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Washington's Hawks Push New Cold War

By Alastair Crooke

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Does the failure of the U.S.-backed, major insurgent August “push” on Aleppo – and the terms of the consequent ceasefire, to which some in the U.S. only irascibly agreed – constitute a political defeat for the U.S. and a “win” for Russia?

Yes, in one way: Moscow *may*, (just *may*) have cornered America into joint military air attacks on Al Qaeda in Syria, but in another way, one would have to be somewhat cautious in suggesting a Russian “win” (although Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s diplomacy has been indeed tenacious).

Secretary of State John Kerry’s Syria agreement with Lavrov though, has sparked virtual open warfare in Washington. The “Cold War Bloc,” which includes Defense Secretary Ash Carter and House Speaker Paul Ryan, is extremely angry.

The Defense Department is in near open disobedience: when asked in a press teleconference if the military would abide by the terms of the agreement and share information with the Russians after the completion of the seven-day ceasefire, Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian, the commander of the U.S. Air Forces Central Command, which is directing the bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria, responded: “I think ... it would be premature to say we’re going to jump right into it. And I’m not saying yes or no.”

But President Obama wants to define some sort of a foreign policy historical “legacy” (and so does Kerry). And the President probably suspects (with good cause possibly) that his legacy is set to be trashed by his successor, whomsoever it be – the minute he steps down from office.

In brief, the Establishment’s dirty washing is hanging on the line in plain sight. And it does not look great: Ash Carter, whose Department would have to work jointly with Russia in Syria, last week at Oxford University, accused Russia of having a “clear ambition” to degrade the world order with its military and cyber campaigns.

House Speaker Paul Ryan called Russian President Vladimir Putin an “adversary” and an “aggressor” who does not share U.S. interests. There is a U.S. media blitz in train, with powerful forces behind it, which paints Putin as no possible partner for the U.S.

Obama’s Will

Only in the coming days will we see whether Obama still has the will and clout to make the Syria ceasefire agreement stick. But the agreement did not appear out of the blue. One parent was the failure of America’s military “Plan B” (itself a response to the failed February ceasefire), and the other “parent” was Kerry’s wringing of a further concession from Damascus: Obama supposedly agreed to the separation of U.S. insurgent proxies from Al Qaeda (the former Nusra Front now called Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), and to their joint targeting, in return “for the what the Obama administration characterized as the ‘grounding’ of the Syrian air force in the current agreement,” as Gareth Porter has reported.

The U.S. and its Gulf allies – in pursuit of Plan B – had invested enormous effort to break Damascus’ operation to relieve Aleppo from the jihadists’ hold in the northeastern part of the city. The two sides, here (Russia and U.S.), were playing for high stakes: the U.S. wanted its Islamist proxies to take Aleppo, and then to use its seizure by the jihadis as political leverage with which to force Russia and Iran to concede President Bashar al-Assad’s ouster. Plan B, in other words, was still all about “regime change.”

Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city, has from the outset of this conflict been strategically pivotal – its loss would have pulled the rug from under the Syrian government’s guiding objective of keeping the mass of the urban population of Syria within the state’s orbit.

America’s long-standing objective thus would have been achieved – albeit at an indescribable price paid by the inhabitants of western Aleppo, who would have been overrun by the forces of Al Qaeda. Thus, the Syrian government’s recovery of all Aleppo is a major strategic gain.

In the end, however, the U.S. and its Gulf allies did not succeed: their much vaunted Plan B failed. And in failing, the insurgents have sustained heavy loss of life and equipment. Indeed, such are the losses, it is doubtful whether a “push” on this scale could again be mounted by Qatar or Saudi Arabia (despite the post-Aleppo “push” in Hama).

In spite of the failure of Plan B, the U.S. was not ready to see Al Qaeda isolated and attacked. It wanted it protected. The U.S. ambiguity towards the jihadists of being “at war with the

terrorists”; but always maneuvering to stop Syria and Russia from weakening the jihadists was plain in the letter sent by the U.S. envoy to the Syrian opposition Michael Ratney to opposition groups backed by the United States.

The first letter, sent on Sept. 3, after most of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement had already been hammered out, “makes no reference to any requirement for the armed opposition to move away from their Al Qaeda allies, or even terminate their military relationships, and *thus implied that they need not do so*,” Porter wrote.

A second letter however, apparently sent on Sept. 10, reverses the message: “We urge the rebels to distance themselves and cut all ties with Fateh al-Sham, formerly Nusra Front, or there will be severe consequences.”

Will it happen? Will the agreement be observed? Well, the Syrian conflict is but one leg of the triffecta that constitutes the “new” Cold War theatre: there is the delicate and unstable situation in Ukraine (another leg), and elsewhere NATO is busy building its forces on the borders of the Baltic Republics (the third leg). Any one of these pillars can be wobbled (intentionally) – and crash the delicate political framework of all the others.

Demonizing Russia

Which brings us to the complex question of the current demonization of Russia by the Cold War Bloc (which includes Hillary Clinton) in the U.S. presidential election campaign.

Gregory R. Copley, editor of *Defense & Foreign Affairs* has described the situation as one in which the U.S. Establishment is deliberately and intentionally “sacrificing key bilateral relationships in order to win [a] domestic election,” adding “in my 50 odd years covering the US government, I have never seen this level of partisanship within the administration where a sitting president actually regards the opposition party as the enemy of the state.”

In short, the stakes being played here – in demonizing Russia and Putin – go well beyond Syria or Ukraine. They lie at the heart of the struggle for the future of the U.S.

There is practical evidence for such caution – for, three days before the Syrian artillery was scything the ranks of Ahrar al-Sham near Aleppo on Sept. 9 to close the chapter on America’s Plan B – (and four days before Ratney’s letter to the Syrian insurgents telling them to separate from Al Qaeda “or else”), Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko in addressing the Ukrainian parliament, the Rada in Kiev, was eviscerating the Minsk II accords, brokered by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande as the only possible political solution to the Ukrainian civil war.

“Moreover, in a difficult dialogue,” Poroshenko said (see [here](#) and [here](#)), “we have convinced our western allies and partners that any political settlement *must be preceded* by apparent and undeniable progress on security issues: a sustainable ceasefire, withdrawal of Russian troops and equipment from the occupied territories, disarmament of militants and their family – and finally *the restoration of our control over our own border*” (emphasis added.)

Poroshenko, in other words, unilaterally turned the accord on its head: he reversed its order completely. And just to skewer it further, he told Parliament that any decision would be “exclusively yours” and nothing would be done “without your co-operation” – knowing full well that this Ukrainian parliament never wanted Minsk II in the first place.

And Kiev too is deploying along the entire borders of Donetsk and Lugansk. (A description of the military escalation by Kiev can be seen visually presented [here](#)).

Is Poroshenko’s U-turn the American “revenge” for Russia’s “win” in Syria – to heat up Ukraine, in order to drown President Putin in the Ukraine marshes? We do not know.

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden has boasted: “I think I tend to be in more direct conversation, for longer periods of time with the President [Poroshenko], than with my wife. (Laughter.) I think they both regret that (Laughter).”

Is it possible that Biden was not consulted before Poroshenko made his annual address to the Rada? We do not know, although within 48 hours of Poroshenko’s making his Rada address, Defense Secretary Ash Carter was in London, recommitting to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, as he signed a “bilateral partner concept” with the Ukrainian defense minister.

Provoking Russia

What *we do know* however, is that this is – and is intended to be – a direct provocation to Russia. And to France and Germany, too. Within a week, however, Poroshenko was backtracking as “coincidentally” a new IMF loan was being floated for Kiev, just as the German and French Foreign ministers insisted on the Minsk formula of “truce – special status – elections in Donbass – control of the border” be respected – and as the Donetsk and Lugansk leadership unexpectedly offered a unilateral ceasefire.

But Poroshenko’s “backtrack” was itself “backtracked” by Sept. 16, when the French and German visiting Foreign Ministers were reportedly told that Ukraine’s government now refused to implement the Minsk accord as it stood, as it now insists that the order be fully reversed: “truce – control of the border – elections.”

The American bitter internal election “civil war” is now shaking the pillars of the tripod on which America’s – and Europe’s – bilateral relations with Russia stand. It would therefore seem a stretch now for Obama to hope to prevail with any “legacy strategy” either in the Middle East or Ukraine that is contingent on cooperation with Russia.

The U.S. Establishment seems to have come to see the very preservation of the global *status quo* as linked to their ability to paint Trump as President Putin’s instrument for undermining the entire U.S. electoral system and the U.S.-led global order.

To the world outside, it seems as if the U.S. is seized by a collective hysteria (whether genuine, or manufactured for political ends). And it is not clear where the U.S. President now stands in

this anti-Russian hysteria having likened Putin to Saddam Hussein, and having accused the Republican nominee of trying to “curry favor” with the Russian president – for having appeared on “Larry King Live” which is now broadcast by *Russia Today*.

But the bigger question is the longer-term consequence of all this: some in the “Hillary Bloc” still hanker for “regime change” in Moscow, apparently convinced that Putin’s humiliation in either Syria (not so likely now), or in Ukraine, could see him deposed in the March 2018 Russian Presidential elections, for a more Atlanticist, more “acceptable” leader.

It is unadulterated wishful thinking to imagine that Putin could be displaced thus – and more likely, Ukraine (with its prolific ‘kith and kin’ ties to Russians) used as a lever to “humiliate” President Putin will prove counter-productive, serving only to harden antagonism towards the U.S., as ethnic Russians die at the hands of rightist Ukrainian “militia.”

But it is certainly so that this campaign is strengthening the hand of those in Russia who would like to see President Putin taking a less “conciliatory line” towards the West. So, we may be heading towards more troubled waters.