

Syrian 'Plan B' Options Beyond Immediate Military Confrontation

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Brief Analysis

Whether credible or not, rumors of risky U.S. military strikes overshadow the wide range of other tools Washington has for raising the costs of Russia's behavior and creating leverage for more successful negotiations down the road.

Press reports indicate that the Obama administration is finally seeking alternatives to its failed bid for political compromise in Syria. Russian president Vladimir Putin seems to be aiming for a military victory that the White House has long argued is "not possible," but absent a "Plan B" that puts pressure on Moscow, President Obama will likely witness at least a limited version of such a victory -- and for the wrong side.

In recent days, the administration has seemingly signaled that it wants to pursue a tougher policy, but how serious are its intentions? Skepticism is warranted. Since 2011, President Obama has scarcely missed an opportunity to vaunt his record of avoiding deeper involvement in Syria. Moreover, his priorities in the region are fighting the Islamic State (IS) and preserving the Iran nuclear deal, both of which might be affected by U.S. action in Syria (though to what degree is debatable). For its part, the U.S. military repeatedly seems to precondition tougher action on zero risk and infinite force structure, as seen most recently when Joint Chiefs chairman Joseph Dunford commented on Syria earlier this week. Against this backdrop, the "kinetic" military options leaked to the press seem drastically out

of character -- not to mention risky vis-a-vis potential conflict with Russia and international law. Indeed, Putin has responded threateningly to the news reports, furthering the impression that the leaks may just be a White House maneuver to demonstrate the danger of challenging him.

Despite all this, the administration does need a new policy. The ongoing violence in Syria demands it, as do the failure of diplomacy and the strategic problems that would arise from allowing the Assad regime to continue its Russian-enabled, go-for-broke offensives. More cynically, the administration may now believe that looking weak on Syria could hurt the Democrats in the upcoming elections as much as escalation would. For example, in this week's vice presidential debate, both candidates called for military action in Syria, presumably at their running mates' behest. The specter of a tougher Clinton administration or an unpredictable Trump White House also gives Obama leeway to pressure Moscow and other parties while telling them "you'll get a better deal with me."

Whatever his motivations in signaling a policy change, it is crucial that President Obama understand the unique danger posed by Moscow's actions in Syria. Over the past seven decades of U.S.-Russian relations, the rule has been that when one party pushes into areas of extreme sensitivity and military advantage for the other party, it risks disaster (see North Korea in 1950 and Cuba in 1962). Thus, the Bush administration was prudent in its limited response to Moscow's 2008 move against Georgia, knowing that Russian interests and forces dominated there.

Yet the reverse is true in the Levant. While Russia has some interests in Syria, most notably military bases, its sovereignty and antiterror justifications are threadbare. If Putin truly cared about fighting terrorism, including from Chechnya, he would have targeted IS consistently since its inception, which he has not -- in fact, he has actually strengthened the group at times by targeting its more moderate rivals. More important, America's interests are much greater in Syria, which borders Israel, NATO member Turkey, and two other close U.S. partners. Its local military capabilities are much stronger as well.

Obama has applied these traditional rules of "great power" competition fairly well in other arenas (e.g., Ukraine and the South China Sea), but his reticent approach in the Middle East has emboldened Putin to throw away the gamebook there. And if he can discard Western interests and dominance in one place, he can do so anywhere, introducing a dangerous degree of unpredictability into the competition.

SO WHAT SHOULD WASHINGTON DO?

Rather than immediately upping the ante with direct "kinetic" action, the administration could apply the same model used in Georgia and Ukraine, namely, using all elements of power to push Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime toward a costly stalemate. Following are possible steps toward this end, most of them drawing on Washington's distinct political and military advantages in the region:

- Completely shut down the counterproductive dialogue between Secretary of State Kerry and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.
- Ship more arms to Syrian rebels, including some systems it has sent before (antitank missiles) and some it has not (e.g., "dual use" heavy anti-aircraft guns and MANPADS). While there is always a risk that the latter weapons could fall into the wrong hands, the United States has successfully transferred such systems before (e.g., in Afghanistan). And the proliferation risk is less dire today because new technologies enable Washington to trace transferred missiles and prevent them from being used to bring down commercial aircraft.
- Take up Turkey's offer to expand the safe zone it established in northern Syria (with some U.S. military support) in August. The two countries could then use the zone to house refugees, provide relief supplies, and build up rebel forces. As former CIA director and Army commander Gen. David Petraeus suggested, the zone could be defended with standoff systems, including Patriot anti-air missiles and ground-to-ground ATACMS batteries based in Turkey. In addition, F-22 stealth fighters could be used for patrols inside the zone -- they are best able to cope with Russian

systems and have already been deployed over Syria.

- Drop humanitarian supplies over Aleppo and other besieged areas. These supplies should be sealed in U.S. transport planes by UN officials to give them the full scope of international legal legitimacy. Washington could then warn of military action against any missile sites or air bases that threaten these airdrops. If threats persist, the military could drop supplies from essentially untouchable B-2 stealth bombers. Yes, using high-value military resources for "political" missions can be problematic, but apart from nuclear deterrence, there is no more important strategic mission on America's plate right now than dealing with Russian (and Iranian) adventurism in Syria. This mission is even more pressing than defeating IS, and using the world's most powerful military to carry it out would send the right message about U.S. priorities.
- Pursue diplomatic action against Russia, the Assad regime, and Iran for their role in perpetrating crimes against humanity, stimulating refugee flows, and indirectly generating support for terrorism. Such efforts should be carried out in the UN, Arab League, and wherever else Washington can find a receptive audience. As NATO Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Philip Breedlove told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March, "Russia and the Assad regime are deliberately weaponizing migration in an attempt to overwhelm European structures and break European resolve." His statement should not be taken lightly. One way to pursue prosecutions is to support the bipartisan Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act, which the White House prevented from going to a congressional vote last month. The bill seeks to target Bashar al-Assad for his war crimes and sanction those who do business with him.
- Leverage European concerns about refugees and war crimes to maintain and even toughen Ukraine-related sanctions on Moscow. Such leverage can also be used to capsize problematic Russian gas pipeline projects such as Nord Stream II and Turkish Stream, at least insofar as they attempt to undercut Ukrainian gas routes and increase EU dependency on supplies from Russian energy giant Gazprom.
- Push the offensive against IS. This would demonstrate American resolve, allow a faster shift of attention and forces to counter Moscow and Tehran, and preempt a potential Iranian countermove against the U.S.-backed operation to retake Mosul, Iraq.

The risks inherent in such steps are real but limited. And while this type of comprehensive "diplomacy 101" approach does not guarantee a favorable end-state, that uncertainty is acceptable given the limited risks and worse alternatives. Until now, the United States has been negotiating from a position of weakness rather than trying to build leverage, thereby encouraging Putin's aggression and making the situation ever more dangerous and unstable. Once the costs go up for Russia and other actors, Washington can negotiate again, but this time with enough clout to perhaps reach a viable political compromise in Syria.

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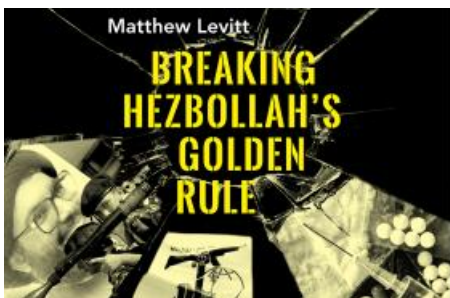
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