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Syria: The Strategic Pandemonium

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S yria today has become hotbed for proxy war between the superpower United States and the erstwhile superpower Russia. The United States and Russia's involvement in the War, the presence of Islamic State (IS), and the role and stance of regional and global actors on different sides has made Syria the fulcrum of battle for strategic space. The Syrian Civil War is an ongoing conflict

between the Government of Bashar Al-Assad and those seeking to oust it—largely, the country's citizenry. The conflict today has gone beyond the issue of pro- and anti-Assad forces, and spilled over to becoming a sectarian conflict as well, with the nation's Sunni majority being pitted against the President's Shia Alawite sect.

In 2014, the extremist group IS, which emerged initially in Iraq, expanded its stronghold to Syria, gaining land and power also due to the advantage presented by the chaos brewing internally in the country. Its many foreign fighters are involved in a 'war within a war' in Syria, battling rebels and rival jihadists from the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, as well as government and Kurdish forces.¹

In 2013, the Government's use of chemical weapons against rebels in Damascus prompted the

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United States to officially condemn Assad and his regime. Barack Obama's government also proposed a programme wherein rebel fighters would be supplied with weapons and training from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in addition to implying targeted military strikes if the situation didn't improve. In response to IS, the United States in September 2014, backed by five Arab countries, moved ahead with its campaign of airstrikes aimed at militants around Aleppo and Raqqa. ²

On the other side, is the regime's supporter, Russia, which has blocked at least three of the Security Council's resolutions against the Assad regime. September 2015 marked the country's official entry into the War when it intervened through airstrikes against supposedly only IS, but claims have implied their targeting of anti-Assad forces as well.

The United States, whose involvement in the War began in 2013 with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) training rebel groups, is explicit in its opposition to Assad and wanting his ouster. The country launched airstrikes in 2014 against IS and other jihadist groups as part of an international coalition, involving Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as well as many European countries. The United States supports Syria's main opposition alliance, the National Coalition (which includes members of the Free Syrian Army) and provides limited military assistance to 'moderate' rebels. However, the nature of these groups in terms of actually being moderate is contested, with reports of some of these groups cooperating with the al-Qaeda backed Al Nusra Front. There may even be

the possibility of the Nusra Front's military effort against the Assad government being a key factor to the United States strategy in Syria.

Saudi Arabia also opposes the Assad regime due to the latter being backed by Iran, Saudi Arabia's arch rival. The issue of sectarian influence dominates in tensions between them. The expansion of Iranian (and therefore Shia) influence, which has already been successful in Iraq and Lebanon, in the Arab world is seen as a major threat by the Saudi Arabia. It began sending money and weapons to rebels mainly through Turkey to counter Iran's increasing influence, which also escalated in the mid-2012 when Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah, backed by Iran, entered Syria to assist Assad's forces. In response Saudi Arabia further increased the amount of weapons support being supplied to rebels, this time through Jordan, another anti-Assad regime nation. Having condemned United States inaction against the chemical weapons attack in 2013, Saudi Arabia agreed to join the United States-led airstrike coalition against the IS in 2014.

As for those backing Assad, Russia, one of the regime's major international supporters, has a vested interest in the survival of the regime. A key naval facility, the Syrian port of Tartus, which Moscow leases, serves as Russia's only Mediterranean base for its Black Sea fleet. Moscow also has forces at an air base in Latakia, a Shia Alawite (Assad's sect) majority area. The 2015 airstrike campaign was launched by Russia with an aim to target IS and 'all terrorists'. However, Western-backed rebel groups were reported to have been hit. Russia, which is home to 16 million Muslims, also sees instability in the

region as a major threat which poses the possibility of importing Islamic extremism into the country.

Regional Shia power Iran has been a long standing supporter of Assad's regime. Iran's intervention—by way of sending cargo flights and boots on ground—began in 2012 in response to the rise of secessionist Kurdish rebel groups. Tehran is believed to be spending billions of dollars a year to support Assad, providing military advisers and weapons at subsidized rates, as well as lines of credit and oil transfers.³ Syria also serves as the main transit point for the supply of weapons to Hezbollah.

With these different sides with their respective different interests, efforts at peace have been a limited success. The UN Security Council's call for the implementation of the 2012 Geneva Communique, which envisages the establishment of a 'transitional governing body' to assist a Syrian-led political transition, broke down after only two rounds of talks in 2014. The Communique also entails 'Action Group members to be opposed to any further militarization of the conflict',⁴ a situation that is far from being realized. A United States-Russia 'truce' in September 2016 which had been brokered with the intention of allowing aid delivery to besieged areas, was abruptly ended due to an attack on a United Nations humanitarian convoy in Aleppo, which was followed by the United Nation suspending aid deliveries to Syria, while the United States blamed Russia for the attack. Had the cease-fire continued, the Russian and United States militaries were prepared to set up a joint operation targeting terror groups, including IS and Al Nusra.

Therefore, at various levels, Syria is hosting a proxy war between multiple sides, all of which are fighting for distinct reasons. Over the issue of regional balance of power, there is Iran on one hand, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States on the other. Russia and the United States, allies with Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively, are not only on opposite sides with regard to the Assad regime, but also find themselves at odds with each other regarding how to tackle the problem of IS. While the option of fighting the terrorist organization together could ideally be explored, the divide over supporting Assad shall continue to be a fundamental obstacle, as is evident from John Kerry's call for war crimes investigation of Russia and the Assad government.⁶ The United States, as of October 2016, has also suspended bilateral ceasefire talks with Russia over Syria due to what it views as Russia's violation of the September ceasefire.⁷

In the chaos of this proxy War, the question has also arisen of who the primary enemy is: Assad or IS. For Saudi Arabia and Turkey, strategic stakes in Syria lie in ousting Assad. Even though the United States with its airstrikes campaign is clear in prioritizing IS, it does so at the cost of effectively addressing the crimes of the Assad government, an issue it had paid heed to earlier. If we add to this complex equation the various rebel groups that these countries support, what is beckoned is the realization that even among allies, there lies major internal ambiguity in terms of who the enemy is, who to support, and the means of doing so.

The frequent fluctuation in the United States-Russia relations, especially in the context of

Syria, till the point of the most recent suspension of bilateral ceasefire talks, leads one to ask the question of whether a new Cold War is being waged between the two countries. The issue of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 also contributed to the escalation of tensions between the two.

The United States, which is also the leading power in the *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (NATO) and Russia, continue to engage in a theatre of nuclear capabilities. With NATO recently activating a missile defence shield at the first base in Romania as part of Project Aegis Ashore, which entails an 800 million dollar missile shield stretching across Europe from Romania to Spain, the response from Russia has been understandably that of major concern, with the project being viewed as a threat to the region's stability and making Russia explore ways of 'neutralizing' this ballistic missiles threat. This carries with it the likelihood of an ensuing arms race.

The *North Atlantic Treaty Organization* and the United States, face a credibility problem. The United States has as many as 150 nuclear bombs based in Europe. Words of friendship and partnership therefore, wane in comparison to the sight of a nuclear weapons stockpile in Europe, with distrust and worrying being rational responses.⁸

Russia in the early October carried out a four-day long nuclear evacuation drill involving millions of citizens. On 21 October, it sent its warships across the English Channel, deploying all of the northern fleet and much of the Baltic fleet in the largest surface deployment since the end of the Cold War, an action that can only be interpreted as a means to further airstrikes in Aleppo.⁹ As part of its theatrics, Russia thus isn't

modernizing its weapons, but finding new ways to display them.

Geo-strategic Interest in Syria

With regard to the geo-strategic interests of Russia in Syria, comprehending the importance of the sea port of Tartus needs to be understood in the context of Russian quest for warm waters. During the original Cold War, Russia understood the strategic significance of access to the Mediterranean Ocean (which further opens up to the North Atlantic ocean to its west and the Suez Canal to the south-east), which remained important for its sea commerce. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia now has seasonal access to the North Sea, making its foray into the Mediterranean Sea all the more important. Russia, thus, maintained cordial relations with the countries in Eastern Europe, Libya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Yemen, Turkey, and Syria. There is, therefore, a perspective that the United States along with NATO, in their bid to isolate Russia, and engineer 'sea denial', has effected the exchange of regimes and installed governments conducive to their vested interests, notably behind the veil of the Arab Spring and youth-led movements in West Asia and North Africa. Under such circumstances, Syria, which is one of the few remnant nations with a strong Russian foothold, has consequently become the main battleground for a geo-strategic tug of war between the United States and Russia.

Putin, who now faces an economically weaker Russia, has sought to offset vulnerability at home with aggression abroad. Russia has taken steps in recent weeks to establish itself as a permanent

power in the West Asia and in the Mediterranean, ratifying an open-ended agreement to lease Syria's Khmeimim air base and declaring that it will upgrade its naval facility in the Syrian port town of Tartus to a permanent naval base.¹² With Russia also being a country where the media and therefore, public perception is controlled, the Kremlin has put forward a nationalist narrative in its efforts to create a perception of the greatness of its military strength, which in actuality isn't that strong relatively, with its military spending being only a fraction of the United States.

On the other side, the United States prioritizing of IS over Assad is perhaps due to a shift in perception, with the country now viewing the defeat of IS rather than Assad as the key to establishing order and control in West Asia.

The actions, in terms of issuing statements and sanctions, undertaken by the West due to their concerns regarding such instances of Russia's assertive behaviour are viewed by Russians as being rhetorically and aggressively 'Russophobic', including the accusations of war crimes in Syria. Assad recently said that the Syrian conflict was already turning into a direct United States-Russia confrontation.¹³

With both sides taking action which the other views as being purposefully against its own interests, it can thus be established that there still exists strong mutual distrust between the two. The entirety of the complex timeline of Russia United States relations can be condensed to a simple equation—that of action and reaction. But the question of attributing which side to which role is a tougher task, because this cannot be assigned permanently and is not constant. Another way the

timeline can be viewed is as reactions piling on top of each other, with tracing the root action too complex, and perhaps inconsequential, a task. The assignment of blame is a subject of confusion with Russia thinking that the United States is at fault for a break in relations and vice versa. Each side thinks the onus of restoring dialogue lies with the other, that the ball is in the other side's court.

With Donald Trump coming into power as the current President, however, the dynamics of the region and thus United States-Russia relations are expected to alter. With Trump promising to put America first inter alia sorting out domestic disorder, how far is he going to pull back from West Asia, will he compete or cooperate with Putin in the strategic quagmire of Syria and the region—the world awaits with baited breath.

Notes

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