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Washington Should Recognize the Russian Strategic Achievement in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Russia is victorious in Syria. It has succeeded in rescuing the Damascus regime, its difficult yet valuable client, from what seemed to be an unavoidable demise. More importantly, it has leveraged the crisis management of the Syrian conflict to create a regional balance between seemingly incompatible powers — Israel, Turkey, and Iran. While it is a delicate and potentially unstable equilibrium, Moscow is indispensable for both the avoidance and containment of hostilities between Israel and Iran. It is thus positioned to strengthen its influence whether the tensions escalate or ease.

In Syria, which is not part of its “near abroad,” Russia resumes its status as a global superpower. The United States, in absolute strength, remains far ahead of this new claimant. However, even if limited in comparison to their U.S. counterparts worldwide, Russian military assets are optimally positioned in Syria to ensure tangible benefits in line with a clear strategic vision. The multiple U.S. kinetic operations, on the other hand, seem set on a course of auto-pilot with guidance from headquarters often lacking.

This new reality owes as much to Russian prowess and savvy as to the near dereliction of duty on the part of Washington. Multiple factors, both long and short term have contributed to the outcome of Russia with a firm grip on Syria. A decisive one, however, was the Obama Administration's lack of vision and initiative towards the Syrian crisis — a condition that has largely not been remedied well into the second year of the Trump Administration. The absence in Washington of decisiveness and of a clear path forward on Syria has not merely enabled Moscow to fill the void, but has also prompted Israel to seek further coordination with the Kremlin to ensure that the Russian prominence will account for Israel's own security requirements.

While Moscow welcomed the ground battlefield participation of Iran and its proxies to limit its exposure in Syria, it is in its current interest to reduce this Iranian presence, now that hostile forces have been confined to well-cordoned areas. This Russian-Israeli convergence of interests will help further strengthen the relationship. Yet, Iranian displeasure from Russia's calls for all foreign forces to exit Syria, have to be muted in light of the heightened need of

Tehran to maintain an untarnished relationship with Moscow – now that Washington has abandoned the JCPOA and declared its intent to exert high pressure on Iran.

Moscow has also gained to its camp another disenchanted Washington partner: Ankara. The trajectory of Turkey from a reliable U.S. ally to a Russian partner also corresponds to its descent from an active democracy to an authoritarian project seeking further consolidation. Ankara is accountable for missed opportunities for coordination with Washington, as well as questionable and objectionable maneuvers and failures to act, apparently calculated to manipulate radical organizations in Syria, including the “Islamic State” (IS). Yet, Washington is far from being blameless in the decay of this pivotal and strategic relationship in the troubled Middle East. Mostly by inaction, but also with ambiguous claims of imminent support, the Obama Administration left Ankara with heightened expectations of a central role in a seemingly promised, but never realized, pro-active U.S. policy towards Syria. As the conspiracy-prone Turkish leadership descended into interpretations of U.S. ill-intent, as opposed to recognizing incompetence, the July 2016 attempted coup seemed to come as a confirmation of hostile designs, ushering Ankara to a “leadership protection mode”, jettisoning prior regional visions, and accepting vassal status towards Moscow in a new, reduced but secure, configuration providing Turkey with further tangible benefits.

The Geneva talks, framed by Security Council resolutions as the conduit for reform in Syria, were based on the premise that the ultimate aim is regime change by peaceful means. Geneva assumed that transition in Syria was inevitable, and that world powers, Russia included, will help ensure a soft landing for an expiring government. Russia’s participation in the Geneva process was to ensure that the international mandate is diffused through ambiguities and alternative interpretations. This, however, was not mere obstructionism. It was instead a delaying action in anticipation of the forging and implementation of a rescue plan for its client regime.

Moscow sponsored two parallel efforts to compete with Geneva and UN missions. In Astana, it proposed a conflict de-escalation process, while in Sochi, it called for the preparation of a political rescue plan. In both Astana and Sochi, far from being the minority voice as was the case in Geneva, Moscow set the agenda and validated stakeholders and participants. More importantly, both Astana and Sochi operated with the underlying assumption that the Syrian uprising – not the regime – is slated to end, and that international intervention ought to focus on containing the collapse of the many oppositions to the regime, to ensure a soft landing that restores the territorial integrity of Syria and preserves its state and government institutions. The recent call by Moscow to merge and unify all three tracks – Geneva, Astana, Sochi – is an effective declaration of victory: the Russian assessment and approach to the Syrian crisis have prevailed.

While the Trump White House may be legitimately frustrated by the burdensome legacy left in Syria by the previous Administration, it has not seriously acted to correct the situation. The punitive strikes against the use of chemical weapons by the regime may have served Trump in distinguishing himself from Obama and asserting his decisiveness to his domestic base. In Syria and across the region, however, they were received as hollow actions with no consequence. Russia is viewed as consistent and steadfast, while the United States is disparaged as grand-standing, fickle, and unreliable

It may be indeed too late for the United States to achieve dominance, or parity with Russia, on the Syrian question. The stakes in Syria for Moscow are far higher than those considered by a White House that still contemplates a sudden exit and offer a continued presence on a play-by-play basis. Plans for an “Arab Force” to display its might in support of a U.S.-approved plan in Syria will have to wait for the Egyptian Armed Forces to finish their protracted operations against insurgents in Sinai, and for the Saudi and Emirati armies to extract themselves from the Yemen quagmire.

It may thus be realistic to concede that Russia has indeed achieved victory in Syria.

Washington has allies, partners, and assets in Syria, and it ought not to abandon them — if not for the moral imperative, then to safeguard the deeply wounded U.S. credibility across the region. Washington’s indifference to the Turkish assault in Afrin was only mitigated by Russia’s green light provided to Turkey to engage in the assault; otherwise, Moscow overtures to the SDF — Washington’s main investment in Syria — may have yielded better results.

To its own detriment, and that of stability across the region, Syria has been a low priority engagement for the Obama Administration. With the (questionable) conviction that IS has been defeated, Washington seems in wrap-up mode in Syria. A better course that combines realism, a sound use of assets, and a consideration for stability in this battered land and its neighborhood, is to offer a gradual U.S. recognition of the Russian prevailing in Syria, and therefore to accept coordination with the Moscow-led effort at restoring state and territorial integrity in Syria, as a function of Russia’s accommodation of lasting U.S. interests: the containment of Iran in Syria, the expulsion of Iranian proxies, and the reinstatement of a security regimen that protects U.S. allies — Israel, Jordan, and Gulf states.

Washington has not provided meaningful support for the Syrian uprising even when the odds of a new Syria emerging were meaningful; it is futile to expect it to do so now. Washington can either be the spoiler of the Russian victory, enabling further conflict, to the detriment of a battered population, or it can leverage its assets for a partial alleviation, and for a rare instance of a U.S.-Russia cooperation. As bitter as is this course for those who have wished freedom for Syria, it may be the only realistic path. ❖



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