



Russia's Middle East Moves and US Options

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Background

In recent weeks, Russia has taken quite significant and surprising steps to deepen and strengthen its support for the Assad regime in Syria. Russia has supported the regime from the earliest stages of the 2011 uprisings but its military intervention in Syria today represents a new dimension of Russian commitment in Syria. What follows is a discussion of Russia's motives, interests and strategy in Syria and a brief review of US options.

Russian Motives and Interests

As a major global power that spans eleven time zones, the Russian Federation shares common borders with both Europe and Asia and exercises significant influence on both continents. However, it has constantly faced logistical naval challenges because of the lack of direct access to warm-water ports. The Russian naval base in Tartus, Syria, established after a 1971 agreement with then Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, gave Russia a rare and coveted facility to project naval power in the Mediterranean Sea. Since that era, Syria's government has been very solidly within the Russian sphere of influence and continued to be a devoted client regime after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In addition to the naval asset in Tartus, the Russians have maintained strong economic interests in Syria through their relations with the Assad regime. Although Syria has historically made up only a small percentage of Russia's trade with the outside world, its share as a trading partner has increased in recent years. Beyond civilian commercial relations however, Russia has also maintained a strong military assistance program with Syria, which has acquired billions of dollars-worth of Soviet and Russian armaments over the years. These military exports to Syria have increased in volume and significance in recent years particularly as oil, a premier Russian export commodity, has declined in value on the global market. In 2005, Russia wrote off the vast majority of Syria's debt, some \$13 billion, allowing for further Russian economic involvement in Syria. Beyond these long-term trade ties and important arms deals, Russia is also hoping to expand its role in exploiting Syrian natural resources. In 2013, Soyuzneftegaz signed a 25-year deal with the Syrian government that gave the state-owned Russian company exclusive rights for exploration and development of Syrian off-shore natural gas and oil in areas of the Mediterranean Sea expected to contain large reserves.

While the presence of the naval base in Tartus and the arms-export relationship with the Syrian regime are likely the primary motivations behind Russian behavior in Syria, other important factors likely weigh into the calculus as well. Though Syria may not be Russia's most important client regime (India is) many other Russian clients are watching what Russia is doing in Syria and the degree of its allegiance to its allies. Various states which fit the

Syrian profile of repressive Russian client regimes will surely be watching to understand the extent of Russian commitment to them.

One also cannot forget that Russia has a significant interest in combating ISIS. Russia has had its share of problems in the past with what it deemed Islamic terrorism, which has impacted Moscow's somewhat tense relationship with its own Muslim population, estimated at 14% of the overall population. The Russian Federation is also surrounded to its south by predominantly Muslim neighbors. The prospect of an ISIS franchise in Russia is quite a serious concern to policymakers in Moscow, as is the threat of small-scale cells made up of Russian citizens who have joined ISIS's ranks returning home from the Middle East.

Analysis

Unlike the days of the cold war, one would be hard pressed to argue today that Russia's support for the Assad regime is one based on ideological affinity. Instead, Russia sees various pressing interests for itself in Syria and preserving the Assad regime becomes necessary for securing those interests. It is important to keep in mind however, that prior to 2011, Russia's interests in Syria could be taken for granted and were never thought by policymakers in Moscow to be in jeopardy. Had the 2011 uprising succeeded in bringing down the regime in Damascus, the new regime would most likely have been heavily influenced by Saudi Arabia and reoriented from being a Russian client to a western one. Syria has been a country where Russia has long projected uncontested influence. Today, this is no longer the case and Russia is finding itself obligated to use direct military force as an instrument of influence just to secure important, although not vital interests there. While some have characterized Russia's moves in Syria as projection of strength and an awakening of the Russian bear, it is really a show of weakness when one considers the broader picture. At the very best, and this is practically an imaginary scenario, Russia can hope to go back to the pre-2011 status quo in Syria with the Assad regime firmly in place and to do so it will have to expend significant costs. This best case scenario for Russia is a net loss.

The Assad regime will never be able to govern Syria again. It might be able to survive, with significant help, but it could only rule a post-war Syria with a level of repression that would make the pre-war dictatorship look cheerful. This is only a recipe for further conflict, instability and death. In the long term, even Russia knows Assad cannot be the answer for securing their interests which is precisely why this military intervention is laden with far more risks for Russia than potential rewards.

Nonetheless Russia seems to be gambling for the short-term. A longer term operation would become costly and difficult to maintain and raise the specter of having to cut their losses and abandon Assad, a step that would do significant damage to Russian prestige. While Russia has stated that its operations in Syria are aimed at combating ISIS, clearly that is only a partial objective at best. However, the Russians also presumably view that the path to combating ISIS requires resolving the Syrian civil war and supporting a ground component of the operation to act as the spearhead against ISIS. Of course, they prefer this force to be the Assad regime and its allies on the ground.

Whether the primary Russian objective is to secure Assad, combat ISIS, or both, it is likely that the longer this military campaign continues, its prospects for success diminish. The best case scenario for Russia in Syria would be to land a fairly quick and decisive blow to anti-Assad forces and help entrench the regime while transitioning toward a political solution in the hope that the increased leverage their military intervention has delivered thus far will secure a more respectable exit for their desperate client while keeping some of their interest intact.

The military campaign in Syria has not been a smooth sailing operation for Russia, but it could get uglier for everyone if Moscow were to commit a significantly larger ground force. This would undoubtedly encourage other regional players who support the opposition to flood Syria with even more hardware designed to inflict serious damage to Russian ground forces and send more flag draped coffins back to Moscow. Should Russia incur such costs, President Putin, who has somehow managed to maintain an approval rating near 90% despite a crumbling economy, may quickly find himself becoming significantly less popular.

Military intervention in Syria has long been a card available to the Russians, and everyone else at the table knew so and realized that it might eventually be played. It is plausible that Russian military intervention came after the passage of the Iran Nuclear Deal for a reason. Holding off on this near-inevitable intervention ensured that Iran would continue to bear the heavy burden of propping up Assad all while dealing with sanctions, making it increasingly vulnerable at the negotiating table with the P5+1, of which Russia was a part.

But while military intervention is a dangerous card, it is also likely Russia's final card and a clarifying one because there is little else the Russians can or are prepared to do to maximize their leverage, and that of their client regime, in what was always going to be the inevitable conclusion in Syria: a negotiated outcome to a post-war status quo that leaves Assad out or greatly diminished.

US Options

Underlying US options after Russian military intervention in Syria are three fundamental differences between the United States and Russia:

1. The US simply does not perceive the same degree of interests in Syria that the Russians do;
2. The US and Russia do not agree on the most effective path to combating ISIS in Syria even if they nominally share the same objective; and
3. The US, weary from decades of military involvement in the Middle East, does not have the appetite for another open-ended military engagement, even if its resources are far less limited than Russia's.

US interests in Syria are less significant than Russia's but the Obama administration does have an interest in bringing the civil war to an end, combating ISIS and doing so while

keeping as many bilateral relationships as unscathed as possible. Additionally, while the US and Russia have strong disagreements on certain issues, including Ukraine, it does not serve US interests to view Russia as an adversary. US objectives can in fact be served with the assistance of a cooperative Russia. The Iran deal is the most recent example of this. The United States and its major allies are all better off when Russia is an active and responsible member of the international community. Despite standing disagreements, a tense history and bellicose domestic constituencies, the idea of “isolating Russia” – the world’s largest country which borders 14 others and is the tenth largest economy that enjoys good relations with China and India – is not much of a policy, let alone an effective one. Below are more realistic options the US may pursue:

Stay out of it – The US can choose what appears to be its current course of action in response to Russian military intervention, staying focused on its efforts against ISIS and staying away from Russia’s direct involvement in the Syrian civil war. This comes with a low price tag for Washington in terms of spending commitments, but will certainly test relationships with regional allies who are looking for Washington to step up its role now that the Russians have gotten more directly involved. In the short run, this may be a viable option but that will not last for long, and it is best to begin moving in another direction before the window of opportunity to seize other options closes. In the immediate short term however, working with the Russians to coordinate the placement of air force assets is crucial since an accident that might bring Russia and the US into direct confrontation should be avoided at all costs.

Make Russia’s life more difficult, i.e. the “Afghanistan option” – Washington can look at Syria and see an opportunity to bog Russia down into a quagmire. It certainly wouldn’t be the first time. As they did in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, the US can – through covert operations – funnel aid and weapons on a significant scale to Russia’s enemies in Syria. But this is not the 1980s, Syria is not Afghanistan and Russia is not the Soviet Union. Going with the Afghanistan option in Syria would prolong what has already been a long and bloody civil war and only put off what has been inevitable, a politically negotiated solution. The Soviet Union could always leave Afghanistan but belligerents in Syria do not see a viable exit ramp and are likely to fight to survive for as long as they can. Further, this option could have additional dangerous byproducts including a Syria flooded with even more dangerous weapons accessible to a long list of rebel/jihadi groups. It could also mean Russian behavior in Syria and elsewhere would likely get more erratic and dangerous. This option also puts the US in a more committed position to a particular outcome in Syria, one that Washington does not necessarily have the interest, will or desire to bring to fruition.

Move toward political solution – The US can choose to see an opportunity presented by Russian military intervention in Syria and begin to push for a negotiated solution to the country’s civil war as quickly as possible. The primary backers of both sides in the civil war may be inclined to move in this direction and press their clients to negotiate a political outcome. For Russia, each additional day of military intervention makes their foray into Syria more costly and more risky. For the Sunni Gulf states which have supported the

opposition, Russian intervention means that the balance in holding the negotiations is tipping in favor of Moscow and not Tehran. The US can push the Gulf States toward this process and away from funneling more arms into Syria by emphasizing that Russian intervention is in part a product of Iranian failure in Syria and is an opportunity to bring the war toward a close without allowing Iran to play the role of arbiter. In other words, for Russia – a global power with which the GCC enjoys significant relations – to play a role in deciding significant outcomes in the Middle East is a far easier pill to swallow than having to go through Iran.

Though some will argue that moving toward a political solution in response to Russian intervention will make the US look weak, the reality is there is no military solution to the civil war in Syria and the continued conflict has had increasingly damaging reverberations on the region. Instead, the opposite is true; the fact that the Russians had to resort to using military force where they have traditionally had non-military influence to wield is a reflection of Russian weakness.

Russian military intervention means the situation in Syria is at a decisive juncture with one path leading to a long-drawn-out war and the other leading to a near-term push for a political solution. The interests of all parties are geared toward that latter outcome, most importantly among them are Syrian civilians themselves who have suffered the most as a result of the war.

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