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Russian troops in formation during Vladimir Putin's visit to Khmeimim Air Base in Syria. Source: Wikicommons.com

Resolving Syria: The Russian Channel That Couldn't

By James Jeffrey

Resolving the Syria crisis will be a priority for the Biden administration. First, it is one of the few combat zones where American troops are daily at risk. Moreover, it is the most important theater for containing Iran's regional expansion and Russia's great power challenge. The conflict has drawn other military forces, including Turkey and Israel, into a dangerous five-army strudel; has generated major international terrorist, chemical weapons, and refugee challenges; and remains the greatest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century, with 12 million refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs), and 500,000 deaths. President Biden inherits an internationally supported Trump policy with goals the new administration can adopt: the enduring defeat of ISIS, the departure of all Iranian forces, and a final resolution of internal conflict.

A reliance on direct negotiations with Russia was used, to various degrees, by both the Trump and Obama administrations. The logic was reasonable. Russia is the single biggest player on Syrian President Assad's side. Having secured its initial goals, it is presumably less ambitious than either Assad or his other ally, Iran, and thus more willing to compromise. Finally, the U.S. and Russia arguably have more reasons to deal than is the case with other potential negotiation partners. But until now, even with the conflict in stalemate and the Assad regime weakened, Russia has not nibbled at U.S. compromise offers made at every level,

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including with President Putin. This experience suggests that Russia, at least at current levels of tolerable cost and risk, is not yet ready to accept an accommodation with the U.S.

Russian Intervention

Given the likely importance of Syria to the new administration's Middle East policy, a review of the past two administrations' engagement with Moscow, and how that engagement might be improved, may be useful. To understand that engagement, it is helpful to start with Russia's goals. By deploying military forces to Syria in 2015, Russia sought to protect its military base and arms sales investments, maintain a friendly government, demonstrate loyalty to partners, and, at least rhetorically, fight terrorism. But these goals evolved as Russia decisively shifted the military situation to its and Assad's advantage. The inability of a U.S.-led regional coalition to effectively challenge Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies enhanced Russia's prestige. The dislocation within the region and in Europe generated by the conflict's fallout, including refugee flows and terrorism, was another plus for Moscow. Increasingly, Russia touted Syria as a success for its brand of political-military engagement: one that was less resourced, but more agile, more realpolitik, and certainly more steady than America's.

But this led to a dilemma. To succeed strategically required a complete, internationally acknowledged military success, reintegration of Syria into the Arab League, and massive reconstruction assistance. But only the West could provide the last, the second was difficult without Western acquiescence, and even the first required arrangements with outside forces operating in Syria, Turkey, Israel, and U.S. This was a no-win situation for Moscow, absent changes of heart in various capitals.

The Obama administration, thinking others saw the world as it did, branded the 2015 Russia intervention as a blunder with no impact on the Syria situation, a "quagmire" for Russia, according to President

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Obama. It did not turn out that way. Secretary Kerry was closer to the negotiating action on Syria, and in 2013 had been an advocate of military action against Assad's chemical weapons use rather than diplomacy with Moscow. He saw sooner the threat of Russia's intervention to America's regional position. He thus sought a compromise, apparently believing that Russia might prefer accommodation with the U.S. to another potential Afghanistan.

This accommodation appeared to come in the form of the Russian agreement with the U.S. on UN Security Council Resolution 2254, passed in December 2015, when Russian military advances were still limited. That resolution advocated a compromise solution which met U.S., regional, international community, and Russian interests. Its unanimous Council adoption suggests that Russia at that point was uncertain of its military success. The resolution built on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and the 2015 "Vienna Statements," which advocated a traditional international "resolution of conflict" regime led by a transitional government

democratically chosen to promote reconciliation. Resolution 2254 endorsed that road map, while adding several elements: an explicit role for the UN in this transition, managed by a high-level UN envoy; a constitutional conference of Syrian governmental, opposition, and 'civil society' elements to draft a new, more democratic, constitution, to be put to a UN-run national referendum; a nation-wide cease-fire; joint efforts against the threat of terrorism; and humanitarian programs and IDP/refugee return.

If fully implemented, the resolution could have resolved the Syrian conflict—which even by 2015 was the biggest, most dangerous in the Middle East—and it could have defeated the terrorist threat. (The latter was Moscow's official reason for intervention and President Assad's excuse for the war he was waging on his own Sunni Arab majority.) But it almost certainly would have resulted in Assad's departure. His successor might not have guaranteed Russia's investments in Syria and almost certainly not Iran's plans to use Syria as a new missile platform against Israel. Presumably, Russia accepted the resolution to avoid a brutal split with the international community, which at the time was overwhelmingly in favor of a solution to the conflict on terms similar to Resolution 2254. Moscow likely wanted credit for supporting just international solutions to major security problems, even if in practice it did the opposite. In sum, Resolution 2254 allowed Moscow to keep its options open, as contradictions between making solemn rhetorical commitments and acting in single-minded pursuit of national interests have not overly troubled Putin's Russia.

By accepting Resolution 2254, Russia kept the door open to a solution that would meet the Obama administration's definition of a success in a conflict that had long bedeviled it. However, Secretary Kerry's peregrinations with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to implement the resolution were all ultimately in vain. Moscow kept talking, while driving toward a military solution through massive, indiscriminate air strikes to recapture territory for Assad and eliminate the armed opposition. Kerry eventually saw through Moscow's game, and began pressing for a more muscular U.S. Syria policy. But by that time the Obama administration had all but given up its support to the armed Syrian opposition, so the only remaining option was direct U.S. military actions such as enforcing no-fly zones. Both the president and the Pentagon turned Kerry down, and his whole effort came to naught, despite several short-lived cease-fires negotiated with the Russians in 2016.

The Trump Administration Tries Its Hand

As the U.S. changed administrations in January 2017, Russia began a new initiative—the Astana process, joined by Syria ally Iran and Syrian opposition supporter Turkey, with an initially ambitious agenda of establishing local cease-fires and pressing for reconciliation between the two warring Syrian sides. The initiative attracted participation at various times by the Syrian government and opposition elements, with at least verbal endorsement by UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, even though the initiative, if successful, would have largely replaced the UN. The Trump administration remained ambivalent about Astana, while occasionally sending observers. The Russians appeared to have come close to a breakthrough between the Syrian parties at Sochi in the spring of 2017, but feuding among opposition elements torpedoed that as well. That all but ended the political pillar of Astana, apart from a failed

effort by the three Astana partners to convince de Mistera to accept their pre-cooked list of "neutral" candidates to the Constitutional Committee in late 2018. Henceforth, the effort focused almost entirely on battlefield cease-fires, increasingly worked out between Turkey and Russia with little Iranian input.

The Trump administration had only limited and somewhat contradictory involvement in the Syrian conflict during its first 18 months, beyond the 2017 and 2018 military strikes which halted Assad's use of chemical weapons. A consistent policy towards Syria fell victim to the press of other, more urgent matters, to President Trump's wooing Putin, and to the military and civilian bureaucracy responsible for the campaign against ISIS seeing Syria only through that lens. President Trump did agree with Putin formally, during their meeting at the APEC summit in Da Nang, Vietnam in November 2017, to endorse a cease-fire in southwest Syria, one of the few areas where the U.S. was still supporting armed opposition elements against Assad. Jordan was supportive of the agreement impacting the situation on its border.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration was forming its own comprehensive Syria policy, finished at the end of 2017. It built on objectives from the Obama administration, namely defeating ISIS elements in Syria and support for the Resolution 2254 political process, but it ended Obama's official, if not rigorously pursued, "depose Assad" policy. The critical new element was the addition of this central objective: withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syria. With this objective, the administration for the first time saw Syria through Iran-colored glasses, a contribution particularly of National Security Advisor John Bolton. It took time for that policy to be implemented on the ground, however. The defeat-ISIS initiative strongly supported by DoD remained the U.S. priority in practice, and Secretary Tillerson did not appear wedded to the oppose-Iran-in-Syria policy. Mike Pompeo, however, was more committed to a holistic counter-Iran policy, including Syria, when he arrived at the State Department in spring 2018.

But just as Pompeo was getting through the door, the Russians pulled the plug on the Da Nang cease-fire by allowing Assad to resume fighting in the southwest. The Israelis and Jordanians reportedly gave a green light to the U.S. reaction, withdrawing support from the opposition forces there, in return for their movement to Idlib or integration into Russian-controlled security organs. Russia also committed to the withdrawal of all Iranian forces from a zone up to 80 kilometers from the Israeli border, a commitment never carried out. In addition, the Russians claimed that the U.S. agreed to withdraw troops from the Tanf enclave along the Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi border blocking the main Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus highway. That alleged commitment, the murkiest element in a very murky, largely unwritten set of U.S.-Russian-Jordanian-Israeli understandings (which Bolton glosses over in his memoirs), was soon pulled by the U.S.

Pompeo's Approach

The disappointment with the southwest agreement accelerated Pompeo's redirection of Syria policy, with the support of the president and Bolton, to the broader strategy agreed on internally in late 2017. This shift came also in response to growing awareness that the engagement of five outside major forces (Russian, Iranian, Israeli, U.S., and Turkish) in Syria raised the risks of escalation, given the 2015 shoot-down of a Russian fighter by Turkey,

the early 2018 repulse of the Russian mercenary attack by U.S. troops, and Syria's accidental downing of a Russian aircraft September 2018 during Syria's response to an Israeli attack on Iranian forces in its territory. The presence of all these forces and the higher stakes as they rubbed against each other also cast doubt on the inevitability of a Russian-Iranian-Assad total victory, thus potentially opening the door to some new compromise.

The Trump administration sought to reinforce these developments. First, it built on Turkish and Israeli military operations, and U.S. forces in the northeast and south, to maintain a military stalemate which denied Russia any final military success beyond maintaining its bases. Second, through sanctions and coordination with the EU and international organizations, it worked to devastate the Syrian economy, while increasing the massive humanitarian refugee assistance effort. And third, it denied Damascus diplomatic acceptance, especially its return to the Arab League. This all was seen as leverage to compel Assad and allies to accept a UN-led political compromise, hasten Iranian departure, and concentrate everyone's efforts against ISIS, the three objectives the Trump administration had laid out.

To sell this approach to Moscow, and through it Damascus and Tehran, the U.S., after consultation with partners, laid out a step-by-step plan in 2018 to de-escalate the conflict, reconcile Syrian factions, and end Western sanctions, all culminating in Syria's reintegration into the international community overseen by the UN. In return, the Trump administration made clear that first, Assad could remain if his policies changed; second, that the U.S. would not challenge Russia's military presence; and third, the U.S. would not seek to dictate political settlement specifics. This new approach was worked exhaustively with Russian officials in various

Nov. 14, 2019: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with foreign ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, a terrorist group known as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Source: shutterstock.com

meetings between 2018 and 2020, including a spring 2019 meeting between Secretary Pompeo and President Putin. Given the priority the U.S. placed on at least an initial Iranian withdrawal from the Golan Heights area near Israel (essentially a reiteration of Russia's 2018 commitment), Washington-Jerusalem coordination on Syria was extensive, especially the approach to Russia. Israel was also operating its own military and diplomatic contacts with Moscow.

The U.S. and Russian militaries had established a de-confliction channel, primarily for their aircraft, once both had deployed troops to Syria. It worked tolerably well, largely because their ground forces were, other than in the Manbij area, not in close proximity. When the Turks launched an incursion into northeast Syria against the U.S. local partner (associated with the anti-Turkish Kurdish PKK), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in October 2019, however, they invited in Russian forces to serve as a buffer. Russian troops then moved into areas of the northeast from which U.S. forces had withdrawn. This led to new de-confliction problems, as Russian and American ground forces were now in close proximity. The Russians then began pressuring the SDF to sever ties with the U.S. and began challenging U.S. patrols, culminating in a deliberate, dangerous confrontation with a U.S. patrol in fall 2020. The Americans deployed heavily armed Bradley Fighting Vehicles, and the provocations ceased.

By 2020, the U.S.-Russian dialogue had made only marginal progress, mainly minor U.S. economic concessions in response to Assad's grudging support for a so-far only symbolic Constitutional Committee launch. Russian officials openly admitted Syria was a military stalemate, that Assad was terrible, and that Syria's economic free fall was palpable, but they continued to reject U.S. offers for more substantive steps. Instead, they sought a sequel to Astana, to hijack the UN political process with a showy, if internationally shunned, refugee conference in Damascus in late 2020. They advocated as well the upcoming 2021 Syrian presidential elections as fulfilling the spirit of Resolution 2254.

The Trump administration debated why there was so little progress, without a definitive answer. Either Moscow thought a better deal might come from a new president or, because some Russians wanted a total military victory, it sought to outlast the U.S. and its partners. Various Russian officials also made clear that they feared that the slightest distancing from a fragile Assad would put Damascus on a slippery slope to anarchy like that seen in Iraq in 2003 or to an extremist, anti-Russian regime. Finally, Russians commented frequently on Iran's less central but still important role with Assad, given Tehran's harder line on a Syrian settlement, and Assad's skill playing off his two allies. Divisions within the Russian government, and thus inflexibility in risking change on a troubled but not failing flagship policy, also likely contributed to the stonewalling.

What Next?

The Biden administration's position on Syria is not yet clear, but given Biden campaign pledges to confront Iranian moves in the region, and the need to keep ISIS defeated and also somehow resolve the Syria conflict, it could well pursue objectives similar to those of the previous administration.

Policy options within these broad objectives include:

- Continuing the current policy of international pressure against Assad to produce a compromise solution via Moscow. But this gives Russia a controlling role, and it relies on massive diplomatic coordination, as well as economic pressure, arguably at some cost to the Syrian people.
- Downplaying Syria, beyond the ISIS effort, and relying on the UN.
- Upping the pressure on Damascus to the point of a regime change.
- Cutting a deal directly with Tehran or Damascus.

As all these options have significant downsides, as well as not solving the issue of what to do with Russia, a fifth alternative might be proposed:

- Modifying the U.S. approach to include both its objectives and the timing of concessions, to entice a potentially better Russian response, particularly given a new administration with four years of continuity.

The U.S. could reinforce its formal "no regime change" strategy with a set of steps taken initially by the U.S., which Russians at times have encouraged, to signal acceptance of an Assad regime if it meets American and American allies' priority interests. This would not include endorsing Assad, whitewashing his inevitably fraudulent presidential election later this year, or abandoning the Resolution 2254 peace process. Rather, this could start with steps such as softening element(s) of the U.S.-led economic sanctions. Such steps should be undertaken only after receiving advance Russian commitments to have Assad reciprocate by (1) accepting formally the UNSCR 2254 country-wide cease-fire, (2) participating more actively in the Constitutional Committee talks established by Resolution 2254, and (3) beginning to limit Iran's deployments.

These are not impossibly difficult conditions. Syria is effectively in a military stalemate, Assad and Russia have endorsed the Constitutional Committee repeatedly, and Russia agreed to limits on Iranian presence near Israel almost three years ago. While the steps above are mainly symbolic, Washington will have to reassure its regional and Syrian partners, who otherwise might fully embrace Assad or conclude the U.S. is abandoning them to Assad and Iran.

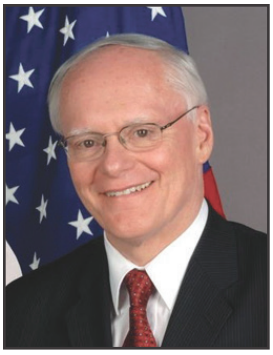
A tougher lift would come next, assuming Russia and Assad did reciprocate. For Israel to breathe easy, the Russians would have to obtain verified withdrawal of Iranian forces from areas near Israel and redeployment of threatening Iranian weapons systems out of Syria, with reliable measures to ensure they do not reappear. To encourage refugee return to areas around Aleppo, Russia could expand its southwest model, where Russian ground forces work closely with former opposition forces with little interference from Assad's troops. This, along with coordination with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees could open the door to refugee return by assuaging refugee fears of Assad's retribution. It could also open the door to international stabilization assistance for those areas. If Iran does carry through at least a partial withdrawal, the U.S. could then adjust its military presence in Syria, a long-standing Russian demand.

The toughest lifts should be put off for the moment. These include: the final implementation of 2254 and Assad's fate; reintegration of northeast Syria, including the SDF, into some Syrian state system; withdrawal of Turkish forces; accountability by the

Syrian government for its chemical weapons program and war crimes; consolidation of international coalition and Russian/Syrian efforts against ISIS; and demobilization of the al Nusra/Hayat Tahir al Sham terrorist organization in Idlib.

Such a step-by-step approach, which would acknowledge Russia's bases and other military interests in Syria, could be attractive to Moscow, although it likely would expect concessions on non-Syrian issues for any final resolution. The big question: could Assad be persuaded to accept continued (if temporary) division of Syrian territory, the heavy lift to expel Iranian strategic capabilities, and continued exposure to the UN political process? Only Russia (and Assad) can answer that question. But if the answer is no, then the U.S., having gone the extra mile for a solution, can tighten the screws on Assad, given the fact that the interests at stake with Syria now comprise a struggle for regional security. In such a situation, a stalemate non-solution which blocks Russian and Iranian ambitions is better than a bad solution that empowers them.

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the author.



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