

# In Syria Talks With Russia, John Kerry's Hand Is Missing a Key Card

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## If President Obama hopes to change the ongoing stalemate on ceasefire talks, Secretary Kerry needs an 'or else' to deliver to Moscow.

**A**fter meeting with Vladimir Putin on the margins of the G-20 summit (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-putin-meet-on-sidelines-of-g-20-summit-in-chinas-hangzhou-1473056453>), President Barack Obama instructed Secretary of State John Kerry to redouble efforts to negotiate a "cessation of hostilities" in Syria. Mr. Kerry has been trying to do that with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for the past year, to no avail.

Others have managed to reach agreements with Russia, sometimes against long odds. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has visited Moscow more than once (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/after-historic-russian-visit-netanyahu-says-us-remains-top-ally/>) to hammer out a mechanism for military deconfliction in Syria, with seeming success. Mr. Putin and Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman reached agreement to potentially cap oil production (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-g20-china-saudi-russia-oil-idUSKCN11B0UF>), despite taking opposite sides on Syria and other regional matters. Even Turkey, whose relationship with Russia seemed perilously tense after Turkish forces shot down a Russian fighter jet last November (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-syria-border-1448356509>), has achieved a reverse (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37018562>) in the mutual punitive measures that followed that incident.

In each case, both sides needed something from one another and were able to put aside their differences to reach a limited accommodation. Before he meets again with his Russian counterpart, Mr. Kerry should consider why the U.S. and Russia have not.

What the U.S. wants from Russia is clear. Washington wants Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step aside and

permit a political transition; President Obama has said that "if it were not for the Russians, then Assad and the regime would not be able to sustain its offensive (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/04/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-may-united-kingdom-after>)." The U.S. also wants Russia to avoid bombing U.S.-backed rebels (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/07/14/russian-jets-bomb-us-backed-rebels-in-syria.html>), as well as U.S. forces (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/07/22/russian-warplanes-reportedly-bombed-us-base-in-syria.html>).

What Russia wants from the U.S. is less obvious. Moscow's aim in Syria appears, first and foremost, to be propping up the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Although the Obama administration has said that Mr. Assad must go, the U.S. is doing little to interfere. Even if Russia's true aim were, as it says, to fight terrorism, the bulk of U.S. military efforts in Syria is already dedicated to just that.

So Russia's true goals for the talks must lie elsewhere. A Wall Street Journal editorial (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/pleading-with-putin-on-syria-1473289920>) suggested Thursday that Moscow may seek to leverage the Syria talks to secure a lifting of U.S. and European sanctions imposed over Russia's actions in Ukraine. It is possible, however, that Mr. Putin seeks victory in both theaters rather than a trade-off between them. Russia may also seek to keep U.S. hopes of a deal flickering to prevent Mr. Obama from adopting a more muscular policy. Or it may simply see the talks as a way to underscore Russia's status as a great power with which the U.S. must deal to resolve vital issues, and to humiliate Washington.

Any negotiation comes down to a simple comparison for those engaged in it: the value of the deal on offer vs. the value of the most likely alternative to a deal. To break a stalemate, one or both parties needs to either sweeten their offer or try to worsen the other side's alternatives. President Obama has made clear that he is unwilling to act in ways that would give Moscow pause -- whether instituting "safe zones" or targeting the Assad regime. So Mr. Kerry has had little choice but to soften the U.S. position (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/closing-loopholes-in-the-proposed-u.s.-russian-agreement-on-syria>) in hopes that Russia bites.

Russia, on the other hand, has taken the more effective, if brutal, approach of backing its diplomacy with limited force to worsen U.S. options. If this dynamic continues, the most likely outcomes are a deal that further compromises the U.S. position in Syria or no deal at all. If President Obama hopes to change that, John Kerry needs an "or else" to deliver to Moscow.

*Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog 'Think Tank (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/09/09/in-syria-talks-with-russia-john-kerrys-hand-is-missing-a-key-card/>)*. " ♦

*Wall Street Journal*

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