



Triangular Diplomacy

Unpacking Russia's Syria Strategy

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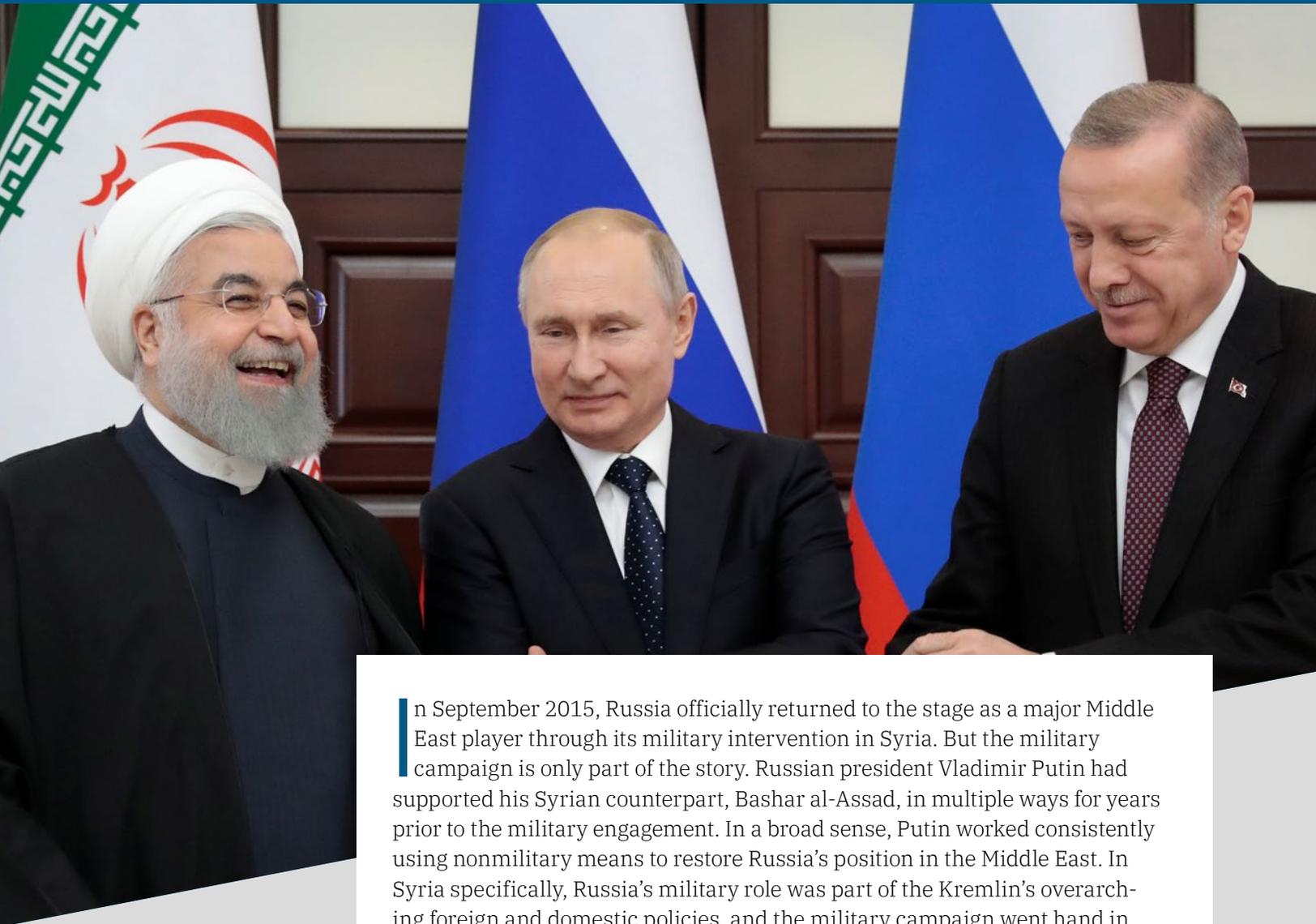


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In September 2015, Russia officially returned to the stage as a major Middle East player through its military intervention in Syria. But the military campaign is only part of the story. Russian president Vladimir Putin had supported his Syrian counterpart, Bashar al-Assad, in multiple ways for years prior to the military engagement. In a broad sense, Putin worked consistently using nonmilitary means to restore Russia's position in the Middle East. In Syria specifically, Russia's military role was part of the Kremlin's overarching foreign and domestic policies, and the military campaign went hand in hand with diplomatic efforts. Indeed, Moscow relied on both in pursuit of its preferred outcomes in Syria.

Viewed through this lens, Moscow's 2015 intervention in Syria can be understood as part and parcel of a larger effort to restore lost power through a

consistently applied diplomatic toolkit. First, Russia has established itself as a power broker through its willingness to sit down and negotiate with just about anyone, eschewing American concerns that negotiations are a concession that offer legitimacy to rivals. Over the years, the Kremlin has pursued ties with both Israel and Hezbollah—indeed, in March 2021 Moscow hosted separate delegations from the two parties in a single week—while Putin has cultivated personal relationships with longtime adversaries in Riyadh and Tehran. Second, Moscow has limited its goals to transactional arrangements, with no ambitions of remaking societies from the ground up or even solving the conflict in Syria.

Moscow has pursued pragmatic and consistent diplomatic engagement bilaterally and multilaterally to impose itself as a broker between the Syrian regime and the international community. These efforts maximized the use of Russia's military means and gradually reshaped the diplomatic process in a way that is consistent with Moscow's political goals, which include keeping Assad in power and elevating Russia's position as a Great Power and chief decision-maker—at the expense of the United States.

While a number of publications have accurately covered Russia's military campaign as well as some specific Russian diplomatic efforts—e.g., those within the high-level Astana format—less attention has been devoted to the details of Russian diplomacy in Syria. This study reviews Russia's diplomatic tactics and how they have reinforced Moscow's military moves in Syria. It thereafter draws lessons for Western policymakers.

Stiff Russian Cocktail: Obstruction, Pressure, and Ambiguity

Diplomatically, the Kremlin's approach in Syria combined three dimensions. First, Moscow consistently protected the Syrian regime from the

consequences of its refusal to negotiate with the Syrian opposition. Most directly, Moscow lied in its multiple vetoes to UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions (sixteen, as of this writing) that, in its view, could pave the way for a Western military intervention.¹ For example, in July 2012 Moscow blocked a resolution that merely threatened the possibility of sanctions, expressing fear that the resolution might eventually open the door for a Western military intervention against Assad, simply because the language did not explicitly prohibit one.² Indeed, Moscow's chief aim was to prevent a military intervention, which it feared even more than sanctions. Beyond the UNSC, Russia used every tool available at the UN to prevent any actions that would further diminish the Assad regime's status. For example, despite a very limited Russian contribution to humanitarian support in Syria,³ Moscow decisively (1) supported the Assad regime in forcing UN agencies to work primarily from Damascus⁴—even those trying to reach nonregime areas—and (2) attempted to block cross-border humanitarian assistance. Moscow also pressured the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to limit the consequences of the regime's use of such weapons. Recently, the Russian envoy to the OPCW slammed the organization's report showing that Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in 2018, calling the allegations “far-fetched” and declaring the OPCW an “illegitimate body.”⁵ Russia's real goal was never to prove what actually happened, but merely to raise enough procedural concerns to delegitimize the report and encourage other parties to treat Assad as a legitimate ruler.

Second, Moscow leveraged Western fears of a global escalation with Russia and of another quagmire in the Middle East. Moscow signaled that it would be dangerous for the West to push too much, and Western leaders did not want to fight a war with Russia over Syria. Privately, some American officials described Russia as unpredictable and prone to risky behavior; this view of Russia colored Washington's assessment of the situation in Syria. Russia's leverage was so effective, in fact, that Moscow pretended to provide an alternative to escalation: that is, Moscow's very involvement suggested that if the West were to work with Russia, a compromise with

the Syrian regime could be found. By this logic, why would the West risk escalation with Russia when engagement could provide potential benefits?

The third dimension of Russia's approach was Moscow's ambiguous intent with regard to Assad. Such ambiguity was, in fact, key to Moscow's credible engagement in various negotiations, as the Kremlin claimed that it was not defending Assad personally but rather the Syrian state and its "legitimate government." The idea of a nuanced relationship between the state and the Assad clan shaped the belief among Western policymakers that Moscow could eventually abandon Assad to save the regime, thereby forcing Assad to the negotiating table. Moscow, therefore, fanned the perception that it shared some common interests with the West, even while remaining a difficult partner. Thus, Moscow's ambiguity, together with its direct line to Assad, gave Russia the position it coveted—one of an indispensable international mediator. Ironically, the misleading claim that Moscow was not wedded to Assad held a grain of truth: Moscow never cared directly about Assad himself so much as it cared, as a matter of principle, about ensuring that the United States did not topple another dictator. Regardless of Moscow's feelings toward Assad, the Russian state in practice saw no alternatives to engaging with him.

Coupled with Moscow's military presence, this diplomatic posture provided Russia with three roles in the Syrian conflict—a party to the conflict, a representative of the regime's interests, and a mediator—any of which it could play depending on its tactical needs. And Moscow could play such roles because it accepted the contradictions inherent in being a member of the P5 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council, with the others Washington, Beijing, Paris, and London) while supporting a government that has violated multiple international obligations. In a way, Moscow had an incentive to pursue such a policy in Syria; it too was relatively isolated on the international stage, and Russia's support to Assad over the years did not exacerbate that isolation meaningfully. In fact, the West and much of the Middle East continued to see Russia not only as part of the problem but as part of the solution in Syria.

Key Narratives

From the beginning, Moscow created diplomatic space by employing four narratives, each of which supported the Kremlin's assertion that it was a stabilizing force in the region and justified its defense of Assad. These narratives are outlined as follows.

Narrative One: The Legal Argument

Legally, in the context of a diplomatic battle within the international community regarding Assad's status in organizations such as the United Nations, Moscow insisted on the regime's legitimacy and sovereignty. While the Arab League suspended Assad in late 2011 following his failure to end his government's brutal government crackdown on protestors, his status at the UN remained somewhat ambiguous. This situation helped Russian diplomats make their arguments. Indeed, Moscow used the fact that the regime controlled Syria's external representation to oppose foreign intervention and use of force in Syria, only to later claim the credibility of its own intervention, which was considered "legitimate" because of the "invitation" of the Assad regime.⁶ Russian statements at the UN have used "the legitimate government" as shorthand for Assad's regime, wielding this narrow conception of legitimacy as a cudgel to criticize actors that have intervened to counter Assad or even to merely limit the suffering of civilian populations.⁷ By this logic, any foreign efforts to reduce the suffering inflicted by Assad are illegitimate unless Assad himself approves of them. But the implicit (and sometimes explicit) assumption of the Kremlin has always been that Assad is here to stay—and Moscow worked to ensure this. Thus, it was natural to frame Western interventions (even humanitarian ones, provided they were outside Assad's oversight) as useless—a feeble ploy designed to prolong the war and delay the inevitable. Russia has used this argument to strangle humanitarian aid to nonregime areas, then used the ensuing deterioration of the humanitarian situation in those areas to criticize the same actors that are, in its view, prolonging the war.

Moscow's fundamental argument is that international law requires humanitarian actors to coordinate with a country's authorities. However, the Geneva Convention also stipulates that local authorities must not violate other provisions of international law. The convention forbids denying access to aid for "arbitrary or capricious" reasons.⁸ Even sovereignty is not superior to humanitarian protection, but Moscow does not see it that way. In reality, Moscow ignored Assad's violations to justify the regime's domination over UN agencies. It also neglects the humanitarian rights of the Syrian population, such as the right to food or medical support. In the Kremlin's view, UN agencies' submission to the regime is simply the result of the balance of power. Following the Kremlin's successful efforts to shut down cross-border aid to northeast Syria, Russia's UN representative addressed the UNSC to say, "We are surprised at the lasting silence of UN representatives with regard to environmental disaster in northeast Syria...It is strange that when it comes to the Syrian track, some episodes seem to escape the UN sight."⁹ In a later statement, that same representative alleged that "the direst [humanitarian] situation has evolved in the northwest, north, and northeast of Syria on the territories out of control of the Syrian government, which are the responsibility of the de-facto occupying powers and the local authorities."¹⁰ For Russia, Assad's military victory has long been an implicit panacea, capable of resolving a whole host of humanitarian and human rights crises that in reality were created by the regime and exacerbated by the Kremlin.

Moscow, as well as Beijing, has demonstrated its ability to selectively insist on some international principles (e.g., national sovereignty, the need for coordination between local and UN authorities) while denying others (e.g., unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance). At the core of the issue is Moscow's desire to return to an international structure that more closely resembles the Westphalian system—one where the concept of state sovereignty is more absolute and, moreover, one where Great Powers have a privileged sphere of influence. This is also at the core of Moscow's routine anger at the perceived Western diktat of a "rules-based"

order—and why Moscow often sticks to the letter but not the spirit of the law.

At the UN, Russia stressed the need to respect Syrian sovereignty; on the ground, however, Russia has largely violated the regime's authority and acted without an international mandate, as it did in Idlib in March 2020 when it reached a ceasefire with Turkey against regime attempts to retake territories. Russian officials often take the same approach to UN reports. In 2020, Russian officials cherry-picked UN figures to claim that humanitarian convoys from Damascus to northeast Syria were increasing,¹¹ even as they pushed for a UN investigation on sanctions. Meanwhile, those same officials have dismissed other UN findings, including an investigatory conclusion confirming regime airstrikes on humanitarian actors, various assessments regarding humanitarian needs in northwest Syria, and numerous reports on the regime's impeding of humanitarian access.¹² As mentioned previously, Russia downplayed and mocked an OPCW report containing overwhelming evidence that the Assad regime had used chemical weapons against its own people on February 4, 2018, referring to the report as "yet another pseudo-investigation" before it had even been released.¹³

Moscow also systematically criticized other actors' behavior but never acknowledged the regime's faults. In 2018, Russian officials remarked on the "dire" humanitarian situation in the Rukban refugee camp, located near a U.S. military base, falsely claiming that supply shortages had resulted because "the [United States] banned entry" to the area around the base.¹⁴ Later, a Russian military official even likened the situation at Rukban to "World War II concentration camps" because of the purported U.S. blockade on aid.¹⁵ In reality, Russian and Syrian forces had laid siege to the area for several months in an attempt to force residents to return home and "reconcile" with the regime.¹⁶ At the same time, the Kremlin systematically worked to shield the Assad regime from culpability for its own actions, harrying UN investigations and working to bury reports that might reveal war crimes.¹⁷ In the same spirit, Russia criticized the humanitarian situation in Raqqa after the city was retaken by the U.S.-supported Syrian

Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2017. However, in addition to the unprecedented level of explosive devices left behind by the Islamic State (IS), the situation was attributable to the regime's refusal to allow UN crossline convoys from Damascus. It took six months for UN agencies to receive authorization to carry out their first assessment mission in Raqqa.

Although the UN tried to address each Russian concern by putting robust monitoring mechanisms in place, Russian diplomats have claimed such efforts lack transparency in an effort to delegitimize them. Moscow managed to close Bab al-Salam in July 2020 under these false pretenses, only months after blocking the renewal of al-Yarubiya and Ramtha.¹⁸ When Bab al-Hawa comes up for renewal again in July 2021, Russia may aim to close that as well.

Narrative Two: Toward De-Escalation

Militarily, Russia portrayed itself as waging a war against “terrorism,” accepting “de-escalation” when the regime and its allies were confronted with stronger actors such as Turkey and the United States. This rhetorical emphasis on terrorism served to justify an indiscriminate military campaign that sought to destroy any opposition to Assad. Just like Assad, Moscow used its narrative to blur the lines between opponents of the regime, lumping all anti-Assad groups together as “terrorists.” But even as Moscow placed enormous importance on fighting terrorists, Russia declined to target IS- or al-Qaeda-affiliated groups with any consistency, instead using its air campaign to wipe out any moderate factions that the West might find palatable to work with.¹⁹ Indeed, the only area where Moscow effectively fought IS was the desert south of the Euphrates in 2017; there, the goal was to reach the Euphrates as soon as possible in an effort to limit U.S.-backed SDF territorial gains and secure Assad's access to oil fields.²⁰ De-escalation agreements brokered by Russia within the Astana format provided useful pauses to the fighting for the Assad regime. Low-level military activity was confined to certain areas, while the pauses allowed the regime to regroup its forces, attacking and reconquering with Moscow's help. According to a

former UN advisor, “the idea of doing de-escalation step by step was brilliant” from both a military and a diplomatic point of view.²¹ It allowed Moscow to label attempts to push rebel groups to surrender as efforts to reach a ceasefire. And the anti-terrorism narrative always justified regime forces' breach of the ceasefires, as de-escalation agreements explicitly excluded terrorist groups without specifying who was among them.

Narrative Three: Focus on Reconciliation

Politically, the focus on the need for a Syrian constitution and “reconciliation” helped Moscow progressively reduce the scope of the UN-led process. It also diverted attention from the regime's refusal to negotiate with the Syrian opposition recognized by the UN and calling for real political reforms in Syria. Moscow proposed alternative topics of discussion and formats loosely connected to the UN framework but whose framing was based on the regime's interests. Discussions on the Syrian constitution thus shielded the regime from any consequence of obstructing UN-led negotiations.

The emphasis on reconciliation, meanwhile, allowed Russia to portray itself as a neutral mediator between Assad and southern opposition factions. In reality, however, this stance permitted Assad to retake territory without a fight and to subsequently punish opposition members with tacit Russian support. During Assad's campaign to retake southern Deraa province, Russia acted as a guarantor, persuading rebels to lay down their arms in exchange for Russian-backed assurances that the Assad regime would allow opposition-affiliated locals to normalize ties with Damascus without retribution.²² Russia mediated dozens of “reconciliation” agreements during the campaign, allowing individual towns and cities to write the terms of their surrender under Russian auspices.²³ Although Russia positioned itself as a neutral party, such efforts were intended to fragment the local opposition, thereby allowing Assad to consolidate control without the costly sieges he had relied on to retake Aleppo and other

opposition strongholds. Moreover, the “settlement” process for rebels to normalize ties with the regime was often a pretext for forcing rebels to confess their disloyalty, and it often led to their being conscripted as cannon fodder on the frontlines in other provinces.²⁴ The regime often forcibly “disappeared” those who survived their military service.²⁵ Throughout the conflict in Syria, Moscow has consistently maintained enough strategic ambiguity regarding its goals to portray itself as a reliable mediator, while in reality it has leveraged that position to bolster Assad’s attempts to expand the regime’s control. Moscow’s position was also part of its competition with Tehran, which supported militias and nonstate actors while Moscow attempted to restructure the Syrian Arab Army, which was on the verge of collapse.²⁶

Narrative Four: The Economic Argument

Economically, Moscow used the issue of the return of refugees to push for lifting sanctions against Assad even if the regime had not changed its behavior. In Moscow’s view, sanctions prevent the successful return and economic reintegration of refugees, violate Syrian sovereignty, and hurt the Syrian people. Putin himself recently tied Syria’s humanitarian issues to “unilateral” sanctions against Syria’s legitimate authorities when he spoke with UN secretary-general António Guterres in the weeks prior to Putin’s meeting with President Joe Biden in Geneva on June 16.²⁷

The Russian Foreign Ministry carried out sustained lobbying in European capitals, even presenting in 2019 plans for charter flights to bring back refugees from Europe to Syria. This push for returning refugees ignores the fact that the regime has systematically killed, arrested, or expelled from the country Syrians who are opposed to Assad. Thus, the regime remains the biggest obstacle to refugee return—not sanctions.²⁸ Even as Moscow lobbied the West to lift sanctions, it expressed no interest in using its leverage in Damascus to change the regime’s behavior in a way that would have actually made returning feasible for most refugees. Relating to its legal narrative and

despite massive diversion of humanitarian assistance by Assad,²⁹ Moscow always insisted that the UN work with the regime to organize humanitarian assistance, even as the regime deliberately used starvation as a tactic to force the Syrian people into submission. And even as Russia has worked to subvert UN aid to benefit Assad, it has also created an elaborate parallel humanitarian operation in Syria, designed to bolster Russian soft power in the country. Over the course of the war, 81 percent of all Russian aid in Syria has been delivered directly via Russian state institutions; this is in sharp contrast to Western powers, which overwhelmingly provide their funds to third-party NGOs that operate with less government influence.³⁰ Russian aid deliveries have certainly served as one-off photo ops, but subsequent investigations have made it clear that those deliveries’ unreliable schedule, small scale, and politically motivated allocation decisions make them a poor replacement at best for UN-monitored aid.

Triangular Diplomacy: An Incremental, Multilayered Effort to Freeze the UN Process

The UN-led process, especially in the early stages, aimed for a genuine resolution of the situation in Syria. Such a resolution entailed negotiations with all sides, acknowledgment of Assad’s crimes, and at least the possibility of his departure. But this process went counter to Moscow’s aims; thus, it sought to change the diplomatic playing field.

Russia first worked to freeze or block the multilateral process led by the United Nations. It then used diplomatic negotiations to gain time for its military campaign. It finally developed alternative tracks, theoretically held under UN auspices. Indeed, it was important for Moscow to maintain a veneer of international legitimacy, even as it marginalized the UN-led process by trying to coopt UN actors in processes shaped by Russia.

While multilateral frameworks like the UN-led Geneva process or minilateral ones like the Astana format have attracted significant attention, the various layers of diplomacy put in place by Moscow below multilateral showcases are particularly worthy of analysis. Moscow built on a set of bilateral relations in which it acted as a competitor but not necessarily an enemy of a number of actors in the Syrian conflict. Russia eventually turned these bilateral tracks into trilateral tracks, thereby allowing Moscow to become everyone's "broker" and to set up a framework in line with its goals.

Russian Nesting Dolls with the Opposition

Russian diplomacy in Syria started with a patient engagement of Syrian opposition figures, whose divisions Moscow exploited. While Russia's support of the Assad regime made most opposition figures suspicious of Moscow, most of them understood that contacts with Russia could be useful for reaching a negotiated settlement. At the beginning of the civil war, this engagement of opposition figures was also a way for Moscow to keep its options open if Assad were to lose. Over time, this posture allowed Moscow to expand its access to the opposition and to scale up its efforts, especially after the launch of its ground operation in 2015.

At the end of 2014 and in early 2015, Moscow engaged in particularly intensive dialogue with the Syrian opposition on a political transition. The Kremlin hosted a number of meetings in Moscow and Astana, the Kazakhstani capital, in January and May 2015; those meetings brought together representatives of the Assad regime, such as Bashar Jafari, and some opposition figures—but not those who demanded Assad's ouster. The Syrian National Council, which represented genuine opposition, boycotted the meetings. Moscow then presented its efforts to the international community as an attempt to prepare for UN-led negotiations between the opposition and the regime. The main outcome, however, was the formation of a "Moscow group" within the opposition, to compete with other groups

in Cairo and Riyadh. This created more confusion for the West but also served the primary purpose of ensuring that Assad stayed in power. The Moscow group's most prominent members—Qadri Jamil, Khaled Muhammad, and Randa Kassis—did not oppose Assad and constantly interfered in the opposition's internal discussion. Russia therefore used its informal diplomacy in Astana to further divide the opposition, eventually offering to negotiate outside the Geneva framework.

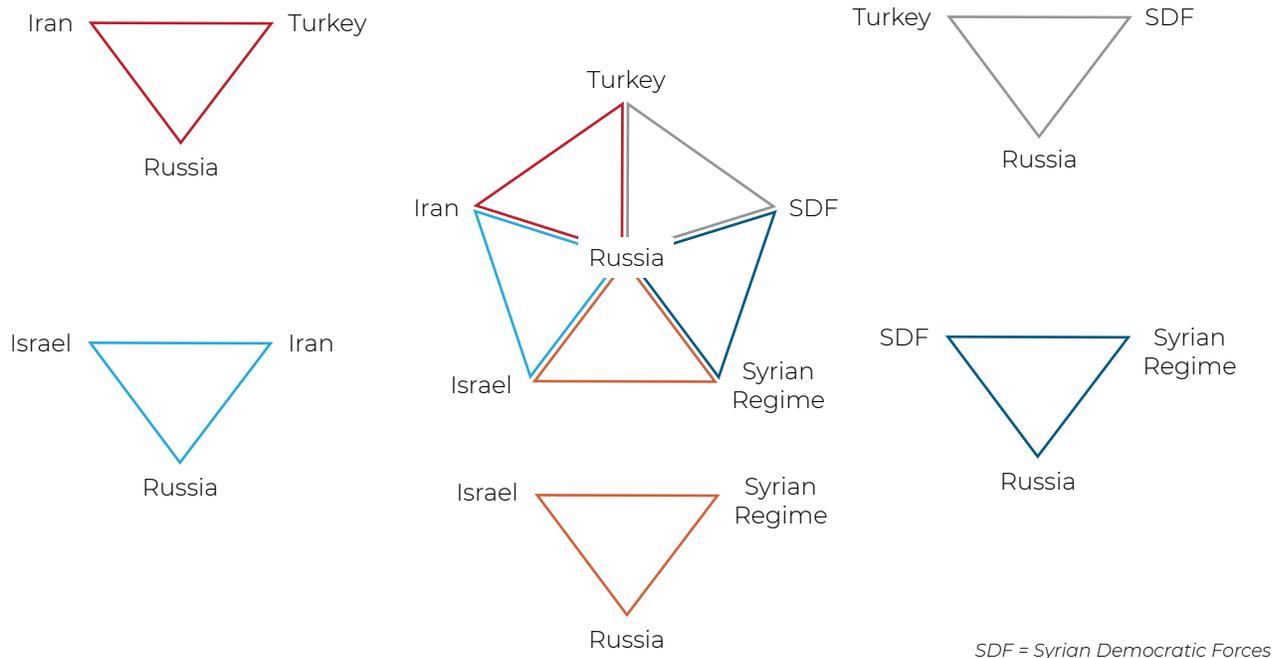
To sustain its outreach to the Syrian opposition, Moscow used both its military presence on the ground and its ambiguous goals regarding what demands it could push the regime to accept. In Geneva, Russian diplomats presented Moscow's ability to convince the regime to attend the negotiation rounds as the result of constructive Russian engagement, and blamed the opposition when the regime left without actually negotiating anything. Prior to a Moscow-organized conference in January 2015, Moscow obtained from the Syrian regime a promise to release prisoners in advance of the meeting; this move was intended to facilitate discussions and to signal that the regime was willing to make real concessions. Ultimately, though, no concessions were made by the regime during the talks.

Moscow launched a number of initiatives and built them up according to the evolution of events on the ground. These Russian moves have been incremental, but they eventually had a real influence on the Syrian opposition, slowly diminishing its relevance even further.

From Bilateral to Trilateral Diplomacy

Moscow's success in engaging bilaterally, as substantively as it did with Syria, can be traced to an attempt prior to the current Syrian conflict to build good relations with Middle East countries. This ultimately helped Russia during the current Syrian conflict, during which it has built a network of relationships characterized by respect for the vital interests of Syria's neighboring countries.

Figure 1. Five Triangles and a Pentagon: Russia as a Balancer in Syria



When certain bilateral relations were strong enough or when a crisis created a specific opportunity, Russia used the principles of bilateralism to bring together two otherwise enemies around common issues important to them; this made Moscow a “tactical mediator,” engaging in short-term deals, not comprehensive agreements, while sticking to its position of support for the Syrian regime.

Ultimately, Moscow built a network of trilateral relations; Moscow, combining political and military tracks, became the balancing actor in these “triangles,” which are now the backbone of Russian influence in Syria. In most of these triangular relationships, Russia has managed to become an “approachable competitor”—that is, each actor’s priority is an enemy other than Assad (see figure 1). By balancing its support between enemies, Russia emerges as a natural interlocutor. This dynamic played out at full speed in 2017—e.g., between Turkey, Iran, and Russia in northwest Syria in May;³¹ between Russia and senior opposition figures at a July meeting in Cairo on “de-escalating” Ghouta and Rastan;³² and between Russia, the United States, and Jordan in southern Syria in September.³³

Although brokered with different international actors, Putin’s parallel summits with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani provided a high degree of visibility to their leadership dialogue on Syria. The summits also signaled to the world that Russia, Turkey, and Iran were the decisive players in Syria, because they alone were willing to take the significant risk of using military force to shape political outcomes.

Beyond its symbolism, however, the core logic of triangular diplomacy remains clear: it is a set of bilateral discussions between Russia and military actors on the ground that are then bolstered by high-level diplomatic meetings. The process has developed incrementally, without a clear endgame beyond the creation of alternative tracks that are more favorable to Russia’s goals than the framework defined by UNSC Resolution 2254.

Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the Astana Format

The triangle of Iran, Turkey, and Russia is the most defining one for the Syrian conflict, as those actors play the most active roles on the ground. This

relationship has largely replaced the UN-led Geneva process for Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

Moscow initially created the Astana format to discuss tactical issues with the two other countries with large military contingents on the ground: Iran and Turkey. Fighting on the ground spurred an interest in talking about military “de-escalation,” but Moscow added a political layer and a link to political “reconciliation.” The Astana format eventually became a real geopolitical framework that helped Moscow sideline the United States after it ceased its operations in support of Syria’s armed opposition groups. Indeed, only Turkey was perceived to have influence on such groups. The process was initially led by military officials, but Moscow gradually modified the format into meetings of only Russian, Iranian, and Turkish diplomats—and the triangle emerged. Most of the time, these discussions were strictly bilateral between Turkey and Russia, in an effort to force Turkish-backed armed groups into ceasefires that would ultimately be agreed upon by Iran-backed actors.

Moscow has convinced Ankara that the Astana format will have an impact on the political solution to the Syrian conflict, despite initial Turkish reticence. Turkey’s participation as a “guarantor” has opened up a political process that, in practice, Moscow now holds in its hands, relying on the supposed acquiescence of the opposition. On the one hand, Moscow outsourced the effort to convince the opposition to Turkey, which brought the armed groups and the National Syrian Council to Astana. On the other hand, when the opposition refused to enter the Russian game, Moscow dealt directly with Ankara to reach a bilateral deal (at Sochi in January 2018), as it considers Ankara the *de facto* representative of the Syrian opposition. Turkish collaboration has allowed Moscow to gradually impose the solution of constitutional reform, which it had been promoting without much success since spring 2015. A former UN official notes, “The Turks became more important because they had military action behind their talks, but they were so self-interested in the north that the opposition had no real ally.”³⁴

The Astana format trapped the United Nations. Although Moscow pretended the format was a way to “prepare” for negotiations in Geneva, in practice it was removing content from Geneva. Moscow, for example, formed a working group on “detainees,” which it asked the UN to run. There was little room for maneuvering, however—for, say, discussions on the fate of the tens of thousands of political prisoners in regime-run jails. Moscow constantly insisted that the process be “Syrian led” (while it chose which Syrians could participate) and merely “UN facilitated” (while the Security Council gave a larger mandate). Indeed, the attempt to bridge the gap between Astana and Geneva effectively paralyzed the UN special envoy.

Ultimately, the Astana format’s fate is indicative of the tactical nature of Russian diplomacy, which fuels Moscow’s broader objectives. Once it had reframed the diplomatic dynamic to the point where the UN envoy was hamstrung, Moscow resorted to Astana far less frequently. Largely inactive since 2020, Astana, according to a former UN advisor, “is dead now.”³⁵ Although Moscow still needs Astana to prevent other less favorable frameworks from reshaping the negotiations on Syria, Russia no longer needs to actively rely on the format.

Iran, Israel, and Russia

Because Iran and Israel lack direct diplomatic communication channels, Moscow managed to form another triangle of sorts between itself and Tel Aviv and Tehran. One of the many layers of the Syrian conflict has been the gradual escalation between Israel and Iran, with the latter using the conflict to move assets and advisors closer to the Israeli border, and the former trying to deter and contain those moves through targeted strikes. The Israel Defense Forces, in fact, recognized more than two hundred strikes in Syria on Iranian targets in 2017 and 2018.³⁶ Assuming that Iranian and Israeli escalation and deterrence maneuvers are a means of communication, Moscow “closed” the triangle by placing itself as an intermediary to avoid a complete escalation between Tehran and Tel Aviv. This triangle reveals how Moscow builds its profile

by maintaining adversarial positions—its alliance with the regime and with Iran—while offering limited but vital opportunities to Israel to react to critical threats from an enemy. On the basis of Putin’s patient outreach to Israel in the past decade, as well as the military position Moscow acquired in the conflict through the setup of Russian air defense, Russia had both a well-structured dialogue on deconfliction with Israel and strong leverage to limit Israel’s airspace for military action. These factors created space for a limited but constructive relationship whereby Moscow accepted Israeli strikes as long as they were limited to Iranian, not regime, assets. By accepting those conditions (although regime forces are hosting Iranian forces and often intermixed with them), Tel Aviv abided by one of Russia’s central concerns: that is, maintaining the military balance of power between the regime and armed opposition groups. Indeed, given Russia and Iran’s competition for power in Syria,³⁷ Russia’s negotiations with Israel may serve a secondary purpose of undercutting a Russian rival for influence in Damascus.

The Syrian Regime, Iran, and Russia

The Israel-Russia relationship also illustrates how Moscow connected triangles to other triangles. Russia used Israel’s vital interest—containing Iranian threats to its territory—to balance another triangle: the alliance between Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow. Russia’s role as intermediary between Iran and Israel gave Moscow additional leverage with regard to its relationship between Damascus and Tehran. Moscow reminded Damascus that Russia was Syria’s only ally able to deliver regional and international cover, while Iran would stay an enemy to Syria’s enemies. Moscow’s relations with Damascus and Tehran are deep and encompass a wide range of issues; nevertheless, Moscow has used external threats to Iran’s engagement in Syria to reassert Russia’s position vis-à-vis the regime. Russia is therefore not the only balancing power in this triangle, as Damascus tries to manage Russia and Iran, both of which are competing for influence in Syria.

Jordan, the Syrian Regime, and Russia

This triangle shared by Jordan, the Syrian regime, and Russia emerged to negotiate the reopening of the border between Syria and Jordan. On the one hand, Amman’s relations with Damascus have deteriorated since the beginning of the war, and a large number of refugees and opposition fighters have found shelter in Jordan. Through control of its side of the Syria-Jordan border, Amman exerted important leverage over Assad by opening and closing the area to opposition fighters either seeking shelter in Jordan or returning to Syria to fight the regime. On the other hand, Russia’s relationship with Jordan was not initially at the forefront of Russia’s Middle East policy, though the Syrian crisis certainly elevated Jordan’s importance. After Moscow’s intervention, however, the two countries began to operate a joint intelligence-sharing center in Amman³⁸—specifically on southern Syria—and to coordinate military activities in hopes of stabilizing Syrian “safe zones.”³⁹ Jordan also played a key role in the September 2017 de-escalation zone agreement.⁴⁰ Here, Moscow again managed to shape a changing context that it had contributed militarily to creating—i.e., the regime’s reconquest of the area south of Damascus—to position itself as a mediator. In that case, through the logic of “de-escalation,” Moscow acted as an intermediary to pressure Jordan through regime advances close to its border while leveraging its position as an indispensable broker for the regime. This triangle continued to incrementally manage the return of the regime in Deraa and along the Syria-Jordan border.

Turkey, SDF, and Russia

Russia also placed itself between Turkey and the Kurdish-led SDF in northern Syria. In March 2017, Moscow stationed Russian troops in Afrin as part on an agreement with the People’s Defense Units (YPG),⁴¹ which serves as the Kurdish core of the SDF, and later established a no-fly zone and provided military support to the SDF in its fight against Turkey. In January 2018, however, Moscow removed that support to allow Turkey to initiate Operation Olive Branch, which led to the entry of Turkish-backed groups into Afrin.

With regard to the Kurds, the Russians have exploited the Turkish threat to alternate every five years between cooperation and pressure. While the regime refuses to make any concessions, this threat remains Russia's main card for encouraging the "smooth" return of northeast Syria to Damascus's control. The Turkish veto on the participation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the Kurdish political affiliate of the YPG—in the political process also plays into the hands of Moscow, which can argue to the Kurds that they will be represented in the discussion only if they deal with Damascus.

The Syrian Regime, SDF, and Russia

Moscow played a similar role in October 2019, when U.S. troops withdrew from and Turkey entered northeast Syria. To block further Turkish advances, Russia brokered a deal between the regime and the SDF to let some regime forces and Russian military police patrol in the region.⁴² Russia had been building its contacts with the Kurdish-dominated SDF for several years to deal with the tactical situation but also to try brokering several political deals between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the regime. Moscow even organized negotiations in December 2016 at the Russian base of Hmeimim but ultimately failed because of the regime's refusal to talk about decentralization of authority in the Kurdish-led region. In the context of the October 2019 Turkish operation in northeast Syria, Russia used both its triangle between the Kurds and the Turks and its triangle between the regime and the Kurds to gain significant leverage over the situation created by the partial U.S. withdrawal.

Russia, Turkey, and Qatar

Though a more recent development of the Syrian conflict, the dynamic between Russia, Turkey, and Qatar shows an alternative feature of triangular diplomacy, with Russia working with actors that are not opposed to each other. The foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Qatar first met on March 11, 2021, for a formal trilateral meeting and published a joint statement that reiterated standard points about UNSC Resolution 2254, the integrity of Syrian

territory, and the fight against terrorism.⁴³ Although the meeting did not have much traction, it achieved several goals. First, it positioned Russia among two Middle Eastern actors with strong relations while excluding Iran. While Tehran formally welcomed the summit,⁴⁴ Iranian diplomats were frustrated to be excluded from the format, recalling the centrality of Astana. As with many triangular arrangements, Moscow claimed the new format was "complementary" to Astana and Geneva. Second, by including Qatar, Moscow aimed to gain Arab support in the management of a crisis from which most Arab countries have been excluded. The framework also provides a useful means to lobby for normalization with Assad while asking for reconstruction funding for the regime. As Yezid Sayigh, an expert at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, framed it, "The Doha initiative will allow Russia and the Assad regime to pocket gains without actually delivering on genuine political change in Syria."⁴⁵

Tactical and Selective Multilateralism

Triangular diplomacy emerged as an effective means of removing the substance of the UN-led process. The main goal of the UN's multilateral framework has been to get the Syrian opposition and the regime to talk. Moscow's strategy, however, has been to (1) freeze the process when deemed disadvantageous for the regime and (2) reframe it according to Russian priorities. Thus, Moscow used multilateral frameworks selectively to support its narratives aiming to prop up Assad. When the Kremlin feared that the regime's use of chemical weapons could lead to a military retaliation by the United States and its allies, Russian officials proposed using the OPCW to investigate the chemical attacks and then destroying the regime's stocks.

Russia obtained from the regime that it had joined the OPCW, and Moscow contributed to design the mandate of the OPCW-UN Joint Mission on the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons. The mandate of the Joint Mission derived from OPCW Executive Council decision EC-M-33/DEC.1 ("Destruction of Syrian Chemical Weapons")⁴⁶ and UNSC Resolution

2118 (2013) in September 2013, and the mission completed its operations in September 2014. In parallel, a fact-finding mission was launched in 2014 to confirm that chemical weapons had been used; it conducted several assessments but without a mandate to attribute the responsibility of the attack. In response, a Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) was established by the OPCW and the UN through Resolution 2235 in August 2015, largely a result of negotiations between the United States and Russia. The JIM worked on the basis of reports from the OPCW fact-finding mission and produced seven reports itself, assigning responsibility to the Syrian government for four attacks (Talmenes on April 21, 2014; Qminas and Sarmin on March 16, 2015; and Khan Sheikhoun on April 4, 2017) and to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant for two (Umm Hawsh on September 15–16, 2016, and Marea on August 21, 2015). As the JIM began to assign responsibility in its third and fourth reports in 2016, Moscow questioned its working methods and criticized what it considered unsubstantiated conclusions in the reports. The JIM's mandate was renewed, with difficulty, in October and November 2016, as Russia and China claimed the JIM should focus on investigating attacks by terrorist groups and not the Syrian regime.⁴⁷ The negotiation process required a technical rollover resolution to buy time because of divisions in the UN Security Council. However, three consecutive vetoes by Russia led to the JIM's termination at the end of 2017. In return, Western countries pressed the OPCW to launch in June 2018 another investigative mission, the Investigation and Identification Team (IIT), without a UNSC mandate and therefore without the possibility of Russia using its veto. Russia complained that the mission was a way to bypass the authority of the UNSC, and when the IIT concluded that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons, Moscow weakened the institution by saying its findings were politically motivated.

Russia used multilateral institutions but did not truly rely on multilateral negotiations. While Astana provides a limited showcase for a set of bilateral relations, Moscow has been reluctant to engage in more substantial formats such as the Istanbul framework between Turkey, France, and Germany.

The first meeting of this format in 2018 was relatively successful, given the agreement on preserving a ceasefire in Idlib and launching the Constitutional Committee, but Moscow pressured Ankara heavily to limit the scope of the discussions. When Turkey proposed another meeting in this format in February 2020, Russia refused. Indeed, Russia has consistently shied away from multilateral formats over which it lacks influence, preferring the facade of multilateral engagement while dealing primarily with parties that either agree with Moscow already or are weak enough to be overruled.

While it has not respected the spirit of multilateral forums, the strength of Russian diplomacy comes from Moscow's ability to invest thoroughly in all existing formats. A good example of this consistency is the Humanitarian Task Force (HTF) chaired by the UN. The HTF, along with another working group on the cessation of hostilities, was created by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to facilitate the implementation of paragraphs 12 and 13 of Resolution 2254, including, *inter alia*, the lifting of all sieges, obtaining unhindered and sustainable humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas, and protecting civilians. The HTF met regularly in Geneva and gathered the twenty-six members⁴⁸ of the ISSG and was chaired by the Senior Humanitarian Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria. Russia supplied the HTF in Geneva with senior officials and ground information, while other countries sent working-level staff. Thus, Moscow created a situation wherein it was difficult to reject the Russian narrative. Russia was invested in the format, which it felt provided support for its Astana-related goals. This exemplifies Moscow's ability to consistently hold its ground in order to avoid multilateral processes that could get in the way of its aims.

In this spirit, Moscow has in theory stuck to the main framework for settlement in Syria as outlined in UNSC Resolution 2254 of December 2015; in practice, however, it has created alternative diplomatic covers and vehicles to weaken the political opposition to Assad. Russia constantly challenged the equivalence laid out by Resolution 2254 between the "regime" and the "opposition," always choosing to

focus on the regime's legitimacy over the opposition but never giving the opposition that same consideration. At the same time, Russia systematically called on the opposition to abide by Assad's requirements.

On the one hand, the ability to block UN mediation and reframe international apprehension of the Syrian conflict is an indisputable success for Russian diplomacy. On the other hand, from a Western perspective, it is striking that despite such success Moscow has been unable to capitalize on the more favorable diplomatic environment it has created. One former UN official speaks of a sort of "failure of Russian soft power" because Moscow still has not converted its military advantage into a settlement.⁴⁹ The paradox is indeed that the international community implicitly acknowledges the centrality of Russian diplomacy in the Syrian file but still does not accept Russian "peacemaking." Several former diplomats interviewed for this paper believe the bar for what Europe would have accepted as a resolution of the Syrian conflict was actually low. Concessions at the Constitutional Committee and other face-saving processes could have granted European and UN buy-in of a Russian-led solution. Of course, the key question to ask is whether Moscow even wants a settlement, as this is not always the case. Still, in Syria, Moscow never got any political concessions from the regime, presenting a real obstacle. Russia's military intervention and support despite multiple violations of international law by the regime went "too far." A former UN official raises the question, "What would have happened if the Russians had not crossed so many redlines, like bombing hospitals?"⁵⁰ One could certainly argue that supporting Assad at all costs was the prerequisite to holding such a position in the diplomatic process. Nevertheless, a European diplomat notes, "Given the cards the Russians have in Syria, they could have [gotten] an enormous international credit, but they are still stuck with a deadlock."⁵¹ Hospital locations, along with the locations of other civilian institutions, are shared with the UN-led deconfliction mechanism so that military actors might avoid damaging humanitarian infrastructure. Instead, the Assad regime has used that information to target such buildings with precision strikes.⁵² But Moscow was never interested

in solving the crisis in a way the West might have envisioned, and needed military force to bolster its position. Nor could it have created the leverage necessary to be perceived as an indispensable power without resorting to indiscriminate brute force. Indeed, the European diplomat's comment shows just how differently Europe—and the West more broadly—and the Kremlin saw Syria. From a Western perspective, the inability to limit military excess while securing international backing is therefore the greatest weakness of Russian diplomacy in Syria.

The competition between Russia's military and diplomacy, if there is any, should therefore not be overstated. As a former diplomat believes, "Even when [Russian officials] compete internally, they maintain a very united front externally." More fundamentally, the fact that Russian diplomacy sees no issue in letting some of its initiatives fail is related to a simple calculus: Moscow does not need to solve the conflict in Syria and in fact gains a significant benefit just by being an indispensable actor. As another European diplomat framed it, "Russia does not need an endgame in Syria."⁵³ With extensive experience in the post-Soviet space, Russian diplomats are experts in managing frozen conflicts. In Syria, Russia is simply awaiting the United States' departure to impose surrender to the SDF; ultimately, Russia believes the long-term dynamic is in its favor. In this context, diplomatic initiatives are more a tool to gain time and limited concessions than they are an attempt to relaunch genuine negotiations.

What the West Did—and Did Not Do

The ambiguities on which Russia played diplomatically have been mostly effective because of Western doubts about the right answer to the Syrian crisis. Fear of escalation with Russia, of Russia overextending and finding itself "stuck" in Syria, and of Jihadi groups profiting from the conflict have all played a role at different stages to limit Western actions on the ground.

Western leaders were reluctant to get involved in Syria on a large scale, and many believed that working with Moscow would help them achieve their goals with less effort. Time and time again, Western leaders engaged with Moscow despite the apparent futility of such actions. U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, in particular, continued to believe that his diplomatic outreach to Russia would bear fruit. By the time Moscow entered the Syrian military theater, Western officials had come to believe that Moscow was dangerous and unpredictable, and that it was best not to push Russia too much.

In addition, American “strategic hesitations” had allowed Russia to fill the void when it came to security—for example, after the United States abandoned southern opposition groups in the Deraa province,⁵⁴ after the U.S. withdrawal from some parts of northeast Syria, or when Jordan had to negotiate the security of its border. Further, the U.S. tendency to focus on its bilateral relationship with Russia while not investing so much in multilateral or minilateral formats has given even more relevance to Russia’s mediation attempts. Triangular relations can exist only in the absence of a U.S. offer to address the other actors’ problems or in the absence of a credible U.S. threat to Iran and the regime in Syria.

For example, most of the serious discussions on Syria are bilateral talks between Moscow and Washington, as the two sides seek to deconflict and, ideally, reach a mutual understanding on Syria’s future. Bilateral talks first began under the Obama administration, when Secretary of State Kerry negotiated deals with his counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, Putin, and other Russian officials on how to best address IS, the refugee crisis, and other issues.⁵⁵ Later, reports indicate, the Trump administration developed a more consistent Syria channel primarily between James Jeffrey and Russian diplomats. Most of the details of these talks are not public knowledge, owing to, in Jeffrey’s words, the general U.S. policy of maintaining “radio silence” on its backchannel.⁵⁶ But reports indicate Jeffrey and Russian diplomat Sergei Vershinin met in person at least once in Vienna in 2019, and the U.S. Department of State acknowledged that they talked at least twice over the phone.⁵⁷ Secretary of

State Mike Pompeo also met with Putin in Sochi in mid-2019 for a “very productive” conversation on Syria.⁵⁸ And though these meetings succeeded in their more limited goal of preventing a major escalation between the United States and Russia in Syria, the two sides had other fundamentally incompatible goals that could not be resolved through bilateral conversations. Russia wanted a total military victory for Assad, while the U.S. commitment to a political transition in line with Resolution 2254 made that outcome untenable. Different versions of a “step-by-step” approach have been tried, but without success.

Thus, as during the Putin-Biden meeting of June 16, 2021, Moscow gained the fundamental recognition of a Great Power on par with the United States, but gave nothing in return. While it is easier to get things done in a small bilateral format, the inclusion of other regional actors and the Europeans could have diluted Russian influence. A key priority for the United States, then, is to reconsider its method and support a renewed multilateral engagement. But the multilateralization of U.S. foreign policy is a broad challenge because U.S. diplomats themselves tend to acknowledge that they have not been trained to consider multilateral forums as more than an echo chamber for their own national initiative. Indeed, in the words of one American diplomat, “The U.S. system has a bias for [the] bilateral framework. There is a European bias in favor of multilateralism because Europe is well represented and knows the rules well.”⁵⁹ This mismatch has been damaging for the transatlantic dialogue, and has hampered efforts to build consensus on addressing the Syria file. The United States has many like-minded allies, but it has struggled to engage them collectively in a way that exerts any sustained leverage on the Syrian regime.

Another dimension that weakens the West’s position has been its reluctance to publicly criticize the United Nations, even when the body made concessions under Russian pressure. Indeed, European countries sought to avoid weakening the UN even further. They were, for example, reluctant to express concerns about the cooperation between UN agencies in Damascus and the Syrian regime. Those same countries pushed back against normalization

attempts by Russia but without calling Secretary-General Guterres out for problematic behaviors within the UN system.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Russian diplomacy blended skillfully the several roles it had designed for itself: a party to the conflict, a spokesperson of the Assad regime, and a mediator.

With its different, pragmatic kind of minilateralism,⁶⁰ Moscow's triangular logic had several advantages. It connected opportunistically different relationships (state and nonstate actors) and created a net whose very center was Russia. In its various triangles, Moscow was able to blame others for lack of progress and to shift the responsibility for delivering results away from itself. In addition, Moscow was able to maintain this balancing act because it defined and enforced pragmatic redlines on issues secondary to its interlocutors, such as ensuring that the regime and Russian forces were not targeted by Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria.

Another distinctive feature of triangular diplomacy has been Moscow's ability to tackle one problem after the other, discarding the impossible ones and seizing opportunities when they emerge. As a mediator, however, Russia is selling assets it does not have. To the international community, it sells a process of political transition while it has no leverage over—and no real commitment to—the in-depth transformation of the regime. To Damascus, it sells reconstruction financed by Europe and the Persian Gulf. To Israel, it sells the withdrawal of Iran. To Iran, it sells protection that it cannot provide in the face of firm opposition from Tel Aviv and Washington. To Turkey, it sells a de-escalation that neither Moscow nor the regime wants, as well as an anti-Kurdish

coordination (the Adana Agreement) that cannot survive a deal between Damascus and the Kurds. To the Kurds, it sells a form of autonomy within a regime that has made clear such an arrangement is out of the question.

To do so, Russia has consistently preferred bilateral arrangements over UN-led multilateral frameworks. It has been especially ready to weaken multilateral institutions, whether by extensively using its veto at the UNSC or by attempting to delegitimize organizations like the OPCW. Russia knows its own position—that Assad should remain in power and pay no price for his gross violations of human rights—is deeply unpopular among the international community at large. Forums that provide the United States space to build coalitions against Assad are dangerous to Russian interests, and the Kremlin has consistently found it easier to delegitimize those spaces and instead attempts to coax states one by one through intimidation and obfuscation.

There are no easy solutions to building a more favorable negotiation space with Moscow on Syria. However, if lessons can be drawn from Russia's diplomatic successes and limitations in Syria, it seems clear that the West should apply the same level of consistency in its outreach to Syrian stakeholders and not pose compromise with Moscow as an end in itself. On the contrary, the ability to build minilateral frameworks including not only Moscow but also Tehran—e.g., by merging the Astana process and the Small Group on Syria⁶¹—would put the United States and its allies in a stronger position to play the long game, ultimately reinforcing the UN. This, in turn, would limit the effects of Russia's triangle diplomacy and put the ball in Russia's court to deliver changes from the Syrian regime—for example, in terms of liberating political detainees or accepting some level of decentralization and devolution of power. In other words, multilateralism could help design clear conditions on which Russia must act.

Summary of Policy Lessons

- Moscow seeks above all else to convert its military intervention in Syria into a diplomatic settlement on its terms.
- To date, Moscow has not obtained any significant political concessions from the Syrian regime, a failure that has presented the greatest obstacles to peacemaking in Syria but has not degenerated into a quagmire for Russia; rather, it is a situation Moscow can continue to manage for a long time, at the expense of true peace in Syria.
- Russia's inability or unwillingness to limit military excesses in Syria, such as the bombing of hospitals and other violations of international law, has crippled Russian diplomacy by rightly unifying the Western position against it.
- American "strategic hesitations" have allowed Russia to fill the security void in Syria. Moscow's triangular diplomacy can exist only in the absence of a U.S. offer to address other actors' problems or in the absence of a credible U.S. threat to Iran and the Syrian regime.
- Washington's tendency to focus on its bilateral relationship with Russia, while not investing very much in multilateral or minilateral formats, has given outsize relevance to Russia's mediation attempts.
- The inclusion of other regional actors or Europe in talks with Russia can be an effective way to dilute Moscow's influence. A key priority for the United States, then, is to reconsider its method and support a renewed multilateral engagement. Unlike Russia, the United States has genuine allies, because it does not look at them as subjects. The ability to build true alliances based on values is a longstanding American strength.
- The United States and the West in general should publicly criticize UN operations in Syria, especially when they reflect concessions made under Russian pressure.
- Too often, the United States has allowed the Russian narrative on Syria to predominate. Propaganda historically has been a key pillar of Russian statecraft in support of military operations. Narrative alone may not necessarily change the outcome in Syria any time soon, but the United States should remain committed to publicizing Moscow's and Assad's activities in Syria as part of a long-term strategic investment in competing with Russia. Without such investment, Washington will effectively be signaling its agreement with Moscow's narrative, which will only encourage Russian leaders to further push this narrative and tacitly gain acceptance.
- Moscow will not split substantially from Tehran, and whatever tactical differences the two capitals may have, they remain committed to broader strategic goals. U.S. policymakers should not expect that if Moscow's influence in Syria grows, then this influence will substantially limit that of Iran. Given this reality, the United States must not expect Russia to be an honest broker set on achieving a just peace in Syria. It must remain skeptical and challenge Russia where appropriate. A failure to do so will yield the same outcome as past outreach to Russia: stepping on the rake yet again.

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