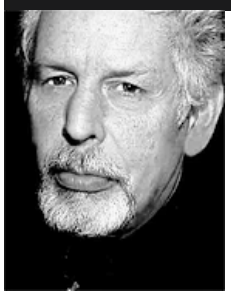
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Military Wild Card

By Richard Lourie

August 25, 2013




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The concept of "failed states" must now be supplemented with the concept of "failed democracies." Russia and Egypt are examples of countries where democratic elections led to undemocratic governments.

Egypt's paradox — the undemocratic results of democratic elections undone undemocratically — is especially tricky for the U.S. because U.S. foreign policy is based on both self-interest and higher values. Those interests are clear in Egypt: The Suez Canal must remain open to oil tankers and U.S. warships, and the peace must be kept with Israel.

Although U.S. interests in Egypt are clear-cut, the problem is knowing who can best deliver results. At what point does an Egyptian military regime start resembling Syria so much that it can no longer be dealt with in good conscience? If the U.S. sides with the coup, it will be seen as both anti-Muslim and hypocritical. But if it calls for the return of ousted President Mohamed Morsi, it will have put itself on the side of the Islamists.

U.S. interests in Russia are less immediately critical. Still, the logistical epic of withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 will be much more costly and complex without Russian cooperation. Nuclear weapons and proliferation, as well as the struggle against international crime and terrorism are all long-haul efforts. Currently, the only way U.S. astronauts can get to the Space Station is on Russian rockets at more than $60 million a ride. Anyone calling for a boycott of the Winter Olympics in Sochi in February to embarrass Putin should ask themselves how embarrassed the U.S. would be if Putin retaliated by barring the U.S. from space.

The army intervenes in societies without mechanisms for resolving intractable political conflicts. This is what happened in Egypt. The high and low moments of Russian democracy are also bracketed by tanks. The high moment came during the coup attempt of August 1991 when Boris Yeltsin climbed on top of a tank in front of the parliament building. He convinced the tanks to disobey orders and not to fire. The low moment came a little more than two years later when Yeltsin ordered tanks to fire on rebellious lawmakers in the same parliament building. This time they obeyed.

In today's Russia, one assumes that the army — along with the security services, the bureaucrats, the rich and the working class — is solidly behind Putin. But the army is a wild card. It chose to disobey orders in 1991 and, in the right circumstances, could do so again. And who knows what the hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers are thinking? Some may harbor resentment against the rich and the corrupt. In fact, oppositionists and mutineers a la Bradley Manning may already be inside the system. Such people would be willing to spill some of Russia's secrets or even disrupt systems and power grids.

But secrets and disruptions are one thing; a coup is another. It would no doubt take tanks in the street to pry Putin and his entrenched inner circle from power. That's not, however, the only scenario. Dissident writer Vladimir Bukovsky has predicted that politicians and military men, sick of political and economic domination by Moscow, might cooperate in the violent secession of one or more of Russia's main regions. In any case, the U.S. would be well advised to build closer ties with the Russian military. At least Washington could then have some sense of how, and when, that wild card might be played.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/25/the-military-wild-card-a27071