

Can Russia Reach a Consensus on Syria with Trump?

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Abstract: Despite the fact that there was no more convenient interlocutor for negotiations than John Kerry, the victory of Donald Trump in the American presidential elections gave the Russian leadership hope for an improvement in Russian-American relations in general and reaching a compromise on Syria in particular. The "staff vacuum" that still remains in the U.S. State Department will not allow the American leadership to move on from slogans and populist declarations to the formulation and implementation of specific foreign policy steps, but some preliminary conclusions can now be drawn. Firstly, the U.S. will pursue a more proactive policy in the region, which will give the Syrian opposition certain opportunities. The situation gradually became clear that either the opposition, with the mediation of Russia, would be incorporated into existing power structures, or they would sooner or later be destroyed. Then, after the missile strike at the al-Shayrat base, the prospects for forcing Bashar Assad to negotiate became better. Secondly, during the episode in al-Shayrat both Russia and the United States demonstrated that they were not willing to launch a war with each other and are still open to dialogue, even if the results of this dialogue are not yet entirely obvious. Third, a more active policy by the United States in Syria may re-articulate Russian interest in the Syrian issue that has been noticeably lost since the beginning of 2017 due to the fact that it has moved from the global agenda to being more of a regional issue.

Since the commencement of its military operation in Syria, Russia's influence in the Middle East has been gradually increasing, despite the fact that Moscow's policy is still unpredictable and has been a cause for many controversies and much complaint from the global community. It is already clear that the resolution of the entire Syrian crisis by military means in favor of one of the parties is impossible in the point of view of a large number of both regional and global actors involved in the conflict. This, in turn, forces the parties to constantly seek compromises and tactical alliances, despite the fundamental divergence of views on the very nature of the Syrian conflict.

From the point of view of the Russian Federation, this is for the better. One of the main motives of the Russian military campaign in Syria was an attempt to provoke a dialogue with the West and, above all, the United States at a time when the agenda of Russian-American relations was finally empty. It should also be noted that the Russian leadership managed to achieve its goal: first, by casting doubt on the effectiveness of the policy of isolating Moscow, and, secondly, creating a stable view of the "necessity" of conducting a dialogue with the Kremlin to address the most important issues on the agenda of the global community.

However, while Russia sought to use the Syrian conflict as a tool for resolving its differences with the West, it became more and more entangled in the conflict. As a result, a compromise is now practically the only way for Moscow to withdraw from the Syrian conflict without the gains it has made being offset. But the prospect of the regionalization of the Syrian conflict and the need to negotiate with local and regional actors instead of the U.S. alone has significantly reduced Moscow's interest in what is taking place in Syria.

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America is Coming Back?

The United States missile attack on Syria's al-Shayrat military base came as a surprise to both the Syrian regime and its guarantors who believed in the regime's complete impunity. For most Arab leaders' and some members of the Republican Party, however, Donald Trump's decision was long-awaited and seemed logical.

Ambassador Frederic Hof, Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, stated less than a day before the missile strike on Syria that after the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhoun, the American leadership faced a dilemma: either the US should start reacting to the crimes of the Syrian regime by military means, or they would be happy with the role of silent observer of how Bashar al-Assad is dealing with the remnants of the Syrian opposition.² The latter option would be more characteristic of the "peace-loving" Barack Obama and John Kerry, who gave unconditional preference to a political settlement rather than military confrontation. Trump showed that, if necessary, he is ready to resort to force.

Paradoxically, but through its maniacal dislike for Barack Obama and his foreign policy orientation, Russia has become accustomed to his strategy and took it for granted that it would be strictly implemented regardless of the administration in the White House. In general, this is not surprising, because the policy pursued by the former American president in the Middle East was to minimize U.S. military presence in the region in favor of resolving conflicts exclusively through diplomatic channels or with the help of U.S. regional allies.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rules of the game in the Middle East changed. The United States became the only guarantor of stability on which Arab regimes could depend upon. Even those countries that had previously been engaged in various kinds of socialist experiments gradually began to adapt to this. Syria acted as well; after the coalition forces' invasion of Iraq in 2003, Damascus quickly realized that it could be next. Hence its policy until 2011 was to convince the Americans of its usefulness and necessity for the White House. For the Baathist regime, this was an opportunity to boast that they were conducting a dialogue with Washington and to demonstrate their strength.

In February 2010, at a meeting with Daniel Benjamin, who was responsible for terrorism-related issues at the State Department, Ali Mamlouk, the head of Syria's intelligence agency, responded to the U.S. proposal to begin cooperating over terrorism, articulated Bashar al-Assad's terms, including the U.S. recognizing Syrian government's stance on the events occurring in the region.³ The indirect negotiations between Washington D.C. and al-Assad's representatives continued after the start of the Arab Spring. During the civil war in Syria, when most countries, including the United States, refused to recognize the Baath regime, the latter was looking for opportunities to maintain contact with the White House.⁴ The importance of this for Damascus is obvious: any contacts with Washington or even the appearance of dialogue give al-Assad advantages allowing him to regain legitimacy even if the parties do not agree on anything.

However, the situation began to change when Barack Obama came to power, and the countries of the Arab Spring were first to experience this. The Americans chose a neutral policy during the events of the Arab spring when the allied regimes of Zin al-Abidine Ben



Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen became targets of anti-government demonstrations and riots. All illusions about the ability of Barack Obama to use force finally disappeared in August and September 2013, when news spread about the use of sarin nerve gas at Damascus by the Syrian army. The use of chemical weapons was unequivocally regarded by the regional opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime as the “red line” that the Syrian president had crossed, and which ought inevitably to lead to direct U.S. intervention. Moreover, it was the “red line” that President Obama had designated himself, but he refused to defend it. Obama’s subsequent statements that he “feels proud” of a diplomatic settlement of the situation acquired a double meaning.⁵ The deal on Iran’s nuclear program achieved in the summer of 2014 in Vienna with the direct participation of the United States, did lead to a rethinking of America’s Middle East policy by MENA countries.

As a result, America’s allies in the region reconsidered what American security guarantees to them were worth, while their opponents gained confidence in their own impunity. This resulted in the repeated sabotage of the ceasefire regime by the Syrian army that continues to this day, despite guarantees from Russia and Iran. The use of chemical weapons in East Guta, the siege of Aleppo with huge civilian casualties, the attack on the Red Crescent aid convoy near the city of Urum al-Kubra, the incident in Khan Shaykhoun: all these are only a small proportion of the crimes with which the world community charges the Baath regime. Of course, there is debate about the regime’s involvement in all these events, but the abuse of power in the very sad history of the Baathist leadership testifies against them.

With Donald Trump’s ascent to power, it became clear that the logic of the former American leadership was no longer relevant.

The White House now clearly outlines its “red lines”, the crossing of which will be followed by the most severe immediate reaction. Therefore, the new American administration is acting extremely rigidly and operatively, not frittering its strength away on long diplomatic dueling.

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For the United States, one meeting of the UN Security Council was enough to immediately make a decision to order a missile strike. The veto that Russia imposed on the resolution by France, Britain and the United States regarding the investigation of what happened in Khan Shaykhoun was enough for the American leadership to entrust all responsibility to Moscow and Damascus and give the command to strike. In other words, the times when Sergey Lavrov and John Kerry could negotiate several times a year for the sake of negotiations appear to have become a thing of the past. The current American leadership has demonstrated its determination and with a high degree of probability will demand details and strict compliance with agreements made by the Syrian regime and its allies.

Hostage to its Own Ambitions

Having begun its military operation in Syria in order to create favorable conditions for the restoration of dialogue with the West, Russia became a hostage to the unchallenged policy of the Syrian regime and drove itself into even greater isolation, always sharing the responsibility for the crimes committed by Damascus with its knowledge. Moreover, while constantly accusing its foreign partners of mistaken approaches to the settlement of the Syrian crisis, Russia received carte blanche to realize its vision of a political solution to the conflict that had proven to be an unbearable burden.



In September 2016, after the final breakdown of the peace initiative realized within the framework of the International Syria Support Group chaired by the Russian Federation and the United States, Moscow did not fail to take advantage of the transition period under the leadership of the United States to seize the initiative and outline its “rules of the game” in Syria. This was the focus of the “triadic initiative” in December 2016 and the subsequent Astana and Geneva negotiations. However, neither Astana talks (to which even Moscow sent low-level delegations),⁶ nor those in Geneva, which were convened twice at the insistence of the Russian leadership and was never remembered for anything other than the mysterious “Naumkin document”⁷ as well as the de facto ceasefire regime, were turning points.

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Having initiated, with great difficulty, the resumption of the negotiation process over Syria, Moscow was more invested than anyone in its success. Geneva is important for Russia’s image, since should it be ineffective, the Russian leadership will not have the opportunity this time to blame the destructive role of the U.S. or other external actors, as it usually does. The stakes at Geneva for the Kremlin are too high, and the results will remain unpredictable, which means that Moscow is interested in de-escalating the Syrian conflict, as well as creating the conditions for giving the upcoming meeting at least some kind of constructive character. From this point of view, Moscow attached

particular importance to Rex Tillerson’s visit to Moscow on April 11–12 and establishing a dialogue with Washington with the aim of coordinating actions in Syria. It is obvious to the Russian leadership that neither Astana nor Geneva can play a productive role without the participation of the United States. Therefore, Russia has repeatedly insisted on American participation in mediation efforts since the beginning of 2017. And that’s why Russia was the party to the Syrian conflict least interested in the chemical attack in Idlib on the eve of the Tillerson and Lavrov talks, unlike its allies—Iran and the Syrian regime were disinterested in normalizing Russian–American relations and still betting on resolving the Syrian conflict in a purely military way with the direct participation of Moscow.

Therefore, no matter who carried out the chemical attacks in Khan Shaykhoun, it was very much expected that Moscow be unable to show composure and restraint, and would instead react emotionally to the ensuing American retributive actions, which would inevitably lead to a further round of tension surrounding the Syrian conflict. This expectation was generally justified: Moscow is often overly concerned about formalities, and the strike on the al-Shayarat base inevitably raised the question of whether Russia was able to protect its allies. Moreover, during its presence in Syria, it has created a durable myth about the immunity of all those whom it defends.

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In fall 2016, when the U.S. Air Force carried out a strike at the positions of the Syrian army in Deir az-Zur—an action which the U.S. claimed was a mistake—the Russian defense



ministry announced that it had delivered S-300 complexes to Syria. After that, Igor Konashenkov, the official representative of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, reminded “American strategists” that “the range of S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems may surprise any unidentified flying objects”, as well as the fact that combat units of Russian Air defense “would unlikely have time to find out the exact program of missile flight and the ownership of their carriers.”⁸ All this formed a vivid idea that Moscow is guaranteeing its allies full protection against military attacks by external actors, and especially by members of the anti-terrorist coalition led by the United States.

Conflict Avoided

The U.S. missile strike on the Syrian military base al-Shayrat could have become a “turning point” in the Syrian conflict, but this did not happen. Moreover, it did not bring about anything fundamentally new either to the American or the Russian strategy in Syria. The practice of past years has repeatedly demonstrated the excessive emotionality of the Russian leadership, as well as how Moscow makes hasty or harsh steps in a situation where something is not going to plan or it believes that it is being unjustifiably ignored. After all, the Russian leadership is still trying to rethink what has happened, but to date the situation has been aggravated by the fact that Russia’s unpredictable actions were supplemented by equally unpredictable actions by Washington, which is traditionally known for more balanced and pragmatic action. Moreover, the fact that Donald Trump is hostage to U.S. domestic policy only increases the risks for both Russia and the entire world community.

However, Moscow did not allow itself unnecessary emotional steps this time. Russia reconciled the positions of Damascus and Tehran, and reassured its partners that it was

not going to change them for better relations with the U.S. It also contacted other regional players—Turkey and the GCC countries—to convince them of the need to preserve the Astana and Geneva formats. During the April visit of Rex Tillerson to Moscow, Sergey Lavrov and Vladimir Putin sent Trump a clear signal that the Russian leadership was open to an exchange of views, even if its results are not entirely obvious. In the Kremlin, according to rumors, the defense department was informed that the decision to suspend the functioning of communication channels with American military colleagues was sudden.

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Two points were key to keeping the Russian leadership from taking hasty and emotional steps. On the one hand, Moscow quickly realized that the Americans had carried out a strike on al-Shayrat under the influence of the moment and to show their own electorate that the new president was really capable of tough steps, as well as to defuse allegations of Trump having very close relations with Russia. In other words, Donald Trump simply had to order the strike on the positions of the Syrian government troops after American public opinion came to the conclusion that the chemical attack had been organized by the Baathists. Otherwise, this would have only added to criticism of the new American president, especially from his colleagues in the Republican Party. And from this point of view, such an act by Donald Trump can be regarded as situational, because the subsequent standstill once again demonstrated that Washington had not had a clear strategy in Syria, and nor did it now.



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On the other hand, the rapid visit of the U.S. Secretary of State helped in keeping Moscow from making hasty decisions, as well as the refusal of British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson to visit Russia.⁹ Against this background, Rex Tillerson’s visit, which in general was not particularly effective, looked like a great gesture of goodwill and respect towards Russia. The British, like a lightning rod, drew in a significant part of Moscow’s irritation with Khan Shaykhoun and al-Shayarat. It is characteristic that the rebuff of the new Russian ambassador to the United Nations with the demand “not to take his eyes off him”, which has already become proverbial, was directed against the British, not the Americans.¹⁰

The U.S. attacks on the Syrian military base at al-Shayrat are not yet a declaration of war. It seems that the statement made at the end of March 2017 by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson about U.S. priorities in Syria and the country’s unwillingness to overthrow Bashar al-Assad is still valid.¹¹ For the United States, it is much more important to concentrate on fighting the ISIS in Mosul and Raqqa rather than opening another front against Bashar al-Assad. However, this is a very clear message to the Baathists and their international guarantors about the seriousness of U.S. intentions towards Syria. Despite the fact that in Moscow there was an attempt to present it

as “a victory of Russian diplomacy”, in practice this means that Washington is becoming less interested in a deal with the Kremlin on Syria on terms favorable to Russia. And its main asset in the form of al-Assad is coming less and less into demand by the West.

Therefore, despite all the dramatic events taking place around Syria in early April 2017, the Russian leadership should still be grateful to Donald Trump for the missile attack on Syria. In this case there are more advantages for Moscow than costs, and the statements of Russian politicians regarding another “betrayal” from the American leadership should be regarded as no more than rhetoric and populist slogans. That was proven by the visit of Rex Tillerson to Moscow, as well as by the interest of Vladimir Putin in meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State despite the extremely tense situation. The visit was perceived in Russia as a sign that the new U.S. administration still considers Moscow an important player and is ready to talk with Russia, and the missile attack on al-Shayarat was not intended to somehow humiliate the Kremlin or demonstrate Russia’s inability to protect its allies. Finally, Donald Trump, although acting unexpectedly, nevertheless took reasonable steps in these cases to contact Russia and warn of a missile strike.¹² In other words, all the formalities were settled.

The best scenario for Moscow would be the completion of its military campaign after the capture of Aleppo: the seizure of the largest settlement of the country could become a worthy domestic argument for the Russian leadership to announce its completion of the tasks it set itself in Syria. However, Moscow does not seem satisfied with this, probably wanting more. But the current situation forcing it to seek new victories while the opportunities for achieving victories are constantly narrowing. From this point of view, the victory of the American anti-terrorist coalition over the Islamic State in



Mosul and Raqqa would be a good occasion for Russia to declare the formal fulfillment of the tasks, even if by the hands of the West, and the end of its Syrian campaign.

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The main problem for Moscow in this case may be that its presence in Syria is becoming more profitable for Washington. Firstly, Russia is only increasing its contingent in the Middle East over time, which could damage the domestic situation in Russia. On the one hand, the Russian leadership in general managed to divert the attention of the Russian population from the deep economic crisis caused by the sanctions policy of the West, reorienting its citizens' attention to the "fight against terrorism" in the Middle East. In the Russian media space in the past two years, foreign policy issues (ensuring Russia's own security, testing the latest weapons, deterring NATO expansion, etc.) have significantly supplanted domestic challenges. On the other hand, after oil prices were fixed at an acceptable level for the Russian budget, and the economic situation in the country has stabilized, the expediency of further building up military potential in Syria is becoming less obvious. And taking into account that low-cost shale oil is expected to depress oil prices further in the future, the economic costs from its military presence in Syria will only grow for the Russian government.

Secondly, the strengthening of the Russian presence in Syria contributes to the gradual replacement of the Iranian presence in that country, which is much more profitable for both the Americans and their allies in the region: most of all, Israel and the countries of the Persian Gulf. The paradox, therefore,

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