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Moscow seeks full-spectrum US engagement

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The high drama of the US-Iran thaw and the diplomatic wrangle over Syria's chemical weapons cannot hide the ground reality that the nature of the war in Syria is dramatically changing. Moscow grasps this and it may have prompted President Vladimir Putin's remark earlier in the week that things are moving in the right direction.

Moscow hopes that building on the recent US-Russia initiative on Syria's chemical weapons, the Russian-American relationship could move on to a higher trajectory.

On Thursday, Putin's aide, Yury Ushakov, disclosed that there could be a meeting between Putin and President Barack Obama at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit on Tuesday at Bali, Indonesia. The initiative came from the Russian side, which was "immediately taken up by the American side" and while confirmation was awaited, "we think this meeting will go ahead," Ushakov said.

Evidently, Moscow didn't factor in the possibility that domestic political preoccupations might prompt Obama to call off his trip to Indonesia, which he has done.

War changes course

Meanwhile, the tectonic shift in the Syrian war has been laid bare in an exclusive report on Monday by the Independent newspaper's veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk.

Fisk reported that contacts have been made by elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from Aleppo with the Syrian government and a two-member rebel delegation travelled to Damascus under a guarantee of safety from the regime to meet a senior official on the staff of President Bashar al-Assad.

FSA will now allow government offices and institutions such as schools to reopen in the rebel-held areas of Aleppo, and fighting between the FSA and the army has ceased in certain areas of the strategic Homs province.

Fisk estimates that the growing defection from the FSA ranks to the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front and the steady ascendancy of the hardline Islamist groups has disillusioned the "moderate" rebels.

After me, the deluge

Buying into this trend, the massive attack recently on Christian churches in Raaqqa and the brutal assault on the ancient Christian village of Maaloula by the al-Nusra group, serves as a rude wake-up call for Western capitals. Bishops and patriarchs from across the region met in Beirut last Friday to lament that the Arab Spring has "turned to winter, to iron and fire" for the Christians of the Middle East.

In political terms, what emerges is that:

- The growing dominance of the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria brings the US, Russia and Iran on the same page in terms of shared hostility toward al-Qaeda;
- Collectively or individually, these countries can be expected to ensure that Syria does not become an al-Qaeda base camp;
- The US and its Western allies may even consider altogether mothballing the idea of sending sophisticated weapons to the FSA for fear they may end up with the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups;
- The recent announcement of the formation of an "Islamic Alliance" of the extremist groups is triggering a new polarization in which the moderate and secular elements would have more in common with the regime than with the jihadi groups. Fisk reported that some FSA members have formed a so-called National Union for Saving Syria with the intent to hold talks with the regime.
- When the tussle between the jihadis and Islamists sharpens - and there are reports of violent clashes - Islamism as a whole takes a beating as beacon for Syria's future;

- Equally, the regional states supporting the Islamist rebel groups in Syria will be forced to rethink. Saudi King Abdullah has invited Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to go on Haj pilgrimage.
- President Assad rises in stature on the political chessboard. On top of the staying power he has shown so far, he is also assuming a new role as the UN's interlocutor ensuring the success of the mission undertaken by the experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Assad now emerges as the only figure capable of rolling back the al-Qaeda deluge in Syria.

Democracy on donkey's back

The prominent Turkish columnist for Hurriyet newspaper Semih Idiz summed up:

Let's face it, the war in Syria is no longer about fighting against a brutal dictator for the sake of democracy. It hasn't been for some time. The war is now over whether Syria will be run according to the Sunni Shariah or remain a secular country even if not a democratic one.

Curiously, Sergei Ivanov, the powerful presidential chief of staff in the Kremlin, put it all other in a candid media talk on Monday. He said, "The war between the government and the opposition stopped [in Syria] a long time ago." Ivanov noted. He went on:

The West is beginning to understand that maybe the [Syrian] opposition should be divided, that it is necessary to stop trying to persuade al-Qaeda and other extremist groups to speak about Geneva-2, and that weapons deliveries to them should be preferably stopped ... first we could split the opposition into two parts and invite both Assad's representatives and what we can describe as a reasonable opposition to the Geneva-2 where dialogue may be launched.

Then, Ivanov looked a little bit further ahead and tossed around an absolutely audacious thought: Certainly, it would be naive and ridiculous to speak about any free expression of will in Syria, but if we agree to recognize the foundations of democracy, let's try to organize fair elections, similar to how it was done in Afghanistan. If you remember, during the last elections [in Afghanistan], ballot papers were delivered by donkeys for half a year, and the vote counting process took quite long as well. But we are ready to accept even this. However, first they will have to agree on the rules of the game.

Ironically, it is Russia that is pressing for Syria to have a crack at liberal democracy at the soonest, as early as by the presidential election due in May 2014. Whereas, the US remains mum.

The Obama administration hopes to revisit the Syrian problem only after gaining greater clarity on the Iranian front.

However, Obama's problem lies elsewhere, namely, how to sell this intriguing Russian idea of an "Afghan solution" to the Syrian question to his regional allies - Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar principally - who never expected things to come to this extraordinary pass.

Fortunately, if it is Saudi Arabia that poses a headache for Obama, here too Russian diplomacy can help. On Monday, Moscow had an important visitor from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia - the secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu.

Now, the OIC bears the imprimatur of the Saud regime. During Ihsanoglu's visit, Russia signed

a framework agreement with the OIC, which provides for bilateral consultations on key issues on the international agenda, "including the issues of regulating conflicts in which OIC member countries are involved".

Casting the net wide

On a broader plane, the Russian expectation is to quickly build on what Putin noted in a speech on Tuesday as "common achievement" of Russia and the US regarding the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. Moscow's expectation was to put Syria peace talks on focus at the Bali meeting talks between Putin and Obama. The meeting would have shown how far Obama is prepared to follow the Russian lead on Syria.

Of course, Obama would know that Russia is casting the net wide for a full spectrum Russian-American engagement starting with Syria. In fact, in the past 10 days there have been two high-level meetings between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to exchange views regarding the change of US missile defense plans announced by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in March 2013.