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Putin's Syrian Gambit

By Alexey Malashenko
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Russian Sukhoi Su-34 fighter-bombers and Kalbir cruise missiles fired from the Caspian Sea have changed the balance of power on the Syrian battlefield, at least in the short term. The intensity of the bombing has allowed the Syrian government forces to take the offensive again. It's unsurprising that Putin is giving Bashar al-Assad this tactical support: Syria is the last vestige of Russia's Middle East presence, a symbol of past glory. Russia's steadfast support of the Assad regime led it to play a decisive role, in 2013, in dismantling Syria's chemical arsenal, to avoid western intervention (1). It has proved wrong those who claimed Russia was now only a regional power, with no interests outside the post-Soviet space.

From the first armaments contracts in 1956, Syria maintained very close relations with the Soviet Union, strengthened by Syria's short-lived political union with Egypt (United Arab Republic, 1958-61) and the rise to power in 1963 of the Baath Party, inspired by Arab socialism. President Hafez al-Assad, before his death in 2000, urged his son Bashar to maintain the relationship as vital to keeping his clan at the head of the country.

After the breakdown of Russia's alliance with Egypt and the loss of support facilities at Alexandria and Mersa Matruh in 1977, the Syrian port of Tartus was the only base for Russian warships in the Mediterranean. Over the past few months, these have become a noticeable presence off the Syrian coast; in September the huge Typhoon-class nuclear submarine *Dmitry Donskoy* was in the area.

Russian aid to Syria has grown since the Arab Spring. The collapse of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes, the dismantling of Iraq and the emergence of ISIS in 2014 convinced Russia that it must continue to support Assad and strengthen its position in the region. Widespread instability and difficulty in reading the policies of the West, especially those of the US, have driven governments to diversify their alliances. France has sold arms to the Gulf states; Russia has recently signed trade, military and technical agreements with Egypt, Iraq and Jordan; Saudi Arabia finances Egyptian purchases of Russian arms, and the Saudi sovereign wealth fund decided in July to invest \$10bn in Russia.

Nostalgia for Nasser

Some Arab politicians and military officers are nostalgic for the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser, in the 1950s and 60s, when ideological competition between the Soviet Union and the West gave Arabs room for maneuver. It was not by chance that Egypt's president Abdel Fatah al-Sissi praised Nasser during his electoral campaign in 2014. Putin has renewed old ties and secured an arms contract worth \$3.5bn by supporting Sissi — who visited Moscow in August — without hesitation.

Russia hopes to strengthen its influence under cover of international law. In a statement at the UN General Assembly on 28 September, Putin proposed the idea of “a resolution aimed at coordinating the actions of all the forces that confront the Islamic State and other terrorist organisations. [...] Naturally, any assistance to sovereign states can and must be offered rather than imposed, exclusively and solely in accordance with the UN Charter. [...] I believe it is of the utmost importance to help restore government institutions in Libya, support the new government of Iraq, and provide comprehensive assistance to the legitimate government of Syria” (2).

Russia is returning to the Middle East, though without claiming that it will regain the influence the Soviet Union once had on international relations. But it also faces a paradox: Assad is far from popular in many Arab countries, and this alliance aligns Russia with Iran, Hizbullah in Lebanon and the Shia militias in Iraq, in a regional confrontation that their Sunni adversaries increasingly present as sectarian. If Putin wants to demonstrate Russia's strength and ability to help its friends — both to public opinion at home and to his regional partners — he can't afford to show weakness by giving up Assad.

Can the conflict be resolved by an accord? From the Russian viewpoint, this would be possible if the West accepted that Assad should remain in power, at least for a defined period. Putin told the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO, the Russian NATO) (3) summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in September that it was vital to consider political compromise in Syria, saying that Assad was ready to involve the “healthy” part of the opposition in government. This would make it possible to form a Syrian coalition including that part of the opposition able to break with the jihadist movements. The president could then hand over “of his own free will” to a successor who would be approved both by the major political forces in Syria and by external players.

This may seem unlikely at present, but has already been discussed by foreign ministers — albeit reluctantly. If it comes about, Russia could look like an agent for peace. Intervening at the request of the Syrian government would give it the status of geopolitical counterweight, like the Soviet Union during the cold war, and protector of minorities in the region — a role that tsarist Russia assumed with regard to Eastern Christians.

Trading Syria for the Donbass?

But Russia is playing on a far bigger chessboard. There are indications that it may be planning to “exchange” Syria for the Donbass region of Ukraine, torn between those who want to rejoin Russia and those faithful to Kiev. If the US and its allies were willing to take greater account of Russia’s interests in Syria, Russia could be more understanding about Ukraine. In September, Russia and Ukraine, with the European Union as mediator, agreed a price for gas to suit both Ukraine and Russia’s Gazprom, which has been finding it difficult to secure new contracts (4). Though it is uncertain that the Minsk I and II agreements of 2014 and 2015 will be applied in full, a meeting in October raised hopes of a lasting truce in the Donbass, with the effective withdrawal of heavy weaponry and both sides accepting that local elections should be postponed to allow an institutional solution.

Russia is at an impasse. At the UN General Assembly, Putin accused some members of NATO of having orchestrated “a military coup [...] from outside that triggered a civil war.” But he defended the Minsk agreements: “Ukraine’s territorial integrity cannot be ensured by threats and force of arms. What is needed is a genuine consideration for the interests and rights of the people in the Donbass region, and respect for their choice.”

In Syria, the post-Assad future, and whether a coalition may be possible, is uncertain. Every player in the conflict sees a different solution. Russia continues to increase military and technical aid. The airstrikes by Russian planes are a major logistical exercise: since the enemy is quite near, the airbase at Latakia needs to be protected by Mil Mi-24 assault helicopters and tanks. Official sources talk of 2,000 men, which the military apparently consider sufficient. But the Crimean crisis has already shown how hard it is to determine the real numbers of troops involved. There is however nothing new about the presence of military advisors: Russia has been sending them to the Middle East since the 1950s.

The role of Russian troops may be limited to protecting the Syrian army’s principal bases, and special operations. Russians remember the “limited contingent” initially sent to Afghanistan and the stalemate (1979-89) during which, according to official figures, 14,000 Soviet troops died

and 50,000 were wounded, while 1.5 million Afghans were killed. ISIS ideologues have pointed out that this disastrous war contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. A ground intervention in Syria would do little for Putin's popularity.

Keeping Assad in power

According to western leaders, Russia's main objective is not to crush ISIS but to keep Assad in power. The airstrikes have targeted different opposition groups, including the Al-Nusra Front, affiliated to Al-Qaida. Russia hopes that confronting ISIS will encourage other countries involved to join it in a "war on extremism". However, a worldwide coalition is unlikely; at best, there will be some technical coordination to prevent air accidents. Also unlikely is a coalition of Russia, Iran and China, as discussed in the Russian media, to rival the one led by the US. China refuses to intervene outside its own borders, and Iran is pursuing its own ends — although the powerful General Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Al-Quds force which is fighting in Iraq and Syria, has been seen in Moscow. Israel's prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who is worried about such rapprochements and fears that an alliance between a Shia axis and Russia will allow Hizbullah to obtain arms, has sought assurances from Putin.

ISIS has served Russia's interests by allowing Russia to show its friends in the region that it can still take a decisive role. Russia can present itself as protector of the Muslim countries of Central Asia, through the CSTO. More than ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia talks of maintaining stability in "Eurasia" and protecting its allies from external threats. For many years, this meant the Afghan Taliban; now it includes ISIS, which is gradually penetrating southern Central Asia.

ISIS identified Russia as an opponent from the start. Last year it released a video warning Putin: "These are the planes [captured by ISIS] that you sent to Bashar [al-Assad]. Allah willing, we will send them back to you. [...] Your throne has already been shaken [...] and will fall with our arrival [in Russia]." ISIS also vowed to free Chechnya and all of the Caucasus. This may seem ambitious, but the jihadists are in a position to strengthen their influence in the North Caucasus, still beset by protests against central authorities, as well as economic and social problems. There will probably be more attacks like those on the Russian embassy in Damascus (in May, September and October), and they could spread to Russian soil.

The decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 was made at a meeting of the Politburo, within the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Leonid Brezhnev allowed his colleagues to convince him. The head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, future general secretary of the Central Committee, initially opposed the invasion, but later came round.

Today, we know who makes the decisions, and how: though the senate unanimously approved sending Russian troops to Syria in September, Putin makes all the decisions himself, based on his own understanding of the situation. Some decisions seem to have a strong emotional element, and to be made without sufficient thought as to consequences.

Russians remember the Cuban missile crisis of 1962: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had suddenly decided to send nuclear missiles to Cuba. He claimed to have discussed this with his

colleagues, but we now know that he took the decision alone, and that his entourage was only informed of it (5). The US's sharp reaction, blockading Cuba and threatening to invade it (6), forced Russia to back down, and the incident seriously damaged Khrushchev's credibility with his colleagues.

Many see Putin as more decisive and effective than President Obama. They claim he has demonstrated this in his management of the Syrian crisis, and is one step ahead of his partners/rivals. But providential military victories are often followed by a stalemate, or even a retreat. All the bombing over the past year has not forced ISIS to retreat. Russia's attempt to return to the Middle East will only succeed if it is able to create conditions favourable to an international political solution.

Notes.

(1) See Jacques Lévesque, "Russia returns", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, November 2013.

(2) Full transcript at <http://gadebate.un.org/listbydate/2...>

(3) The CSTO's members are Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

(4) See Catherine Locatelli, "Gazprom's eastern future", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, June 2015.

(5) William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the Man and His Era*, Norton, New York, 2003.

(6) See Daniele Ganser, "Russian roulette in Cuba", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, November 2002.

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