

ISSUE BRIEF

CONFRONTING THE “MOSCOW TRACK” FOR SYRIA

What the United States and Russia can talk about if they talk about Syria

Thanassis Cambanis | September 23, 2015

Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to address the UN General Assembly on September 28, on the heels of a shrewdly publicized deployment of new Russian troops and military equipment to Syria. Simultaneously—and not for the first time—the Kremlin has rolled out the prospect of a “Moscow Track” to peace in Syria, marketed as a pragmatic alternative to the failed U.S.-run Geneva Process.

Moscow’s latest moves have begun to shift the ground, and ultimately the United States will have to choose between two different, equally messy courses: standing aside and letting Russia and Iran shape the conflict unimpeded; or making a real diplomatic and military commitment in the hopes of influencing the Syrian civil war’s final disposition.

Already, a chorus of analysts and political actors is advocating a “hold-your-nose-and-make-a-deal with Russia” approach,¹ claiming the United States must either

sign on to Moscow’s plans against ISIS, or else plead guilty to promoting terrorism through American inaction.

But framing the choice as a binary one plays into the rhetoric of Bashar al-Assad and his sponsors, and ignores the fact that substantial American action can still reshape the dynamics and alter the outcome, just as surely as decisive Russian, Iranian, and Syrian moves could. The more time passes, however, the fewer options remain for the American camp.

Until President Obama decides to invest in a new Syria policy or else completely relinquish any stake in the conflict in the Levant, there’s little to discuss with Putin. Russia comes to the table with clear aims and a plan to achieve them; the United States needs its own goals and strategy before engaging in a conversation.

The most effective approach for the United States right now would be to quickly commit to a program

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that supports alternatives to Assad and opposes ISIS—while making clear that America would back peace talks that include all foreign sponsors and all domestic players in the conflict, with the exception of ISIS and other jihadis.²

This brief argues that such an approach is an essential precursor to any “Moscow Track” for Syria, and could well render it obsolete. It lays out where American and Russian interests in Syria overlap and where they diverge, and examines the limits of Russia’s going it alone. Finally, it outlines a course of U.S. action that would expand the options for the Syria crisis beyond the limited and troublesome alternative solutions currently under consideration.

RUSSIA’S INTERESTS— AND AMERICA’S

Syria is Russia’s most solid foothold in the Arab world, and offers a strategic alliance, military contracts, and a critical naval base in Tartus. So, in the short term, Russia’s ramp-up is only an increase in the degree of Moscow’s long-running commitment to the regime of Bashar al-Assad.³ Many foreign and domestic constituencies are also influencing the course of Syria’s war. Arab monarchies in the Gulf, along with Turkey, have kept alive a Sunni-dominated insurgency that has fought the regime and its backers to a stalemate. The fighting has catastrophically crippled the nation’s institutions and infrastructure.

If the United States does not respond to Russia’s latest move with a concrete shift in policy soon, it will effectively cede the theater to Damascus, and its patrons in Iran and Russia. Eventually, momentum could shift in the regime’s favor. If Russia solidifies its presence in Syria further and installs better air defenses, the United States will no longer be able to easily consider pivotal interventions, such as establishing a no-fly zone.

Not all of Russia’s interests and intentions in Syria conflict with those of the United States, however, and in fact several overlap:

- Moscow and Washington abhor jihadi extremists and are obsessed with protecting their homeland from terrorist attacks.
- Neither power likes a power vacuum in a strategically sensitive Middle East; despite Washington’s looser rhetoric, both powers are fundamentally conservative about regime change.
- Both want to preserve the institutions of the Syrian state and keep its borders intact at the end of the current civil war. In fact, both powers are invested in the existing Arab state system and do not wish to see the emergence of new states or the redrawing of borders.

But a number of crucial differences separate the two powers:

- While Russia sees Bashar al-Assad as a solid partner, the United States sees him as a long-term strategic threat who cynically allowed jihadis to flourish in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and backed militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas.
- Russia supports the Iran-Syria alliance and an arc of anti-American regimes and non-state actors from Tehran to the Mediterranean. For obvious reasons the United States sees that alliance as a threat to its hegemony in the region and to the rough alliance of U.S.-allied Arab states.
- Russia and the United States are at loggerheads elsewhere: over the Ukraine, energy supplies to Europe, and the Iranian nuclear program.

- The two powers exhibit vastly different levels of willingness and capacity to fight ISIS.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Russia has much more narrow and easier to fulfill strategic aims: shore up a local client dictator, preserve a military foothold, and dent jihadist capabilities. The United States on the other hand has a wide range of hard-to-reconcile regional aims; and for all its equivocation, Washington's aim is to stabilize the region. It does not have the luxury and clarity of a spoiler's agenda.

WHAT CAN RUSSIA ACTUALLY ACHIEVE?

Much of Washington's reaction to Russia's surge has been devoid of context and long-term perspective. Of course, an injection of Russian fighters and equipment will change the dynamics of the fight; but there is no evidence that Russian intervention will have a conclusive impact. By way of comparison, a considerably larger U.S. occupation force in Iraq was unable to eliminate Al Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State's precursor. And the Soviet Union's attempt to decisively shore up a local partner against jihadi rebels—in Afghanistan in the 1980s—failed mightily.

Russia and Iran both benefit from an inflated reputation in Syria. Both powers have spent considerable funds and manpower to prop up a regime that has steadily lost ground during four years of war. Betting on the regime has been costly, and Russia's decision to double down exposes it to still greater risks and costs. It will take time to see whether Russia is engaging in a limited and achievable intervention—striking ISIS while shoring up the regime's heartland—or a more far-fetched all-out venture to win the war outright for Assad.

Syria's dynamics are unique, of course, but there is no sound reason to predict Russia can wipe out the anti-

Assad rebellion as it now stands. Foreign influence has shaped the Syrian war for years—through the limited impact of previous gambits in Syria by the United States, Iran, and the Arab Gulf monarchies—but has not been able to decide its outcome, underscoring the need for modest Russian expectations.

Russia and Iran together can probably assure that their local partner in Damascus remains in power over some portion of Syria, but it is less clear whether they can re-extend Assad's ambit beyond the rump state he controls today. It is even less clear what will survive of Syria's national institutions. And there will surely be blowback. Fighters from Chechnya and other former Soviet republics already are fighting with the Syrian rebels. Their ranks are almost guaranteed to swell now that Russia has publicly upped its ante in Syria.

HOW SHOULD THE UNITED STATES RESPOND?

Until now the United States followed a wishy-washy course, typified by the “non-strike event” in the summer of 2013,⁴ when Washington backed down from its threat to intervene against Assad's use of chemical weapons.⁵ Once America abandoned its fixed red lines,⁶ Washington downgraded its already limited leverage over the conflict, while remaining vulnerable to its consequences. Ever since, the major players in Syria have vastly lowered their expectation of any U.S. involvement whatsoever, whether political, economic, or military.

The United States wants Assad gone, but has done little to hasten his fall because the available options to replace him are poor. Washington wants “moderate” rebels, but also does not want to get dragged into a civil war. As a result, it has not given any meaningful support to any militia that has a serious combat presence, and it has not exercised any political or military muscle that would change the balance of power on the ground.

At times, Washington has even appeared to believe that a quagmire in Syria would somehow serve U.S. interests by draining the resources of a gang of bad actors: Iran, Hezbollah, Assad, Russia, the money men in the Arabian peninsula, ISIS, and Al Qaeda.⁷ Counterterrorism officials seemed to believe that the threat from ISIS was local, and could be bottled up in the Levant without any blowback beyond Syria's borders.

All the assumptions underlying American inaction, however, were blown apart by a series of cataclysmic events: the concurrent implosion of Syria and Iraq in 2014 at the hands of ISIS, followed by the entrenchment of a sustainable jihadist empire headquartered in Mosul, and finally a human wave of displaced people remaking the demographics of Syria's neighbors and flowing through Europe. No matter how hard the U.S. government has tried to contain, cauterize, or ignore the Syria war, its strategic ramifications continue to demand notice.

Putin's showmanship has once again created a sense of urgency, just as the refugee crisis, the emergence of ISIS, and the use of chemical weapons did in early periods of the war. In response, some analysts and politicians in the United States have focused on the public relations fallout from Russia outmaneuvering Washington.⁸ In the case of Syria, that image reflects reality. Russia is achieving its admittedly simpler, Machiavellian goals far more successfully than the United States because Russia is far more committed, has dedicated far greater resources, and has a solid ally in power in Damascus.

If, after all the political calculations are made, the United States is unwilling to shoulder the risks of a heavier involvement in Syria, then it must make a clear case that inaction is a safer, smarter, and more responsible course than intervention. It must argue that *any* greater military involvement would make the

human toll worse. And if it decides to pursue inaction and still wants to maintain some semblance of its role as a humanitarian world leader, the United States must also make a serious production of spending money and resources to contain the wider fallout of the conflict in terms of contagion and refugees. Washington has led international donations to the Syrian refugee response and insists it is a priority, but American contributions have been inadequate to address the crisis. United Nations appeals remain massively underfunded, and millions of refugees live without any secure status in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. If the United States decides to limit itself to addressing the humanitarian needs, it must immediately commit to resettling a number of refugees in the six figures, and ought to commit enough money to fully fund the UN's Syrian refugee appeals.

A better course of action would be to get off the fence and aggressively pursue a plan that promotes an inclusive national solution to the Syrian conflict, one that would address core concerns about governance, corruption, and the disenfranchisement of many Sunnis.

Such a course would be fragile and full of risks, but the alternative is worse: a de facto alliance with Putin, Assad, and Tehran in shaping the future of Syria. In that scenario, the very same parties that drove Syria to collapse and green-lit the unfurling of a massive international jihadi wave would dictate the terms of a counter-jihad, with the United States playing a supporting role. An American junior partnership with Assad and Putin would be bad geopolitics for the United States—and it also would be unlikely to bring peace to Syria.

What would a more effective solution look like? The United States cannot wisely sign onto an anti-ISIS alliance composed solely of Assad, Russia, and Tehran. A genuine anti-ISIS campaign must have

support from Syrian Sunnis if it is to have any chance of success. A national coalition backed by all the major non-jihadi players would be the only a viable vehicle for fighting ISIS and stabilizing Syria as a whole. It would be a long shot—and it would become a possibility only if the United States decided to provide a significant counterweight to the Damascus-Moscow-Tehran alliance.

That position would entail a serious and major U.S. commitment, including a no-fly zone and safe havens, and partnerships with any non-jihadi militias willing to rhetorically embrace basic values of pluralism and shared governance.

Crucially, this American involvement must be accompanied by a new diplomatic initiative from Washington, inviting all the conflict's foreign sponsors and all its domestic stakeholders—except for the jihadis—to take part in designing and supporting a transitional government. Assad and his circle would have to be part of that negotiation.

Talking to Putin about Syria will not make America look more ineffectual and disconnected than it already does. On the other hand, there is no reason to start a dialogue unless the White House has something to say. Articulating and putting resources behind a regional strategy to resolve the Syrian problem would be a good opening statement in any conversation with Russia.

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Notes

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