**The View from Moscow**

[Michael Young](https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/experts/1258?lang=en)

In an interview, Dmitri Trenin **outlines the broad principles guiding Russian policy in the Middle East**.

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*Dmitri Trenin is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. He is the author, most recently, of* [*What is Russia Up To In the Middle East?*](https://www.amazon.com/What-Russia-Up-Middle-East/dp/150952231X) *published in December 2017 by Polity. Before joining Carnegie in 1994, he served in the Russian military and graduated in 1977 from the Military Institute of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR. In 1984, Trenin received a Ph.D. in history from the Institute of U.S. and Canadian Studies of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Recently, he participated in the annual conference of the Carnegie Middle East Center, in which he \**[*outlined*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLKAtvFzqMw&feature=youtu.be) *Russian policy in the Middle East. Diwan* ***asked him to expand\**** *on his comments at this conference.*

***\*This is a 55-minute video from 8 Dec 18 at the Beirut Carnegie Center focused on Iranian, Russian, and Turkish views of and policies toward the Middle East: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLKAtvFzqMw&feature=youtu.be***

**Michael Young:** You have argued in the past that Russia is not seeking to compete with the United States in the Middle East. Yet that is precisely what appears to be happening as we observe Russian moves. Can you explain this?

**Dmitri Trenin:** Russia is not the Soviet Union. It does not see the Middle East as a region that it can dominate. Displacing the United States from the leading position in the Middle East is way above Russia’s capacity, and keeping the region in its sphere of influence is way above Russia’s resources. What we are observing now is not a replay of the U.S.-Soviet power matches of the period between the 1960s and the 1980s. The United States, starting from the presidency of Barack Obama, has been pursuing a policy of retrenchment to strengthen the home base and cut back on foreign commitments. President Donald Trump has stayed the course with his characteristic gusto and bravado. **Russia has certainly benefited from waning U.S. interest in the Middle East** as, absent an active America, **Russia can act with more confidence and ease. But it is not Russia that engineered the major shift in U.S. foreign policy** in the first place.

**MY:** Would you outline the main guiding principles of Russia’s foreign policy in the Middle East today?

**DT:** I think some of these can be very roughly summarized as follows:

First, always **act in your own self-interest**. Do not try to reform others or impose your model on countries or the region as a whole;

Second, Russia is **essentially a lonely power. Do not befriend or alienate anyone forever**. International relations are highly fluid and today’s foe can be tomorrow’s ally, and vice versa;

Third, **maintain functioning contacts with *all relevant parties* within countries and the region**, including with those that may regard each other as mortal enemies;

Fourth, **always demonstrate resolve**, **commitment** to one’s course, **and strength**. Raw power is valued highly across the Middle East;

Fifth, **forget about ideology and high moral values** preached in Europe and the United States: the **Middle East is a region made for classic realpolitik**;

Sixth, **manage your resources carefully**, Russia can only compete if it is ***more purposeful*** and ***resourceful*** than its competitors or rivals.

These principles can become a **template for Russia’s 21st century global foreign policy.**

**MY:** How is Russian foreign policy in the region different than that of the Soviet Union? And how is it the same?

**DT:** Moscow’s rules have changed, but the Soviet Union is just a historical name for Russia, just like the Russian Empire or the current Russian Federation. The basic difference is that while the Soviet Union was heavily engaged around the Middle East in spending money on an ideological and geopolitical project, the Russian Federation is active in the region trying to make money. The Soviet Union was about an idea. Russia’s idea is about Russia itself.

**MY:** The United States has traditionally tended to place values at the heart of the foreign policy it seeks to project, but Russia has been less willing to do so. Why is that; **what is the role of values in Russian thinking in its dealings overseas**?

**DT:** As the Soviet Union, Russia forfeited more in the name of values than almost any other country, including the United States. At the end of the road, the Russians became bitterly disappointed and grew rather cynical about foreign affairs. **They also understand that remaking others in one’s own image virtually never works**. Moreover, they regard U**.S. promotion of democratic values as a foreign policy tool** rather than a genuine desire to help less fortunate peoples. Now, **values take very much a back seat to interests in Russian foreign policy. Russian leaders are both realists and nationalists—in the sense of a “Russia First” principle.**

**MY:** What do you predict will be the evolution of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East in the coming decade, and what will be Moscow’s priorities?

**DT:** It is difficult to impossible to predict Russia’s own evolution as a polity in the next decade. The next 10–12 years will probably see another pivotal moment in Russian history. M**oscow’s foreign policy will fully depend on what will happen domestically**.

With regard to the Middle East, I would hope that **Russia continues to exercise restraint both in terms of the ambitions** its sets for itself in the region and the **resources it commits**. ***Russia’s interests include keeping the terrorists away, and down; attracting technology and investment; expanding access to the region’s markets, from arms to agricultural products.*** Trying to emulate the practices of the former Soviet Union or the United States would be detrimental to the Russian self-interest.