liebl). Indeed, Russia has the ability to play a significant part in reconstruction efforts in Iraq, a role that they will likely relish (Kagan, Zimmerman).

The burgeoning Russo-Turkish relationship has been mentioned earlier in the context of energy cooperation. Despite historical competition between those two entities, the current fraught relationship between Turkey and the United States presents an opportunity for Russia to move in (Kagan, Zimmerman). This potential rapprochement will embolden Turkey (and perhaps even Iran) to subdue Kurdish self-determination efforts (Meredith). Iran's standing distrust of the current US Administration is a potential opening for further improving relations with Russia buttressed by Russian and Iranian convergent interests in containing the opium trade in Afghanistan (Liebl). If Russia does indeed challenge the United States' strategic imperatives, Iran could be drawn in as well, prompting a likely response from Gulf countries wary of increased Iranian activity in the neighborhood, according to regional expert Mubin Shaikh.

Conclusion

According to Dr. Meredith and Dr. Sager, Russia will be one of several—if not the leading—actors shaping and defining the outcome of conflicts in the central Middle East. These efforts will ensure an enduring Russian presence in the region in terms of military operations and economic trade (Meredith). While the US can do little to halt Russia’s expanding influence in the region, the US could attempt to at the very least, maintain, if not increase, its influence, resulting in a period of “enduring competition.” Even maintaining its current level of influence is challenging though, given Russian advances in the region. Dr. Meredith argues, “The loss of US reputation in the region is inevitable” in part because the natural, historical (and conflicting) interests of regional actors are reemerging—they no longer need or want the US to set the terms, the conditions for success, or most of all, constrain their independent actions. This is in part due to the “success” of US regional capacity building efforts over the years, as much as their own initiative. Dr. Meredith concludes that Russia’s likely entrenchment and success in the Middle East will result in the return of the “‘great game’ of power politics with fluid allegiances, amidst fixed interests, all centered on relative gains in a zero-sum international environment.”

Expert Contributions

Mr. Edward Chow

Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

Request: Please list and describe what you feel are the top 3-5 Russian interests in the Central Region over the next 18-24 month period, what actions would be necessary to satisfy these interests, the likelihood of each of these actions occurring, the main constraints and enablers to these actions, and the US options for countering them.

Response:

Russian Interest	What actions would best serve this interest in the Central Region over the next 18-24 months?	What are possible competing US interests?	How likely is it that the action listed in column 2 would be successful? 0% indicates that the desired outcome will never be achieved; 100% indicates the outcome will occur with certainty	What are the main constraints or enablers to achieving each action?	What options (diplomatic, military, economic, etc.) does the US have for countering these actions or alliances?
Interest 1. Diminish US pre-eminent position in the region.	Cooperate with regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, and separate them from US orbit.	US needs to rebuild frayed relations with regional powers, including re-establishing working relationship with Iran.	= 70%	US has been doing a pretty good job, across recent administrations, in helping Russia achieve its objective.	US must rebuild relations with regional powers.
Interest 2. Increase Russian influence in	Work with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab	US own economic interests and those of our	= 60%	Alliance with Arab oil producers is one of temporary	Work with emerging powers like China and India,

the most important oil region of the world.	countries on matters of common interest, such as the OPEC/non-OPEC agreement on oil production cuts.	closest allies and trading partners lie with oil consumers, not oil producers.		convenience to both sides and is unlikely to last.	whose interests are also those of oil importers, rather than seeing their expanding influence in the region as a threat to our interests.
Interest 3. Reduce US military capability in the region and counter it if possible.	Maintain military installations in Syria and extend regional assets into places like Iran.	Greater Russian military footprint in the region makes US military assets more vulnerable and increases the chance of unintended conflict.	= 50%	Much depends on how astute US is in maintaining cooperation with regional partners.	Stop selling advanced weaponry to partners in the region whose security vulnerability is more internal than external. Instead help them establish more representative governments overtime which care for welfare of population.
Interest 4. Contain radical Islam to protect Russian homeland.	Work as much as possible with regional partners, including reviving Soviet-era relations with Kurdish movements and using Soviet diaspora in Israel.	Russian interest to contain radical Islam to places outside of Russia is not necessarily compatible with US interest to eliminate radical Islam's impact worldwide.	= 20%	An imploding Iraq will wreak havoc in the region and beyond.	Stabilizing Iraq, which includes re-establishing a functioning economy outside the oil sector.
Interest 5. Seize leadership on anti-terrorism from US.	Work with emerging powers outside the region, such as China and	US should be working more with emerging powers such as China and India, which	= 10%	Failure of US to manage relationships with regional powers, including Iran, and with	Seek common ground with regional powers, including Iran. Renew efforts

	India, on common interests, including reducing US pre-eminence.	are interested in stability in the region, than Russia which wants to upset the status quo, including US pre-eminence.		emerging powers.	to resolve Israel-Palestine conflict.
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Please feel free to contribute any additional comments, analysis, insights, or references below.

“The US has long held a position as the global superpower, though is now being confronted by competitors, such as Russia, who seek to challenge US pre-eminence and become US-peer great powers.”

I do not agree with this statement. No near-peer competitor has such aspiration in the short to medium term. There are countries, however, which seek to marginalize US power and influence in regions they deem important to their interests. I believe this is Russia’s position in this region.

Dr. Frederick Kagan and Ms. Katherine Zimmerman

American Enterprise Institute

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Response:

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Strengthen Russian economy	Russia will pursue the development of oil fields, natural gas pipelines, and other energy deals in region. It will seek to coordinate with Saudi Arabia to influence OPEC production levels in order to prevent the collapse of the price of oil. It will also seek	Leverage over Saudi Arabia decreases. Russian and Saudi Arabian cooperation may increase as they make concession to each other in order to ensure the other works toward keeping the price of oil up. Stability of US partners threatened.	Russia will increase its investment contracts and military sales in the region has a high probability—90% chance of occurring in the next 18-24 months.	<i>Constraint:</i> Russian economic investment in the region requires Russian companies to outbid others for specific deals. Competition could prevent Russia from securing the energy deals it seeks. <i>Enabler:</i> Perception	<i>Diplomatic:</i> The US could convey its staying power in the region to Gulf State and other partners. <i>Military:</i> The US could offer training and assistance to partner governments to out-compete Russian advances. The US has already stepped up

	<p>to increase arms sales to the region, including to Gulf States (such as the S-400 system to Saudi Arabia and Turkey) and new tanks to Iraq. Arms sales, along with oil, are the only two major ways Russia can obtain cash from abroad.</p> <p>Russian companies will also seek to secure reconstruction bids in Iraq, Syria, and possibly Yemen.</p>	<p>Russian purchase of oil and of oil infrastructure (such as in Libya) creates the ability for Russia to potentially threaten European oil-importing nations like Italy.</p> <p>Robustness of US influence in the region questioned. The openness of Gulf States toward the purchase of advanced Russian weaponry indicates that they are hedging their bets against their relationship with the U.S. and U.S. willingness to remain active in the region.</p>		<p>among Gulf States that the US is less reliable than before has driven some to hedge bets with Russia.</p>	<p>foreign military sales and could do more.</p> <p><i>Economic:</i> The US could impose additional sanctions against Russia and could seek to encourage EU partners to follow suit. It could expand and/or enforce current sanctions regimes against Iran, which could constrain Iran’s buying power over the medium term.</p>
<p>Erode capability and willingness of US and Europe to act politically or</p>	<p>Russia will pursue the expansion of its military basing footprint in the region and the movement of additional</p>	<p>US freedom of movement threatened along with freedom of navigation through maritime</p>	<p>Russia will secure additional basing in region—40% probability over next 18-24 months.</p> <p>Russia will</p>	<p><i>Constraint:</i> Russian diplomatic resources seem to be limited, placing constraints on Russia’s ability</p>	<p><i>Diplomatic:</i> The US could take the lead in negotiations regarding the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen</p>

<p>militarily against Russia</p>	<p>capabilities to military bases oriented on denying the US and Europe freedom of movement. It will do so by continuing to incorporate Iraq into its alternative security infrastructure, existent today with Iran and the Syrian regime and provide military assistance and training to the Iraqi Security Forces. Russia could apply the blueprint it developed in Syria to the Yemen crisis in order to secure access to military basing in Aden or al Hudaydah port cities as an alternative to basing in East Africa.</p> <p>Russia will undermine UN processes and paralyze the development of diplomatic or political actions by the US and Europe</p>	<p>chokepoints.</p> <p>US influence and leverage over MENA partners decreased.</p> <p>US position as global leader weakened as Russia coopts international processes.</p>	<p>expand current military basing in the region—90% probability over the next 18-24 months.</p> <p>Russia will develop an additional competing diplomatic channel for conflict resolution in the region—50% probability over the next 18-24 months. Russia seems to invest in such a channel opportunistically in Yemen, which is the likely place for it to inject itself as an alternative to a UN channel.</p>	<p>to invest heavily in resolving multiple conflicts at once.</p> <p>Russia likely seeks to expand military basing without requirements to invest significantly in the defense of its force posture, which means it must rely on a local partner.</p> <p>Regional partners are wary of Russian involvement and the long-term benefit of working with Russia.</p> <p><i>Enabler:</i> Diplomatic vacuums create space for opportunistic efforts by Russia.</p> <p>Risk-aversion within US decision-making circles to pushing back or raising the cost of</p>	<p>rather than observing the actions of others. The US could also accelerate efforts to form a regional bloc to contain Iranian malign influence, offering security guarantees to some Gulf states, in return for their refusal to join with or support Russian efforts counter to US interests.</p> <p><i>Military:</i> The US could deploy additional assets to the CENTCOM AOR to demonstrate its willingness and ability to offset and overcome Russian deployments (particularly A2AD systems). The US could (and should) maintain a force package in theater clearly able to destroy the Russian positions in the region as a</p>
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	<p>by providing alternative forums for political negotiations and presenting conclusions from these forums as the way forward toward peace. US, UK, and French unwillingness to compel a Russian veto on the UNSC will constrain potential UN actions in the region.</p>			<p>Russian involvement incentives Putin to continue efforts to expand back into old Soviet-era basing and relationships.</p>	<p>deterrent to Russian adventurism.</p>
<p>Decrease American influence in the region</p>	<p>Russia will continue to deepen its relationships with Turkey (and also Iran), which will continue to strain the US-Turkish bilateral relationship.</p> <p>Russia will seek to convince the US and US partners that it could be a key broker against terrorism and also Iran in the region in order to discourage US actions.</p>	<p>The strained relationship with Turkey competes with NATO treaty obligations to the country.</p> <p>The Middle East is an area of vital national security concern for the US—Russia's efforts to expel us from the region would have devastating consequences for the US.</p>	<p>The Russo-Turkish relationship will continue to deepen—70% probability in the next 18-24 months.</p> <p>Convergent interests remain more salient than the points of divergence for the moment. Interests diverge fundamentally, however, making this relationship unlikely to endure over the long term.</p> <p>Russia will successfully present itself as reliable US</p>	<p><i>Constraint:</i> US public opinion could shift significantly to affect the position of US decision-makers on partnering with Russia in the region.</p> <p>Fundamental interest divergence with Turkey will prevent the establishment of an enduring Russo-Turkish partnership.</p> <p>Regional partners seek more US</p>	<p>Stop the policy of retrenchment, commit to long-term engagement in the region, take a leading role in conflicts with vital implications for the US (Iraq, Syria, Yemen, e.g.), and demonstrate a willingness to stand up to Russian efforts to expand its footprint and constrain ours. Increase economic pressure on Russia (which has an</p>

			<p>partner in region against terrorism and Iran—50% probability in next 18-24 months. Russia’s success in convincing key decision-makers that US and Russian interests converge over the past year indicate that the US could accept the Russian role.</p> <p>The US appears willing to disengage from the region, possibly accomplishing Russia's objectives for it.</p>	<p>engagement, not less, and will not prefer Russia as a partner if the US offers them a choice.</p> <p><i>Enabler:</i> US retrenchment policies.</p>	<p>economy the size of Italy's and depends on two exports) and Iran in order to generate as much friction as possible in that relationship. Strengthen relationships with Gulf states. Be prepared to destroy Russian A2AD systems as required.</p>
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Please feel free to contribute any additional comments, analysis, insights, or references below.

Many of the insights provided above are derived from the September 2017 Critical Threats Project-Institute for the Study of War Syria Intelligence Estimate and Forecast. The PDF is available: <https://www.criticalthreats.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-Syrian-Theater-September-2017.pdf>.

Mr. Vernie Liebl

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Question: In the event that the U.S./Coalition is challenged by another global power, what are the second and third order effects in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility?

Amplification: Consider the range of interests that Russia has in the Central Region¹ over the next 18-24 months and how these interests may come into conflict with those of the US. What actions or alliances would enable the achievement of these interests, how likely are they, and what are the main enablers or constraints to the achievement of these actions/alliances? What options does the US have to counter?

Request: Please list and describe what you feel are the top 3-5 Russian interests in the Central Region over the next 18-24 month period, what actions would be necessary to satisfy these interests, the likelihood of each of these actions occurring, the main constraints and enablers to these actions, and the US options for countering them.

Response:

Russian Interest #1	Prestige and global success versus U.S. via Middle East centric actions	Presence, influence and/or dominance in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia et al	The provided instructions are incompatible with providing the insight and responses that need to be provided, therefore look to the "additional" section	Most of the constraints/enablers are specific to each country, with some overlap on specific constraints (such as the Islamic State	What options (diplomatic, military, economic, etc.) does the US have for countering these actions or alliances?

Please feel free to contribute any additional comments, analysis, insights, or references below.

Response:

The provided spread sheet is incompatible with properly responding to the question posed (R6.2), therefore my observations will be here.

¹ The CENTCOM Area of Responsibility is quite large. For the purposes of this effort, the Central Region will refer to the Levant and the Gulf.

First, the question implies that the U.S./Coalition is primarily challenged by Russia in the CENTCOM AOR, which is clearly what the focus is desired to be. However, the first thing to be delineated is –Is Russia a global super power?

True, they have possibly pervasive influence in Syria but have little in Iraq. Russia is on the verge of being allowed use of Egyptian airfields and airspace as General Sisi, current leader of Egypt, is trying to off-set a U.S. strategic presence in the region as well as an over-reliance on the U.S. for military equipment and support (the lack of U.S. support in combating Morsi and the Muslim Brothers is a prime driver for Egypt). Russian interests in Turkey are in the nature of weakening/embarrassing the U.S., NATO and the EU, as well as circumventing the Ukraine for the export of natural gas. Russia is an enabler of Iran, generally in its military ventures in Syria, Iraq and Yemen; specifically in encouraging the Iranian nuclear program. However, there is likely a point at which Russia will stop that benign enabling and focus on forcing Iran into a nuclear stasis (meaning Russia is likely willing to ‘allow’ Iran to become a ‘minor’ nuclear power, enough to deter any U.S. amphibious potentials, but not enough to physically threaten the Russian heartland).

None of the Russian efforts in any of the above listed countries makes Russia a global superpower, as nearly all are either near the Russian periphery (example: Turkey) or are in areas of traditional Russian interests (example: the Levant – meaning Mediterranean Turkey and Syria). Context needs to be given to Russian efforts (and accomplishments) in regards to Turkey and Syria needs to be viewed in light of the 325+ year’s long effort to obtain ice-free/warm water ports for Russia. Russian naval squadrons were in the Mediterranean fighting Ottoman naval forces in 1768-1770, fighting in the Mediterranean against Napoleonic forces from 1798-1807 and then homeporting a Russian naval squadron in Malta from 1827-1833. From 1958 to 1991 the Soviet Navy operated the 5th Eskadra in the Mediterranean (see “The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean” by Gordon McCormick, Oct 1987, the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA). Russia re-established the 5th Eskadra in Tartus Syria in 2013, where they remain today. The naval base of Tartus, established in 1983 specifically for the 5th Eskadra, was re-occupied by the Russians in 2000, after a nine year absence when in Nov 1999, then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced that Russian Navy operations would be extended and that Tartus would be re-activated.

In January 2017, Russia and Syria signed an agreement extending Russian control of Tartus (and the air base at Hmeimim near Latakia) for 49 years, with an option for a further 25 years beyond that. Included in the agreement was Syrian granting of Russian extraterritorial control in those base areas and acknowledgement that Russian naval combatants could include those that were nuclear-powered with no referral to the Syrian government. Clearly, all of the current and recent Russian actions in Syria are compatible with the long Russian strategy of operating in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant.

As a prefatory ‘bottom line up front’ – Russian efforts, accomplishments and failures within the Levant and associated areas (Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Cyprus, etc) are part of long-term Russian drive start by Tsar Peter the Great. And to explain why a continental land power should have such a counter-intuitive long-term effort, one needs to understand the view from Moscow. Moscow and the Russian heartland has few land barriers to invasion, from east, west or south, thus there is a need to establish defenses as far forward as possible in order to give greater depth for security. A part of that is to find strategically defensible ‘points’ out on that defensive periphery. Once those points are fortified, they become critical terrain, which requires a further extension to find other defensive outliers to protect the now established defensive points, zones and/or boundaries. Thus fortifications based on a river need to have a defensive screen beyond that river, which means expansion to get those defensive screening

locations. Once those are taken, held and developed, those defensive points now themselves need a defensive screen, requiring further expansion. So, in regards to the Levant and Middle East, to defend the Russian heartland means acquiring the Ukraine, the Crimea and the Caucasus. Once those are obtained or worked into the defensive system, to protect them the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea need to be developed as a naval defense. To protect those requires advancement to the Balkans, the Anatolian Plateau, the eastern Mediterranean and into the mountains south of the Caucasus (the Zagros, the Elbruz, the Armenian Highlands, the Taurus, etc). There is an inexorable historical inevitability to this, and despite real and potential reverses, retreats, defeats and diversions, as long as there is a Russia this policy will likely be pursued. That it conflicts with other historical and national narratives is expected, so what is occurring within the identified region is nothing new or to be unexpected. Even the presence and interests of a contesting external 'imperial' power (or to use the CENTCOM term – global superpower), in this instance the U.S. (think also Great Britain, France, the Ottomans, the Mongols, the Umayyad's, etc), is within the historical norms for the region.

With that context in mind, a state by state review in brief, some of it noted earlier, is in order.

Egypt – Since the mid-1970s, the U.S. has provided Egypt with more than \$70 billion in aid, much of it military, in order to keep the Soviets/Russians out, allow the U.S. to use Egyptian air and sea bases, to conduct exercises (such as the Bright Star series) and to prevent a resumption of conflict with Israel. However, the Obama administration is viewed as having retreated from the relationship (temporarily suspending military aid to Egypt in 2013) and responsibilities, something further aggravated by the Trump administration seeming to continue the U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East (or at least a noticeable attenuation in its commitments there). With an appearance of Russian military effectiveness in Syria against Islamist forces which also present a threat to Egyptian society as well as a willingness to adhere to stated commitments, Egypt has, at least preliminarily as of 30 November 2017, agreed to allow Russian military aircraft to use its air bases and its airspace. Such an action clearly raises U.S. concerns over operational security of the movements of U.S. aircraft, naval craft and military personnel in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as requiring the necessity of airspace coordination. The 2017 Egyptian/Russian agreement, when including the 2014 Egyptian purchase of \$3.5 billion in aircraft and arms, the 2016 joint paratrooper and anti-terrorism training exercises in Egypt, and a tentative agreement to build Russian nuclear power facilities in Egypt, indicates that U.S. influence in and with Egypt is in peril. That Egypt is skillful exploiting a long historical trend (since the 1950s) of playing the U.S. and Russia/USSR off against each other for its own gain is not in dispute. So seeing this as something new by the Russians is fallacious. A re-engagement by the U.S. and recognition that diversification of military arms sources isn't necessarily a zero-sum situation will likely greatly ease Egyptian 'game-playing'.

Syria – Russia is entrenched in Syria, is both defending and promoting the Asad regime, which shows to those in the region a loyalty to treaty obligations and a toughness to execute necessary military operations to ensure regime victory. Russian naval infantry and paratroopers provide training and, when necessary, on the ground combat punch, to Syrian Arab Army forces, Hezbollah, Iranian Hashd units (many manned by Iraqis) and Syrian Hashd/militia forces. Russian aircraft have been effective in providing combat air support and logistical support when needed. Russian elements have provided mediating services between the numerous and varied combat elements within Syria mentioned above. It hurts Russia not at all that as the Eastern Orthodox nation with a Patriarch and a majority interest of Christian 'territory' in Jerusalem (The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, for example), that they also provide training and assistance to Syria Hashd forces like the umbrella group 'Guardians of the Dawn' (affiliated with the Syrian Arab Air Force Intelligence Directorate and composed of such smaller groups as the Lions

of the Cherubim ["Usud al-Cherubim"] who often call themselves Mujahideen of the Cross, the Lions of the Valley ["Usud al-Wadi"], the Intervention Regiment and the Lions of Dwel'a ["Usud Dwel'a"].

Russia has provided not only military support but also economic aid, specifically in oil products and food stuffs (augmented by China and other nations) and is a counter-balance to the massive Iranian presence and penetration within Syria. Russia is a major participant in the numerous peace talk efforts concerning Syria since 2012, and as of 2015, has become a guarantor (along with Turkey and Iran) of the results of the Astana series of peace talks. Extensive, continuing and deep Russian political and diplomatic efforts to bring peace to Syria (despite failure due to the fractiousness of the combatant parties and non-parties) has greatly enhanced Russia's regional reputation and has led to the displacement of the U.S. in the role of 'peace-maker' by Russia (the U.S. is now frequently viewed as part of the problem, as a support/creator of ISIS, as uninterested in peace in order to sell weapons and be a hegemonic imperial power, as a bumbling player increasing problems, or as an anti-Islamic nation supporting Zionist occupiers in Palestine; actually, any of a host of anti-U.S. themes).

And perceptions of U.S. effectiveness in Syria were not helped when it was reported in July 2017, in a meeting between U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson and UN Secretary General Guterres; that Tillerson believed that the fate of Syria and its leader was now up to Russia. BLUF – Russia has defeated the U.S. in Syria, leaving the U.S. to try and pick-up what pieces it can through the isolated Kurds and their Syrian Democratic Forces, which is not an able partner in bringing peace to Syria. That the U.S. is not a major player in Syria, and potentially with a receding role in much of the Levant, is epitomized by the Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq (RSII coalition), also referred to as 4+1 (in which the "plus one" refers to Hezbollah). The '4+1' is a joint intelligence-sharing cooperation formed as a consequence of an agreement reached at the end of September 2015 between Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria to "help and cooperate in collecting information about the terrorist Daesh group" with a view to combatting the advances of the group, according to the statement issued by the Iraqi Joint Operations Command.

Still, Russia is not only protecting its investment of port and air bases in Syria (as a previously elucidated 'forward defense buffer') but is also engaged in 'zachistki' (clean-up) operations against Islamist Chechen groups affiliated with Caucasus Islamist organizations who are either linked with Al Qaeda or remain Islamic State-inspired. These targeted groups continue to train and then send suicide attackers to Russia, in revenge for Russian actions in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, etc). This is also an integral part of Russian helping create the 4+1, as within the founding statements for this organization was a sentence stating "the increasing concern from Russia about thousands of Russian terrorists committing criminal acts within ISIS".

Iraq – Russia lost a huge amount of influence and prestige in Iraq when Saddam Hussein was defeated in the Kuwait War in 1991. Impotence of Russian intervention efforts and clearly displayed U.S. military power basically shut Russia out of Iraq up until fairly recently. Russian success in Syria from 2015 to the present, and Russian "co-belligerence" with Iran against the Islamic State has reinvigorated Russia's reputation, specifically its 'fighting reputation' and its diplomatic status/capability. Russia did entertain meetings and influence efforts with former Prime Minister (2006-2014) and current Vice President (one of three) Nuri al-Maliki, however, that effort appears to be a dead end with the crediting of victory over ISIS to current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Maliki was intent on running for Prime Minister again in 2018, with the backing of Iran and Russia, but that is not likely to happen now. However, the Iraqi October re-occupation of Kirkuk and the resulting near self-destruction of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) into its divisive component parts of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has given Russia an opening. The PUK, which has some support from Iran and has apparently reached accommodation with the Baghdad government, has become the

slightly dominate political entity in the KRG, while the previously politically dominate KDP has lost territory, prestige and its longtime leader, and is in a hostile stand-off with both the PUK, the Baghdad government forces, Iran and to a lesser degree, with Turkey. Russia has offered to sign an oil deal with the KDP (not the KRG or Baghdad), which will also mean easing tensions with Turkey. An isolated and weakened KDP, desperately attempting to cling to its U.S. support which seems to be increasingly ephemeral (from their perspective), makes this Russian lifeline appear to be a potential miracle. If an agreement is signed, this is a direct challenge to U.S. support for and from the KDP. Any lessening of U.S. influence likely will lessen U.S. 'lily-pad' capacity, which will then have an adverse impact on U.S. operations in Syria. Thus, as with Egypt, the Kurds are learning to play the game of playing the Russians off against the Americans for Kurdish material gain.

Turkey – While a member of NATO and a historical foe of Russia, several factors are militating for Russian/Turkish cooperation, at least short-term. First, Turkey's value to NATO has decreased because of the disappearance of the Soviet threat to Europe. As well, European Union reluctance to grant Turkey full membership within the EU, the rising tide of Islamism within Turkey (as a replacing of Kemalism by Erdoganism) and anger with the U.S. support to various Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq has led to a selective rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. Russia, contrary to an initial Turkish stance demanding the deposing of Bashar Asad, supported Asad, leading to severe tension when Russian forces began a military intervention in Syria in 2015. Then, the 24 November 2015 Turkish Air Force shoot-down of a Russian Air Force Su-24 operating in Syria and the ensuing hostile stand-off, led to the breaking of diplomatic relations and potential military conflict. However, after a series of military confrontations, primarily in the Black Sea and the Dardanelles, Russia broke the tensions in April 2016 by unexpectedly agreeing to build monuments honoring the fallen soldiers of the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War. Turkey reciprocated. In June 2016 Russian sanctions on the Turkish tourism industry were lifted and the following month diplomatic relations were restored, with proposals to cooperate in the fight against Daesh and an expressed intention to improve ties. Since then Russian and Turkish relations have been reasonable warm in an effort to avoid friction, of which there is plenty in Syria. Russian-Turkish interests in the movement of natural gas coincide (with Russia circumventing building pipelines across Ukrainian territory). Gazprom is building the Turkstream pipeline across the Black Sea through Turkish territory, the actual construction being contracted out to the Swiss Allseas Group. This development has led the U.S. to impose selected economic sanctions on Russia, which has led to a cooling of already rocky U.S.-Russian relations. For Turkey, this is a plus as they receive the benefit of Russian aid while the U.S. imposes no penalty upon them so as to retain access to U.S. bases in Turkey. Diplomatically, Turkey is engaged in a diplomatic row with Germany over Turkish and/or Muslim refugees/emigrant laborers, which the U.S. has been unable to mediate but with Russia providing subtle support and encouragement to Turkey in order to disrupt both NATO and the EU. Russia is also favoring Turkey in order to support the Russian presence on Cyprus (approximately 4,000 Russian citizens there, availability of neutral ports for Russian civilian and military naval vessels, and extensive Russian financial assets in Cypriot banks), specifically in the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). This effort is a Russian exploitation of the naturally divisive Cyprus issue, aggravating relations between Greece and Turkey, both NATO allies.

So, Russian efforts with Turkey are basically designed to disrupt NATO, Europe and regional U.S. influence, yet it must be remembered that Russia and Turkey are essentially regional competitors (historically, certainly so) and do not see eye to eye on numerous items. Russian actions in Syria have derailed Turkish efforts to depose the Asad regime. Russian military presence has deterred decisive Turkish military action against the Kurdish Efrin enclave, forcing the Turkish to employ less than reliable regional proxies of the Turkish Free Syrian Army (made up of at least 39 "groups" and 10 "allied groups")

such as the Free Idlib Army, the Sultan Murad Division, the Shem Legion, the 51st Brigade and the Manbij Brigade [allied group under Ahrar al-Sham], and only able to achieve partial satisfaction of Turkish goals. The Russian support to the Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), in many ways only partial and more of future promises, not only restrains the Turks but also forces the U.S. to increase support to the PYD, which is ultimately unsustainable due to its geographic isolation as it is surrounded by hostile countries. Russian support to Hezbollah and warm relations with Iranian elements such as the IRGC operating within Syria (at the behest of the Syrian Damascus regime) puts Turkey in a dilemma, as Qatar and the Muslim Brothers, both supporters of the Erdogan government, ardently desire Turkish military efforts to suppress not only Islamic State forces, but also Al Qaeda-related entities (see Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, for example) in addition to combating the Shia forces within Syria. So, any current Russian-Turkish cooperation is temporary, as the historical competition for advantage, be it economic, geographic or military, will continue.

Iran – Russia and Iran share a distrust of the U.S. and in the post-Cold War world have been drawn together as a means to combat what they see as intrusive U.S. imperial efforts to isolate them in the Middle East, both militarily and via economic and diplomatic sanctions. Events in Syria have drawn them closer, as both desire to preserve the Assad regime, although for ultimately opposing reasons (Russia wants to sustain Syrian state institutions while Iran would like to create a Shia religious-political entity tightly linked to Iran), which the U.S. still apparently wants to depose (openly expressed by President Obama, not countered by President Trump). Russia has extensive economic links with Iran, regardless of a history of regional competition and Russian heavy-handedness which would seem to militate against any cooperation beyond superficially. The long U.S. presence in Afghanistan, with its potential regional implications as a U.S. military lily-pad, unites Russia and Iran regionally. The massive opium (heroin) problem originating out of Afghanistan has also united Russia and Iran in an effort to stop the influx into their respective countries (80% of global opium production sources out of Afghanistan, with Russia having ~3 million addicts and Iran ~2 million addicts from this flow). Both countries have established direct links to the only organization within Afghanistan that seems to be able to control and decrease the flow, the Taliban, which has undercut the legitimacy of the U.S.-supported government of Afghanistan. Finally, Russia is not discouraging Iranian efforts to build a nuclear deterrent, which is clearly antithetical to U.S. foreign policy, both short-term and long-term. That Russia does not do so encourages countries in the Arabian Peninsula to potentially distance themselves from the U.S. and seek Russian mediation to dissuade any Iranian future nuclear potential to be used against them, which undercuts U.S. regional relations.

General – Russian maneuvers and actions within the “Central” region as defined by the original question are consistent with historical Russian activities within the region, despite a temporary Russian withdrawal from 1991 to 1999 due to Soviet military collapse and economic retrenchment. None of this should be viewed in a superpower rivalry, a la the Cold War, which from the tenor of the questions seems to be how the question seems to be framed. This is Russia doing what Russia has always done and not aimed specifically at the U.S., we just happen to be the new global/imperial power much as it was the British Empire before us, or the French or the Ottomans, etc).

However, with regards to Syria, Russia is working a few avenues which are greatly benefiting them both domestically and internationally. First, Russia is minimizing its risking of ethnically Slavic troops by employing mercenary groups and nationalist forces. The “Wagner Group”, a pseudo-mercenary Russian organization first employed as “little green men” in the Crimea and the Ukraine, is present in Syria (roughly 2,500 men) and are the most noted “Russian” forces engaged in combat. Also, in the Russian hunt for Caucasus-based Islamist groups operating in Idlib and/or Aleppo Governorates of Syria, Russia

has employed a Chechen loyalist battalion called the Kadyrovtsy (these were replaced by an Ingush MP battalion, and so on). Finally, Russian EOD and engineering specialists have extensively publicized their humanitarian efforts at disarming the numerous IEDs and unexploded ordnance, which has created noticeable regional sympathy for the Russian efforts to help and protect the average Syrian. The U.S. does little to combat this media effort by Russia, ceding the regional IO battlefield to the Russians.

Dr. Spencer Meredith III

National Defense University
College of International and Security Affairs

Part A

Request: Please list and describe what you feel are the top 3-5 Russian interests in the Central Region over the next 18-24 month period, what actions would be necessary to satisfy these interests, the likelihood of each of these actions occurring, the main constraints and enablers to these actions, and the US options for countering them.

Response:

Russian Interest	What actions would best serve this interest in the Central Region over the next 18-24 months?	What are possible competing US interests?	How likely is it that the action listed in column 2 would be successful? 0% indicates that the desired outcome will never be achieved; 100% indicates the outcome will occur with certainty	What are the main constraints or enablers to achieving each action?	What options (diplomatic, military, economic, etc.) does the US have for countering these actions or alliances?
Maintain primary role defining the nature of debates and outcomes; one among several but definitely not less than the US = diplomatic initiative, set conditions for	Opportunism above all – let the US take the initiative with Kurds, maintain strong influence on Assad and Turkey, keep Iran in Kremlin’s orbit = stifling US initiatives before they	SDF needs to survive, US can sacrifice some but cannot push Turkey too hard. EU relationship critical to pressure Erdogan, but this will not overcome his domestic	85%	<i>Constraint: Russian reliance on PMCs allows for time to muck around, but also comes at a cost – parents still have influence in Russian public narrative (small but could grow); normal internal Kremlin politics, but these are</i>	Limited vis-à-vis Russia directly, more successful engaging obliquely with EU and making clear SDF is a red line for US in region Downside is SDF role becomes “too big to fail” and fails anyway

<p>success in the region, military presence, economic trade as “showpiece”</p>	<p>gain traction, but also letting the US expend energy (time, money, reputation above all) in what Russia will show to be futile “destabilizing” efforts</p>	<p>imperatives, neither can US assume EU agreement on goals and methods to achieve them</p>		<p><i>weak compared to enabling factors</i></p> <p><i>Enabler: China pushing into CAR with OBOR incentivizes Russia to keep its goal of opportunism rather than declared red lines – “stay a player, don’t risk overcommitting”, which still may occur but with the goal of spoiling US efforts, not because of inherent interests</i></p>	<p>– SDF has more against it than for it; big brother cannot abandon but neither can it guarantee success, let alone its survival</p> <p>Key is strategic communication – “goal is survival of effective, responsive governance in region and right now SDF is one of the best chances for that long-term”</p>
<p>South stream pipeline</p>	<p>Crushing SDF to satisfy Erdogan</p>	<p>More EU interests for pipeline, unless US can loosen and speed up LNG alternatives; SDF needs to survive</p>	<p>50%</p>	<p>Constraint – US support for SDF</p> <p>Enabler – SDF self-failure; Iraq forces Kurds to escalate based on existential threats (redefining in-group away from national lines towards strict ethnicity → really bad b/c of worsening effect on Turkish escalation</p>	<p>US-Iraq: conditioning assistance on redefining strategic goals to include existing Kurdish identity, accepting not full or even appearance of more independence</p> <p>*Problem is Iraq obviously needs US less than 5 years ago – success against ISIS and Iran’s influence make US conditionality less influential</p>

Part B

For each interest you previously listed in Part A, what would be the impact of Russian success on US interest in the region? In other words, what are the second and third order effects of Russia achieving its objectives in the Middle East on US strategy and interests?

Please submit your response in a Word document no more than 3 pages.

Russian efforts to maintain a primary role defining the nature of debates and outcomes in the region has a high likelihood of success. Russia will continue to pursue being one (if not the leading) among several determining state actors, and definitely not less than the US given Moscow's ego-politics. Russia will continue to take the diplomatic initiative to set conditions for success in the region – even if that means letting other partners take the lead at times. Efforts will continue to include an enduring military presence and economic trade as showpieces of Russian great power. Both sell well domestically and further justify the anti-US jingoism that defines the Kremlin's strategic communication. There is little the US can do to stop/blunt/deter the intentions and actions that the Kremlin pursues in that regard. The US does not currently have the capital to “sour the Russian milk” for would-be consumers. However, by holding to a core set of strategic goals (survival of proto-democratic states/non-states like SDF) while ensuring the US also maintains the strategic initiative (exploring new partnerships if SDF fails or falls by the wayside), the likely outcomes will be an enduring competition, rather than outright ouster of the US as a dominant actor in the region. Enduring competition has several benefits for the US given its greater capacity for the “long-fight” compared to the chances of Russia overextending its more limited resources (certainly in terms of DIME, but mostly regarding its defensible reputation as the one who sticks a finger in Washington's eye). Russia can also shift away from the ME with little risk having achieved (and proclaimed as such) several “success points” along the way. However, this course is also precarious for the US and its allies/partners as 2nd/3rd order effects for a greater Russian success would include:

- Tighter Russian-Turkish relations that further delegitimize the latter's erstwhile EU aspirations – complicating the NATO relationship further, given the potential for pro-Russian sentiment in at least two other NATO members (Bulgaria, Hungary);
- Viability of any realistic hope for Kurdish functional autonomy as Turkey would grow bolder in trying to strangle it in its crib;
- Increasing Iranian influence to bolster Iraqi suppression of Kurdish autonomy down the not too distant road, as well as Assad's relations with Lebanon, recognizing that Turkish and Iranian interests do not align – this plays in Russia's favor as both sides play off each other for Moscow's attentions/graft (Russian military support to Iraq – in partnership with Iran – remains a viable next step)
- Greater resonance of the “US = Great Destabilizer / Russia = Fixer of US failures” narrative – Russia has a longer history of international relations than the US, it has abiding interests in the region while the US is transient.

In the end, the loss of US reputation in the region is inevitable given that true political natures are emerging after two-plus decades of idealistic naiveté by the US that forced otherwise realist/pragmatic/aggressive regional players to mask their intentions with the verbiage of Western norms. They no longer need or want the US to set the terms, the conditions for success, or most of all, constrain their independent actions. This is in part due to the “success” of US regional capacity building efforts over the years, as much as their own initiative. Russia's success will reveal even more of this long,

historic, grounded self-interest in the region. The result will be a return to the “great game” of power politics with fluid allegiances, amidst fixed interests, all centered on relative gains in a zero-sum international environment. The US needs to maintain its principles as a Democratic Great Power, as much as engaging the statecraft necessary to navigate that fluidity to achieve its core strategic goals.

The reimagined south stream pipeline (TurkStream) accomplishes three primary goals for Russia (with 2nd/3rd order effects):

- Reduces Russian strategic vulnerability by decreasing reliance on Ukrainian pipelines – less revenue for Ukraine thereby increasing its chance of state failure or perceived failure as the country relies on “back channel” gas supplies with the concomitant charges of corruption; this also reduces/removes leverage piece from future Minsk negotiations;
- Maintains EU strategic vulnerability
- Deepens Turkish connections, increasing Turkey’s role to support Russia in other diplomatic areas (further afield from the ME); incentivizes Iranian moves closer to Russia to maintain “special connection” beyond nuclear supports
- US LNG has a chance to reduce the first and second, but externalities are greater for US supply than Russian success in this effort.

Dr. Abdulaziz Sager

Gulf Research Center

Part A

Request: In the event that the U.S./Coalition is challenged by another global power, what are the second and third order effects in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility?

Response: The only global power with the ability to challenge the United States is Russia. There are regional powers that play a role but they cannot be considered global powers. Russia has proven to be efficient in Syria, in fact far more efficient than the United States. They have further underlined their reliability by sticking closely to their allies and not abandoning them in the time of need. This has heightened Russian credibility in the region at the same time that the uncertainty about US policy has led to a high level of disillusionment about US objectives. It is therefore of immense importance that the US establish a policy that changes the image of the US as otherwise the second and third order of US CENTCOM's responsibility will also be negatively impacted.

Part B

For each interest you previously listed in Part A, what would be the impact of Russian success on US interest in the region? In other words, what are the second and third order effects of Russia achieving its objectives in the Middle East on US strategy and interests?

From the Gulf and regional Middle Eastern perspective, the Syrian experience and developments over the past 3 years have shown that Russia is a more reliable ally than the United States. For many in the region, the Russian military intervention on behalf (and/or to rescue) the Syrian regime has led to the view of Russia being a credible potential ally.

As a result, Russia is now able to project effective power into the Middle East and this ability is growing. One direct impact is the possibility that many Middle Eastern countries will now be ready to grant military facilities to the Russian military. This has a direct impact on the projection of US military power and on the influence that the US can spread into the region even with some of its allies. Compared to Russia's determined action and readiness to act, the United States is seen as hesitant, unsure and not having a concerted strategy as far as the region as a whole is concerned.

The bottom line is that Moscow appears to have a more stable and clear cut political attitude towards the main issues in the region. Their position looks firm and steady and this in turn inspires more trust in Russia than the US.

The above does not only have implications for US power projection and influence but it could even impact US weapons and military sales. Russian military technology, for example the S400 air defense system, is now seen as superior to the US's systems in addition to being significantly less expensive and coming with little political constraints attached. This makes Russian military sales a real alternative.

Mr. Mubin Shaikh

Independent Consultant

Request: In the event that the U.S./Coalition is challenged by Russia, what are the second and third order effects in the USCENTCOM area of responsibility?

Response:

Cause1 yields Effect1: Russia militarily challenges the U.S. and coalition.

Effect1 becomes Cause 2, which yields Effect2: Russian challenge causes U.S. to respond militarily which draws in Iran.

Effect2 becomes Cause3 yields Effect3: Iran mobilizes against the U.S. and becomes cause for GCC Coalition to mobilize against Iran.

Biographies

Mr. Edward Chow



Edward Chow, a senior fellow in the Energy and National Security Program at CSIS, is an international energy expert with more than 35 years of industry experience. He has worked in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, South America, Europe, Russia, and the Caspian region. He has developed government policy and business strategy, as well as successfully negotiated complex, multibillion-dollar, international business ventures. He specializes in oil and gas investments in emerging economies. He has advised governments, international financial institutions, major oil companies, and leading multinational corporations.

Chow spent 20 years with Chevron Corporation in U.S. and overseas assignments. He was head of international external affairs at headquarters in California. He played a leading role in negotiating international commercial agreements. While he was Chevron's principal international representative in Washington, he worked closely with the White House, Capitol Hill, federal departments and agencies, foreign governments, international financial institutions, and the foreign policy community on international economic policy affecting worldwide energy investments. Between 1989 and 1991, he was based in Beijing as Chevron's country manager for China. Chow is a graduate of Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in international affairs. He has published articles in leading academic and foreign policy journals on global energy developments, spoken on energy at international conferences, universities, and think tanks in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and appeared on major international media.

Dr. Frederick Kagan

Dr. Frederick W. Kagan is the Christopher DeMuth Chair and director of the [Critical Threats Project](#) at AEI. In 2009, he served in Kabul, Afghanistan, as part of General Stanley McChrystal's strategic assessment team, and he returned to Afghanistan in 2010, 2011, and 2012 to conduct research for Generals David Petraeus and John Allen. In July 2011, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen awarded him the Distinguished Public Service Award, the highest honor the Chairman can present to civilians who do not work for the Department of Defense. He is coauthor of the report *Defining Success in Afghanistan* (AEI and the Institute for the Study of War, 2010) and author of the series of reports *Choosing Victory* (AEI), which recommended and monitored the US military surge in Iraq. His most recent book is *Lessons for a Long War: How America Can Win on New Battlefields* (AEI Press, 2010, with Thomas Donnelly). Previously an associate professor of military history at West Point, Dr. Kagan is a contributing editor at the *Weekly Standard* and has written for *Foreign Affairs*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other periodicals.



Mr. Vernie Liebl

VERNIE LIEBL, M.A., M.S.

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Degrees:

- M.A. National Security and Strategic Studies
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- Culture and History of South Asia
- Culture and History of Islam



Vernie Liebl is an analyst currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL). Mr Liebl retired from the Marine Corps and has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia.

Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2.

Mr Liebl has a Bachelor's degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Master's degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Master's degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with "Highest Distinction" and focused on Islamic Economics).

Dr. Spencer Meredith



Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III is a professor of national security strategy at the US National Defense University. With a doctorate in Government and Foreign Affairs from the University of Virginia, and two decades of research and work on post-Soviet regions and the Middle East, his expertise bridges scholarly and practitioner communities. To that end, he has published widely on strategic topics related to democratic development, conflict resolution, and special operations. He is a Fulbright Scholar and a regular advisor and contributor to several DoD and interagency projects, including multiple Joint Staff Strategic Multilayer Assessments, intelligence community workshops, and JSOC efforts supporting the joint warfighter in the areas of governance, human factors of conflict, and influence operations.

Dr. Abdulaziz Sager

A Saudi expert on Gulf politics and strategic issues, Dr. Abdulaziz Sager is the founder and Chairman of the Gulf Research Center, a global think tank based in Jeddah with a well-established worldwide network of partners and offices in both the Gulf region and Europe.

In this capacity, Dr. Sager has authored and edited numerous publications including *Combating Violence & Terrorism in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, *The GCC's Political & Economic Strategy towards Post-War Iraq* and *Reforms in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Feasible Solutions*. He is also a frequent contributor to major international media channels and appears regularly on Al-Arabiya Television, France 24 and the BBC. In addition to his academic activities, Dr. Sager is actively engaged in track-two and mediation meeting. For example, he has chaired and moderated the Syrian opposition meetings in Riyadh in December 2015 and November 2017.



In addition to his work with the Gulf Research Center, Dr. Sager is President of Sager Group Holding in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is active in the fields of information technology, aviation services and investments. Furthermore, he holds numerous other appointments including on the Makkah Province Council, Advisory Board of the Arab Thought Foundation, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Faculty of Economics and Administration at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Ministry of Education, Geneva Center for Security Policy and German Orient Foundation. Dr. Sager has also sat on the advisory group for the UNDP Arab Human Development Report, and participates in the Think Tank Leaders Forum of the World Economic Forum and the Council of Councils of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Dr. Sager holds a Ph.D in Politics and International Relations from Lancaster University and an M.A. from the University of Kent, United Kingdom and a Bachelor Degree from the Faculty of Economics and Administration of King Abdulaziz University.

Mr. Mubin Shaikh



Born and raised in Canada, Mubin Shaikh grew up with two conflicting and competing cultures. At the age of 19, he went to India and Pakistan where he had a chance encounter with the Taliban before their takeover of Afghanistan in 1995. Shaikh became fully radicalized as a supporter of the global Jihadist culture, recruiting others but the 9/11 attacks forced to him reconsider his views. He spent 2 years in Syria, continuing his study of Arabic and Islamic Studies and went through a period of full deradicalization.

Returning to Canada in 2004, he was recruited by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and worked several CLASSIFIED infiltration operations on the internet, in chat-protected forums and on the ground with human networks. In late 2005, one of those intelligence files moved to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) for investigation. The "Toronto 18" terrorism case resulted in the conviction of 11 aspiring violent extremists after testifying over 4 years, in 5 legal hearings at the Ontario Superior Court of Justice.

Shaikh has since obtained a Master of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (MPICT) and is considered an SME (Subject Matter Expert) in national security and counterterrorism, and radicalization & deradicalization to the United Nations Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, NATO, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), CENTCOM, various special operations forces, the FBI and others. He has appeared on multiple U.S., British and Canadian media outlets as a commentator and is extensively involved with the ISIS social media and Foreign Fighter (including Returnees and rehabilitation) file. Shaikh is also co-author of the acclaimed book, *Undercover Jihadi*.

Ms. Katherine Zimmerman

Katherine Zimmerman is a research fellow at AEI and the research manager for AEI's [Critical Threats Project](#). She is the senior analyst focusing on the global al Qaeda network and also covers the Salafi-jihadi movement, as well as related trends in the Middle East and Africa. She specializes in al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen, as well as al Shabaab in Somalia and al Qaeda in the Sahel. Her analyses have been widely published, including in CNN.com, FoxNews.com, *The Hill*, The Huffington Post, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. She helped create and now manages CTP's open-source intelligence team of 15 staff and interns as they collect and analyze thousands of documents from local media in Arabic and other languages. Ms. Zimmerman has testified before Congress about the threats to US national security interests emanating from al Qaeda and its network. She has also briefed members of Congress, congressional staff, and US military, diplomatic, and intelligence community personnel at many echelons within the United States and in Europe.



Mr. Ali Jafri



Ali Jafri provides research support on issues of national security, armed groups, and human security in the defense and intelligence communities. He previously served as a member of a multi-disciplinary team of analysts, technologists, and data scientists tasked with helping bring innovative practices to customers in the intelligence community. Prior to joining NSI, he worked at Georgetown University, conducting research on emerging threats, focusing on political instability in South Asia. He is a graduate of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, where he completed a Masters in Law and Diplomacy.