Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Where the Middle East Fits into Russia’s Worldview

Guests:
Celeste Wallander and Dmitri Trenin

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Celeste Wallander:
Back in February of 2016, as the fighting had escalated, as Russia's intervention had proven quite successful, and we were beginning to see an escalation of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, the international community got very involved and there was an attempt to have a comprehensive ceasefire peace agreement.

Jon Alterman:
This is Celeste Wallander. She was special assistant to President Obama and senior director for Russia and Eurasia on the National Security Council. In 2016, she was supporting Secretary of State John Kerry’s efforts to work with Russia to end the Syrian civil war. She is currently president and CEO of the U.S.-Russia Foundation.

Celeste Wallander:
It was a meeting that Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov had really driven to achieve on the sidelines of the 2016 Munich Security Conference.

News Clip:
Ladies and Gentlemen, friends, a very, very warm welcome to the 52nd edition of the Munich Security Conference.

Celeste Wallander:
Well, the actual meeting went on for hours, deep into the night. Core to the negotiations was the definition of a terrorist.

Jon Alterman:
The Syrian war had dragged on since 2011, and Russia had begun fighting on the side of the Syrian government in 2015. Civilians were dying in large numbers. After many hours of talks that night, Russia seemed to relent. Russia would agree to a ceasefire. There was just one exception: everyone could still fight terrorists. Some members of the U.S. team celebrated the victory. Wallander didn’t share any of their joy.

Celeste Wallander:
It was just very clear to me from Foreign Minister Lavrov’s position that despite the fact that there was agreement that the fighting would stop except for fighting the terrorists that the Russian position hadn’t changed at all. Russian military operations were going to continue exactly as they had been for the preceding months, since the Russian intervention started in September 2015. I remember people walking away from the table tired at the end of that very long day… It was one of the most soul-destroying experiences I have ever had.

Jon Alterman:
This series will explore the motivations and implications of Russia’s political, economic, and security policies in the Middle East. We will look at Russian-U.S. relations in the region, Russian soft power, and how the Middle East views Russia. We’ll discuss Russia’s growing role in the region and the future of Russia’s presence in the Middle East.

Celeste Wallander:
There are a lot of similarities between what drove Soviet foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and what drives Russian foreign policy.

Dmitri Trenin:
Another thing that the Russians found very useful is that you should keep contacts open to all the relevant players.

Carole Nakhle:
Russia had to turn some sources to raise capital because the sanctions constrained its access to capital and it found the answer, at least in part of it, in the Middle East.
Jon Alterman: I’m your host, Dr. Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy and director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, and this is the Russia in the Middle East podcast miniseries.

In this episode, we’ll begin to explore Russia’s presence in the Middle East and how it has changed from the fall of the Soviet Union, to the rise of Putin, to today.

Jon Alterman: Russia today is not competing in the same world as the Soviet Union was 40 years ago. Moscow’s foreign policy, and how it sees its role in the world order, reflects that.

Dmitri Trenin: In this world, in the twenty-first century, Russia cares about itself. It doesn't care about an ideology, it doesn't care about a bunch of client states, so it's very different in other words from the Soviet Union.

Jon Alterman: Russia today is not competing in the same world as the Soviet Union was 40 years ago. Moscow’s foreign policy, and how it sees its role in the world order, reflects that.

Dmitri Trenin: It sees the world as a ... realpolitik, it sees the world as a very competitive place. It sees itself as a loner, it's not part of a block, it's not part of an alliance, it does not recognize any one’s leadership over itself.

Celeste Wallander: The Russian doctrine tends to not count on allies very much because when you count on an ally you’re ceding control. When you count on an ally, the ally’s interests and ideas tend to influence how things play out.

Jon Alterman: Celeste Wallander, who we heard from earlier, agrees.

Jon Alterman: Even in its own neighborhood, Russia sees itself as an outsider, Trenin notes. For centuries, Russia was the only independent Eastern Orthodox nation in the world, standing between the Catholic and Muslim-dominated worlds.

Today, Russia sees itself as a nation apart, not really belonging to any large international grouping. It does not view itself as part of Europe, Asia, the Atlantic community, or the West.

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Jon Alterman: For a country like Russia that disdains allies, the UN security council is an ideal structure. Five permanent members decide jointly on the most crucial security issues in the world. While Russia cannot impose its will on others, more importantly, Russia can prevent others from acting against Russian interests.

Jon Alterman: The Security Council helps put Russia on something of an equal footing with the United States, and even 30 years
after the end of the Cold War, that binary competition still resonates in Russia.

**Celeste Wallander:**
The main driving force, one way or another, of much of Soviet foreign policy was global competition with the United States to be present, so that the United States wouldn’t have advantages.

**Jon Alterman:**
The government in Moscow long ago abandoned communist ideology, but Wallander says it still pushes an ideology of Russian greatness. And Russia’s interests, traditions, and political ambitions mandate that Russia maintains an active presence in the Middle East.

**Celeste Wallander:**
So the element of countering U.S. influence, U.S. access, U.S. impunity in the Middle East, I think, is as strong or maybe even stronger than it was in Soviet foreign policy. So that's a strong similarity.

**Jon Alterman:**
But Wallander asserts that there are also big differences between Russia and the Soviet Union’s motivations in foreign policy.

**Celeste Wallander:**
But a big difference is that private or quasi-private economic and business interests are important in Russian foreign policy. These are not economic interests, necessarily, in the service of Russian national interests, but they are interests in the service of private actors, most of whom are very well connected politically to drive their own business interests, that’s true in the energy sector.

**Jon Alterman:**
And those private sector interests, in energy and in other areas, draw Russia to the

Middle East. But Wallander reminds us of Russia’s larger objective in the region:

**Celeste Wallander:**
The strategic objective of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is ultimately determined by Russia’s strategic objectives with respect to the United States.

**Jon Alterman:**
So what do Russia’s intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2015, and its involvements in Libya, and its support of Egypt mean?

**Celeste Wallander:**
The Kremlin views this in the framework of loss. It’s not framed as aggression or expansion. It’s to prevent loss. And we know from the study of history that when leaderships believe that they’re facing loss, they are more risk-accepted.

**Jon Alterman:**
Since much of Russian foreign policy is framed by competition with the United States, to Russia, those interventions show that Moscow can stop Washington from changing regimes anywhere in the world. Moscow hopes that discourages U.S. interference that could potentially end in Russia itself.

Trenin adds that within that framework is a large sense of opportunism.

**Dmitri Trenin:**
I don't think that the leadership has a very clear and detailed view of the end state that it wants for the Middle East. Again you have a clear dichotomy between Soviet thinking and contemporary Russian thinking. I would say that there's a lot of opportunism in Russian foreign policy and I use the word opportunism not necessarily in a derogatory sense. You see an opportunity, you jump at
that opportunity. The adverse side of opportunism is that when you see dangers coming from the region, you have to address those dangers.

Yes, it’s looking for opportunism with regard to the few things that Russia can offer the world: one is energy—the Middle East stands for energy. Another one is arms: the Middle East stands for arms, even if most important Russian clients, in terms of arms and military equipment, are not found in the Middle East, rather, but they are watching. So it’s an exhibition, if you like, for the Russian arms industry. An exhibition that is moving, that is fighting, that is firing shots and firing missiles, so it’s something that you can exploit pretty effectively.

And it’s also a region, part of which is considered by Russia to be its immediate neighborhood. So Turkey and Iran—although Russia today does not have land borders with either of those countries—across the Black Sea and across the Caspian they are close neighbors, and you have to maintain relations with those countries.

Celeste Wallander:
Playing globally is very important to the Putin leadership, simply for status: to be at the table, to have a role in outcomes, and in negotiations, and not just for the appearance, often for the substance, but also for the appearance. They understand that reputation actually matters in international relations, and if you don’t have a reputation for being a global player. That needs to be at the table when important issues are addressed, you’re at a disadvantage.

Jon Alterman:
Wallander reiterates the emphasis Russia places on proving itself as a global leader, particularly in comparison to the United States:

Celeste Wallander:
The priority, and that means the number one priority and sought after objective, is for the United States to recognize Russia as an equal and to find an accommodation in which Russia gets to occupy its rightful place at the table with the United States, treated as an equal, and which the United States does two things: rules out regime change as an illegitimate aspect of international relations—this is the respect for sovereignty, you know, this whole narrative—and second agrees to changing the international rules of the game.

Jon Alterman:
Russia and China share that objective—they are both looking to reshape the international order away from a U.S.-led one and towards an order that better suits their own goals.

Celeste Wallander:
Russia’s presence in Syria is one way Russia is trying to achieve that goal, and all at a relatively low cost.

Celeste Wallander:
If the United States is not willing to accept that kind of grand strategic bargain with
Russia, then what you get is continuity in current Russian foreign policy, which is to seek advantages in the area of military and strategic access, political influence, a role in a global energy markets that sustains the Russian economy back home and abroad or set of business interests, whether that's in defense or technology or other kind other sectors where there may be advantages.

**Jon Alterman:**
But Trenin emphasizes that there are clear bounds and goals with that strategy:

**Dmitri Trenin:**
Russia is not trying to replace in the United States in the Middle East. It's not going to be a security protector for the region, it's not going to be the order giving power, it knows it's beyond its means. And second, it knows that even if it had those means, those means would better be spent home rather than lavishing that money on foreigners who as we all know tend to be very ungrateful in the end.

**Jon Alterman:**
But keeping money at home has a downside.

**Dmitri Trenin:**
The Middle East is a bazaar and if you don't have too much money to spend then the interest the people pay to you is not that great. In that sense, the Russians are disadvantaged.

**Jon Alterman:**
But that strategy also means that Russia’s presence in the region is a relatively low investment. Any wins or advantages are a bonus, and its losses don’t come at a great cost.

Category two is security interests.

**Celeste Wallander:**
From a Russian military perspective, looking at American capabilities and its ability to sustain multiyear global strategic as well as battlefield operations through Eurasia was very threatening.

**Jon Alterman:**
Russia’s 2015 military intervention in Syria was a pivotal moment for Moscow. It marked Russia’s return to the region after it was mostly absent for the better part of the previous two decades.

While Russia’s intervention was partly to preserve its military footprint in the Middle East, it was also to stop the advance of U.S. interests. The two objectives are intertwined, says Wallander:

**Celeste Wallander:**
So the reason to intervene to save Assad wasn't just to save Assad. And it wasn't just to save the military footprint and access in the Middle East and in Syria. It was to stop the United States from doing this again, to show the world that the United States does not have impunity.

**Jon Alterman:**
So Russia’s military intervention in Syria served more than one purpose. But the immediate reason, says Trenin, was to eliminate a security threat:

**Dmitri Trenin:**
Putin sent the Russian Air Force to the region, he was not looking for opportunities. He was looking out for dangers and there was a danger that had to be addressed and he did what he did. Of course there was a larger idea of, reestablishing Russia as a global, great power. But the immediate reason for involving Russia in the Middle East was a set of dangers coming out of Syria and Iraq at the hands of ISIS.
Jon Alterman:
To be precise, Russian forces generally left the U.S. and its allies to target ISIS. Most Russian attacks were focused on civilian populated areas under the control of other Syrian opposition groups.

After the intervention in Syria, Russia for the first time turned outward, looking at ways of becoming involved in structuring security in other parts of the region.

Dmitri Trenin:
Are they happy with the level? Well, Russia doesn't have that much in terms of resources that it would be wise for it to share with the region or to commit to the region. Russia's presence in Syria is fairly light, it's a miracle how much you can do with so little. You're basically have a handful of planes, let's say three dozen planes at the peak of the operation. You have maybe up to 5,000 military personnel at the height of the operation, yet we managed quite an important accomplishment as a result and it did not cost you that much.

Jon Alterman:
This is Trenin again highlighting Russia’s emphasis on low-cost, high-reward endeavors in the region, particularly with regards to Russia’s military objectives.

Dmitri Trenin:
It's actually money well spent you would say, you would think. Yes there's a level of casualties as well, but so far it has not been that high. And the financial expenditure, again, is tolerable for Russia. So I would say that they probably are quite satisfied with what they have been able to achieve given the fairly modest resources that Russia can commit to the region.

Jon Alterman:
The third circle is economics. We can start with oil, but as Wallander notes:

Celeste Wallander: Let’s say energy writ large, because even though it’s mostly about oil in the Middle East with Russian oil sales, but you have to remember that, generally speaking, the global price of oil affects the contract price of natural gas.

Jon Alterman:
As Russian businesses and interests have become more concerned about U.S. shale oil over the last decade, Russia has become increasingly involved in OPEC+.

Celeste Wallander:
Good relations with the main OPEC leaders matters to the Russian leadership for non-obvious geo-economic reasons. It’s not just about making money. It’s about that concern about how the United States was able to push down the price of oil.

Jon Alterman:
As we saw in the first half of 2020, bad relations with the main OPEC leaders can lead to global price wars and the devastation of the energy sector. But we’ll cover the oil price war in more depth in episode two.

The other important part of economics is weapons sales.

You’ll recall Trenin’s observation that even though the Middle East is not the top buyer of Russian arms, those top buyers are watching the Middle East. The region serves as a showroom and proving ground for Russian weapons. Wallander agrees:

Celeste Wallander:
No Middle East country is at the top of the list of Russian arms export customers. But the overall picture of Russian ability to sustain domestic defense production certain
countries are very important when they buy high end capabilities like Iran and certainly now Egypt. So even though, if you look aggregate, it's not that you're not struck by how much of defense exports are sold to the Middle East, and that's sometimes misunderstood I think in general commentary.

Particular weapons systems that are valuable and useful back home in Russia are easier at the defense production is easier to stay at sustained at home when those weapons systems are also sold abroad. It's a supply. It's kind of a supply chain. It's kind of an industrial policy that matters back home.

**Jon Alterman:**
So those are the three categories of Russian interests in the Middle East: prestige, security, and economics.

So what have we learned? Over the last decade, Russia has returned to the Middle East. Some of its objectives remain the same as they were during the Soviet Union. Russia remains eager to prove itself as a great power, and it feels it has global interests to protect. But Russia isn’t interested in mimicking the U.S. approach, nor can it afford to.

Instead, it opportunistically seeks low-cost ways to advance its political, military, and economic interests. By simultaneously keeping its costs and its ambitions low, Russia has made it much easier to declare success.

Next time on the podcast, we look at Russia’s economic interests in the Middle East and explore Russia’s arms and oil interests in the region. To do so, we are joined by Carole Nakhle, Nikolay Kozhanov, and rejoined by Dmitri Trenin.