
The U.S. and Russian Interventions in Syria

Room for Cooperation or Prelude to Greater Conflict?

YOSHIKO HERRERA, ANDREW KYDD & FYODOR LUKYANOV

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WORKING GROUP ON THE FUTURE OF U.S. - RUSSIA RELATIONS
РАБОЧАЯ ГРУППА ПО БУДУЩЕМУ РОССИЙСКО-АМЕРИКАНСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

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Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations

The Working Group on the Future of U.S.-Russia Relations convenes rising experts from leading American and Russian institutions to tackle the thorniest issues in the bilateral relationship. By engaging the latest generation of scholars in face-to-face discussion and debate, we aim to generate innovative analysis and policy recommendations that better reflect the common ground between the United States and Russia that is so often obscured by mistrust. We believe our unique, truly bilateral approach offers the best potential for breakthroughs in mutual understanding and reconciliation between our countries.

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Executive summary

U.S.–Russia bilateral relations, already strained, have worsened since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013. The fact that both countries are conducting military operations in Syria poses serious dangers. This could, however, also create new opportunities for cooperation.

Both the Russian Federation and the United States have strong interests at stake in Syria, and these interests overlap in part, but not completely.

Moscow wants to defeat Islamic extremism that may spread to Russia’s neighbors or borders; it does not distinguish between the Islamic State (IS) and other anti-Assad groups. Washington, on the other hand, argues that some groups are “moderate” and therefore worthy of support. Russia has long maintained that propping up Assad is the only way to prevent Islamic radicalization of the region. The United States and its European allies hold that IS and Assad can be fought simultaneously. Russia’s aversion to regime change, and the disappointment in how the post-Gaddafi period evolved in Libya, have stood in contrast to American enthusiasm for the Arab Spring revolutions and now-tarnished dreams of spreading democracy to the region.

Be that as it may, both Russia and the United States have come to believe that salvaging Syria is a key to future development of the Middle East. The United States and Russia now share more common ground on the Syrian question than before.

This paper highlights the ways in which the United States and Russia could exploit the possibility of coordinating their Syrian strategies to better the chances of a decent outcome in Syria, and to improve the bilateral relationship.

- The October 2015 bombing of a Russian passenger jet in Egypt, and the terror attacks in Paris two weeks later, have created a moment where Russia, Europe, and the United States are convinced that IS terrorism emerging from the region will undermine their security and must be addressed at the source. This moment of potential cooperation may be fleeting, however, and should be exploited immediately.

- Both the United States and Russia seek to ensure a stable and unified Syria, though the two countries disagree on how to achieve this. In recent weeks, Russia’s full-throated insistence on Assad appears to have softened. Meanwhile, as the United States has refocused its efforts on anti-IS military operations, it has also suggested that Assad may yet play a “transitional” role in stabilizing Syria.
- The Russia-brokered disposal of Assad’s chemical weapons in 2014 was an episode of unexpectedly efficient cooperation between the United States and Russia. It demonstrates that the two countries can implement joint actions when interests are well aligned. It may be possible to effectively divide up responsibility for the anti-IS military campaign, with Russia targeting Islamist rebels and IS where they abut Assad regime territory, and the United States targeting IS and helping Kurdish and other ground force offensives against IS.
- In a worst-case scenario, where terror attacks launched from the region are directed across the Middle East, Europe, and even Russia, the major outside powers (especially Russia, the United States, and France) may conclude that a coordinated international large-scale military operation is the only solution.

Introduction

U.S.-Russia relations, already rocky, plunged to new depths following the events in Ukraine in 2014. The ouster of President Yanukovich, the Russian annexation of Crimea, the outbreak of conflict in eastern Ukraine, and U.S.-led Western sanctions on Russia have produced a level of acrimony not seen since the early 1980s. Presidents Obama and Putin are widely seen as disliking each other, to put it politely, and prospects for cooperation or improvement in the relationship seem slim.

This context makes the current dual interventions in Syria by the United States and Russia particularly dangerous, although it could create new ground for cooperation. The United States has been conducting airstrikes against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria for more than a year, and Russia began a campaign of airstrikes against opponents of the Assad regime this fall. Some of those opponents are supported by the United States, so a clash between Russian forces and U.S.- and allied forces was initially not out of the question. Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States, has already shot down a Russian aircraft, leading to considerable hostility between the two parties. The aftermath of further clashes would be highly dangerous and difficult to predict, which places a premium on avoiding them. Russian and U.S. forces' agreement to coordinate efforts to exclude unintended collisions in Syrian airspace have demonstrated the will to work on minimizing risks. Yet both sides appear to have strong interests at stake, and those interests are at least partially conflicting.

Nonetheless, the parties' fundamental interests do overlap to an extent, raising some hope that the interventions in Syria will not lead to a greater clash between the United States and Russia, and might even contribute to the eventual defeat of IS and a ceasefire in the Syrian civil war. Those common interests were galvanized by the downing of a Russian passenger jet on 31 October 2015 and the terror attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, both traced to IS. The remainder of this report will review the course of the war to date, the goals behind the interventions by the United States and Russia, and the ways in which their shared goals might be achieved and their conflicting goals resolved.

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Background

The Russian approach to Syria was heavily overshadowed by recent experience in Libya, where NATO's intervention—authorized by the UNSC following Russia's surprising decision not to veto the resolution—pursued regime change, culminating in the brutal killing of Muammar Gaddafi.

In the Arab Spring of 2011, demonstrators in Syria, as in Libya, Egypt, and other countries, began demanding political change. The Assad regime tacked between concessions and repression, but over time employed more and more force against the opposition. What began as peaceful demonstrations soon degenerated into civil war. The civil war then escalated into a regional conflict with a strong sectarian component in which several neighboring powers, particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, supported various combatants. The United States and other Western countries were initially preoccupied with Libya, and then, perhaps chastened by that experience, were reluctant to intervene directly. In contrast, the Gulf countries, which had followed developments in Syria very closely from the beginning, unequivocally backed Assad's opponents with increasingly militarized covert support. The massacres committed by the Assad regime in the embittered civil war would eventually grow too great to overlook; the United States and its European and Arab allies called for his ouster and recognized the opposition in 2012. Yet Russia maintained support for Assad, and prevented the UN Security Council (UNSC) from acting against him. Russia opposed foreign intervention in Syria's domestic affairs and criticized biased interpretations of the violence, which was perpetrated by both sides. The Russian approach to Syria was heavily overshadowed by recent experience in Libya, where NATO's intervention—authorized by the UNSC following Russia's surprising decision not to veto the resolution—pursued regime change, culminating in the brutal killing of Muammar Gaddafi. Moscow claimed that the UNSC resolution's limitations had been ignored by Western allies.

The United States, despite its calls for Assad's departure, did not intervene in the conflict directly, or even provide significant quantities of military aid to the moderates of the Free Syrian Army, in part out of fear that the latter was allied to the Al-Qaida affiliate Al-Nusra, and was not that moderate at all. As a result, moderate groups dwindled, while Islamist groups funded by Saudi Arabia grew in strength.

In 2013, an attack using chemical weapons killed some 300 people. The United States and other Western governments, along with rebel groups, blamed the Syrian government for the crime. The United States considered using force to punish the regime. Russia countered by proposing an agreement to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. The United States endorsed the idea, Assad accepted the plan, and by mid-2014 Syria's stock of chemical weapons had been removed and destroyed. This remarkable episode of cooperation demonstrates the ability of competing actors to efficiently implement joint actions when their interests align.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL), the successor organization to Al-Qaida in Iraq, began infiltrating Syria, taking advantage of the chaos there. In a year IS went from being a very minor player to controlling the entire east of the country, south of the Kurdish strongholds, and on into western Iraq. At present, IS essentially rules the non-Kurdish, Sunni-populated areas of desert Syria and Iraq, with its capital at Raqqa. By mid-2014, IS was the most powerful rebel group in Syria. Its barbaric behavior, social-media-driven recruitment, and extraordinarily ambitious goals finally prompted the United States to intervene directly. In September 2014, the United States began launching airstrikes at IS and training opposition fighters to combat them, as well as aiding Kurdish fighters in the north. At the same time, the United States flatly refused any coordination with the Assad regime, maintaining its claim that Assad should step down and pave the way for coalition rule in Syria.

At present, the U.S. intervention cannot be counted a success. The effort to train local forces has failed completely. And while airstrikes have helped the Kurds defend their territory and roll back some IS gains in the north, the control IS maintains over its core territory has not been effectively challenged (although an offensive now underway has achieved some success at Sinjar). Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Syria has grown increasingly dire. More than 200,000 people have been killed, and half the country's population is displaced, including more than 7 million internally displaced and 4 million who have fled the country. The best that can be said of the U.S. intervention is that it has contained the threat, and prevented the defeat of the Kurdish forces—the one indisputable U.S. ally in the region.

In September 2015, Russia, prompted by signs of increasing weakness in the Assad regime, sent air- and limited ground forces to an airbase at Latakia near their longstanding naval refuel facility at Tartus. A Russian-led campaign of airstrikes began, primarily targeting foes of the Assad regime other than IS, although a few IS targets have been hit as well. The geographical distribution of civil war combatants explains the Russian decision to target non-IS opposition. The Syrian government's strongholds in the south abut against mainly non-IS rebels in the northwest, which in turn abut IS territory in the east, with Kurdish territory along the northern border. Non-IS rebels, therefore, present the greatest threat to Assad, and so the bulk of the airstrikes have been targeted against them rather than against IS. They are currently engaging in a coordinated offensive with Syrian army forces against rebels in the Homs area.

Russia is conducting a large-scale air campaign, including such unusual measures as the use of long-range cruise missiles from the Caspian flotilla to hit targets in Syria. The military plan is obviously to deliver maximum damage to anti-Assad forces and to empower the Syrian army to regain the initiative and recapture at least part of the rebel-held territory. Moscow has basically ignored growing criticism from the West and the Middle East (primarily the Gulf region and Turkey) for having targeted the “wrong” (non-IS) foes. The assumption is that a successful ground operation by the Syrian army and Hezbollah, boosted by Russian airpower and Iranian military support, will change the trajectory of the Syrian conflict, forcing all parties back to the negotiating table, but with a different constellation of forces. Meanwhile, Russia has indicated its operations can be extended to Iraq to hit IS there as well. Indeed, the authorization to use Russian armed forces abroad,

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which was given to the president by the Federation Council, does not specify the country in which forces are to be used—effectively giving the Council's blessing to any steps the head of state deems necessary to combat terrorism. Iraq has de facto joined the so-called Russo-Shiite alliance (Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus, plus Hezbollah in Lebanon). Nevertheless, close ties between Baghdad and Washington prevent the Iraqi government from formally asking for Russian military help against IS.

This combination of circumstances exacerbates fears that accidental or even intentional conflict will occur between U.S. and Russian forces in the region. Turkey's shooting down of a Russian combat aircraft and the subsequent deterioration of relations provide a taste of what could be in store should such an event be repeated with direct U.S. involvement. The Syrian war is the first serious military campaign since the Vietnam War, in which the air forces of two great military powers are operating in the same conflict area, supporting opposing sides. On the positive side, the United States and Russia have reached a technical agreement to avoid unintended clashes between their forces. As long as Russia is content to target groups that are not receiving aid from the United States, this approach should be workable—at least in theory.

The greater question is whether a possibility for cooperation exists between the United States and Russia in defeating IS and resolving the Syrian civil war. The widespread international outrage against IS after the explosion of the Russian civilian plane over Sinai, and especially after the terrorist attacks in Paris, has created a "cooperation moment" which could spur an improvement in relations between Russia and the United States. However, we are reminded that a similar mood existed after 9/11, but the identification of a common enemy ultimately failed to produce a sustainable drive for cooperation. The remainder of this report analyzes U.S. and Russian goals in Syria and the extent to which they are potentially compatible.

U.S. goals

The primary U.S. goal is to defeat IS. Only the emergence of the IS threat prompted the United States to intervene directly in Syria, and defeating IS appears to be the current top priority. In addition, the United States would like to defeat or at least weaken other Islamic extremist elements among the anti-Assad rebels, most particularly Al-Nusra.

The United States' second main interest is to end the civil war. Doing so is the only way to stop the killing, end the flow of refugees to Europe, and restore order. A Syria at peace would become less of a breeding ground for Islamic extremism and pose less threat to the outside world.

The third U.S. interest is to oust President Assad. The United States and its European allies blame him for turning an episode of domestic protest into a horrific civil war. They do not believe that any peace process can succeed in Syria with Assad in power. However, in recent statements, they have softened this position to reflect a willingness for Assad to play a "transitional" role. The pressures of reality may compel them to accept a longer-term role for Assad if there seems to be no prospect of dislodging him.

Finally, the United States would like to see Syria remain a unified country, rather than be partitioned. Assad's ouster is seen as contributing to this goal; indeed, to allow Assad to reassert control over all of Syria is viewed as immoral and a recipe for future instability. A less tainted representative of Alawite interests, on the other hand, could contribute to a post-conflict government. This goal of a unified Syria may be sacrificed in the face of reality if Assad cannot be removed and other groups refuse to negotiate with him (aside from truces that implement de-facto partitions).

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Russian goals

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The primary Russian goal is to defeat the type of Islamic extremism represented by IS and other militant groups in Mesopotamia, spreading to other places from there. Russia tends to disregard the distinction between IS and other groups, viewing IS as but one incarnation of jihadi fighters which can develop into other forms. The United States, in contrast, draws sharper distinctions between Syrian opposition groups, arguing that some are “moderate” and hence worthy of support.

The biggest difference in perspective between the United States and Russia is that the latter sees the Assad regime as the only means to counter the Islamic radicalization of the region. Military experts agree that IS cannot be defeated by airstrikes alone, but no outside powers are ready to deploy boots on the ground to hit IS directly. In the Russian view, alliance with the Syrian army and sectarian militias is therefore the only way to substantially influence the situation.

Moscow is not bound to support the Assad family forever (indeed, in late October its tone already reflected a less Assad-centric position), but believes a new setup of power can be reasonably discussed only after the territory of Syria (ideally whole, possibly divided) is secured and the Syrian state survives. The idea of a simultaneous struggle against Assad and IS, as advocated by the United States and its allies, appears to Russia to be a direct path to al-Baghdadi’s Caliphate, with Damascus as its capital.

One could legitimately assert that a main objective of the Russian operation is to establish a solid footprint in the Middle East and thereby guarantee a Russian role in shaping the future of the region. The Russian leadership has no doubt that the Middle East will be an area of severe instability for years if not decades to come. This instability will inevitably spill over to the whole of Eurasia, and Moscow will need to keep a presence there in order to have power projection capacity and influence political developments. (For example, the traditional notion of “European security” is now inseparably linked to the Middle East, and all institutions in this area should be reconsidered.) Syria is believed to be key to the future development of the entire region. The Middle East as created in the twentieth century is being effectively and irreversibly deconstructed, yet it remains crucial for Russia in many regards.

Russia also wants to at last draw a line under the period of regime change as a means to settle regional conflicts. Libya was the last straw. In this regard, Russia is perhaps pushing against an open door inasmuch as the United States appears to have lost its appetite for such policy.

Possibilities for cooperation

Given these interests on the part of the United States and Russia, one can speculate about possible avenues for cooperation in Syria, from the modest to the more ambitious. Projecting forward from current policy, we can imagine that Russia will target Islamist rebels and IS where they abut against Assad regime territory, while the United States targets IS in aid of Kurdish or other ground force offensives against them. If conflict between the United States and Russia can be minimized and both campaigns succeed, an optimistic scenario for the future would be that IS is defeated, the remaining parties being the Assad regime, a non-IS rebel alliance, and the Kurds in the north. In an even more optimistic scenario, the United States and Russia could then broker three-way peace negotiations among these parties to preserve Syria as a multiethnic, multisectarian state. The difficulties facing such negotiations would be enormous, but if the parties are dependent on external support, the sponsors would have considerable leverage.

Several variations on this theme are conceivable. One possibility is that the non-IS, non-Kurdish rebels might be completely defeated by the Assad regime, with Russian and Iranian help. These rebels might also merge with or be acquired by IS. IS would then gain a large swath of territory in the northwest of Syria, as well as the fighters there. In either event, such a development could potentially ease the coordination problem between the United States and Russia, as there would be no more “moderates” over which to argue.

In a more extreme scenario, the internationalization of the Syrian conflict via terror attacks across the region (the Greater Middle East, Europe, possibly Russia) could generate support for a large-scale military operation with ground force components, and involving all the major outside powers—especially Russia, the United States, and France. Such a scenario cannot be excluded, despite current obvious unwillingness on all sides to risk putting boots on the ground. It is worth noting that Russian rhetoric after the passenger plane crash echoed the language used by the George W. Bush administration as it prepared to retaliate against Afghanistan after 9/11. France too must now demonstrate its capability for retaliation, and a quick and vocal response may be the only chance for President Hollande’s reelection in 2017. The Russian and French “neocon” moment may find support in the Obama administration (which is also pressed by some domestic constituencies to show strength in the Middle East), or in that administration’s successor.

The likely implication of such a development would be much greater confusion among local players who are fighting their own wars with motivations distinct from those of the major powers. A hypothetical U.S.-Russian (and possibly also French) military cooperation in the area would reshuffle existing “coalitions,” which could greatly complicate the next steps to a political solution in Syria. The latter is impossible without the basic consent of key regional players, no matter what the “great powers” may say.

A political solution in Syria is impossible without the basic consent of key regional players, no matter what the “great powers” may say.

Even in the most optimistic scenario, there is little reason to believe that a Syrian settlement would profoundly change relations between Russia and the United States. Post-9/11 experience has showed that counterterrorism does not create long-term rapprochement, and political differences reemerge after the immediate threat is removed. However, a new explosion of terrorism in the Middle East offers opportunities to at least broaden the agenda between Russia and the United States, which has largely focused on the Ukrainian conflict and other purely confrontational issues since 2013.

The United States instinctively prioritizes freedom over stability, while Russian leaders have the reverse preference.

Syria is a testing ground for a new model of international relations in an era when interdependence and clashes are dialectically connected to each other. Russia and the United States are conceptually far apart on Syria and the Middle East, and this gap cannot be fully bridged, not least because of geopolitical competition. Different perceptions of the reasons and consequences of the conflict are deeply rooted in the worldviews of the two countries. The United States instinctively prioritizes freedom over stability, while Russian leaders have the reverse preference. At the same time, the absence of a division of the world into ideology-driven blocks, as in the Cold War, offers options for cooperation when goals temporarily coincide.

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Fyodor Lukyanov has been editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, a journal published with participation of *Foreign Affairs*, since its founding in 2002. Under his leadership, the journal has become one of the most authoritative sources of independent information on foreign policy and international relations in Russia. In December 2012, Lukyanov was elected chairman of Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), the oldest Russian NGO providing expertise in the field of security and foreign affairs. He is a member of the Presidium of the Russian International Affairs Council. Since 2015 he has been a research professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. His columns appear regularly in the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, and *Gazeta.ru*, and he frequently contributes to the *FT Exchange* blog. With extensive background in Russian media since 1990, Lukyanov is one of the most quoted commentators of Russian foreign policy worldwide. He graduated from Moscow State University in 1991 and has a master's degree in German language and literature.

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