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Another Fateful Turning Point in the New Cold War

A struggle is under way over the Syrian ceasefire agreement, while the political crisis in Ukraine deepens.

By Stephen F. Cohen
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Nation Contributing Editor Stephen F. Cohen and John Batchelor continue their weekly discussions of the new US–Russian Cold War. (Previous installments are at TheNation.com.) Cohen reminds listeners that Ukraine remains the political epicenter of the new Cold War, but Syria is where it may now become a hot war.

The Syrian ceasefire agreement—brokered by Secretary of State Kerry and his Russian counterpart Lavrov, and emphatically endorsed by Russian President Putin but less so by President Obama—offers hope on several levels: from the suffering Syrian people to those who want an American–Russian coalition against the Islamic State and its terrorist accomplices with the possibility of a broader diminishing of the new Cold War. But, Cohen adds, the chances of a successful ceasefire are slim, partly due to the number of combatants and lack of a monitoring mechanism, but mainly due to powerful forces opposed to the ceasefire both in Washington and in Moscow.

American opposition is already clear from the statements of leading politicians, from Secretary of Defense Carter’s clear dissatisfaction with Kerry’s negotiations with Moscow, and from anti-ceasefire reports and editorials in the establishment US media. Meanwhile, Putin’s unusual personal ten-minute announcement of the ceasefire on Russian television suggests that many of his own military-security advisers are opposed to the agreement, for understandable reasons.

According to Cohen, this is now very much Putin's own diplomatic policy, leaving him vulnerable to the commitment of Obama, who has previously violated agreements with Moscow, most recently and consequential regarding Libya.

In Ukraine, President Poroshenko continues to demonstrate that he is less a leader than a compliant victim of domestic and foreign political forces. Having again promised Germany and France that he would implement the Minsk Accords for ending Ukraine's civil war, which they designed, he promptly reneged on the commitment, bowing to Ukrainian ultra-right movements that threaten to remove him.

Having called for the ouster of his exceedingly unpopular Prime Minister Yatseniuk—"our guy," as the US State Department once termed him and still views him—Poroshenko then instructed members of his own party to vote against the parliamentary motion, leaving Yatseniuk in office. With Washington, and Vice President Biden in particularly, widely seen to be behind this duplicity, Poroshenko increasingly resembles a temporary pro-consul of a faraway great power. At the same time, on the second anniversary of the violent Maiden protests that brought to power the current US-backed government, the State Department hailed the "glories" of what is now virtually a failed Ukrainian state and ruined country.