

Syria, Russia and Ukraine

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The targeting of Russia by the United States and other NATO powers is an attempt to control the former Soviet Republics in the Caucasian landmass that provide both vital energy resources and transport routes between Asia, Europe and Africa. This may appear as being in conflict with the Obama administration's declared "pivot to Asia" that is aimed at reducing the role of China and its regional allies, Iran and Russia in the world economy. In reality, it is part of the same strategy for world domination.

The ongoing war in Syria, like the wars for regime change in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, is in part aimed against Russian political and commercial interests in the region. It is a proxy war being financed, supported and fought by Western allies, Turkey, Saudi, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and the CIA, on the one hand, and Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah and Russia, on the other.

Following the backtracking by Washington on its plan to strike Syria in September and the start of the so-called diplomatic track with Iran, a number of the regional powers began to resume relations with Russia and Iran, much to Washington's displeasure.

The February 22 Kiev putsch and the demonisation of Russia were aimed at disrupting those burgeoning relations and paving the way for a renewed attempt to topple the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The Obama administration, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring that brought down longstanding Western clients, is determined that Assad will not long remain as the last strongman in the Middle East and North Africa not beholden to Washington.

Syria matters, not because of its oil and gas, which, apart from its offshore resources, are small and declining, but because it occupies a strategically important position on the eastern Mediterranean, linking it to Central Asia and the Far East. It was once one of the termini of the fabled Silk Routes from

China.

Russia has long exported arms, fighter planes and military equipment to Syria, while the port of Tartus provides it with a naval base in the Mediterranean, its only warm water base accessible from the Black Sea. Furthermore, Moscow is opposed to the extension of the operations of Islamist militants that might enflame Chechnya once again and set Central Asia alight.

Russia is now supporting a natural gas cartel GECF of 13 members, similar to OPEC and including Iran and Qatar, in order to ensure the high prices on which Russia depends. It is also seeking to build pipelines for gas and oil distribution to Europe and East to China. The proposal for a pipeline linking Iran, Iraq and Syria to bring energy to the Mediterranean was one of the factors that brought Saudi Arabia and Qatar into the war to unseat Assad.

Last year, the European Union's push to reduce dependence on Russian gas suffered a blow with the collapse of the Nabucco pipeline project. That transmission line for Azerbaijani gas reserves was shelved in favour of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).

The TAP will ship gas through other European states less dependent on Russian gas, leaving countries like Bulgaria and Hungary heavily reliant on Russian imports.

The Eastern Mediterranean has now become a potentially large offshore source of energy, with Israel and Cyprus now working to extract gas. But the region is bedevilled with conflicts (Turkey/Cyprus, Israel/Lebanon, Israel/Gaza) that make exploration and production difficult.

Last January, a Russian state-controlled energy group, Soyuzneftegaz, signed a deal with Syria to develop and produce oil and gas off Syria's coast, whereby Soyuzneftegaz will be allowed to carry out offshore drilling, development and production activities in Syria's territorial waters. The 25-year agreement

covers 2,190 square kilometres in the Mediterranean waters, at a cost of US\$90 million, to be borne by Soyuzneftegaz.



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