The Importance of Syria's Counter-Insurgency in U.S. Policy on Russia

by

Lieutenant Colonel Ryan Hellerstedt
United States Army

Under the Direction of:
Colonel Bob Hamilton

United States Army War College
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Abstract

The direct involvement of Russian and U.S. forces into Syria has provided a new flashpoint for U.S.-Russian relations, but more importantly, provided several lessons learned that should inform the new U.S. administration's policy on Russia. Syria's civil war is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. The conflict has spilled into or drawn in much of the region, including Syria's Shia-centric Assad Regime allies Iran, Russia, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Opposing them are the Sunni militia and rebel groups supported by much of the Sunni Gulf Arab states, and finally a third party of U.S.-backed Syrian Kurds fighting the self-declared Caliphate of the Islamic State. Using the analysis from observations in Syria, the U.S. should develop a comprehensive national strategy that encompasses all aspects of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics, to address the broader U.S. policy on Russia. This new policy should address concerns in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the increasingly multi-polar world as China develops and exercises new national power.

The Importance of Syria's Counter-Insurgency in U.S. Policy on Russia

The U.S. and Russian operations and interests in the Syrian Civil War provide a platform through which the broader strategic relations between the two countries could improve. Thus far, however, the crisis in Syria has only proven the differences between the U.S. and Russia. The Civil War in Syria is the epitome of a volatile, uncertain, ambiguous, and complex environment: a kaleidoscope of conflicts, state and non-state actors, internal and external influences, and religious connotations. While the Sunni-Shia conflict is exacerbated in Syria, the geo-political relations between NATO members, Russia, and the neighboring Middle East nations have far greater implications. Syria's violent millennia of history, the occupation by European powers, and its modern history of a minority-led dictatorial government have all collided with the Arab Spring to present a five-year crisis that has drawn in major powers from around the globe. As Iran, Russia, and militia proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah aid the Bashar al-Assad Regime to fight against the Sunni-backed opposition forces in the western half of Syria, other Sunni and Kurdish groups, some of which are backed by the U.S. and Sunni Arab states, fight for dominance in eastern and northern Syria.

As the U.S. is drawn into the conflict through Iraq and the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), it has to consider Russian forces operating in the same space, sometimes against the same enemies and at times against each other's supported proxy groups. Both countries have to weigh international relations with Turkey, the Gulf States, Iraq, Iran, and Israel, without letting the war in Syria pit the U.S. and Russia directly against one another. United Nations mandates and other forms of politically ending the Syrian conflict have failed, and there appears to be no near-term solution to the fighting. Meanwhile, millions of refugees and displaced people flood into

Europe and neighboring countries, causing one of the largest humanitarian disasters in recent history.

This paper examines why the Syrian conflict has drawn in the U.S. and Russia, and assesses the respective interests of each. While these interests have historical relevance to the Cold War era of international relationships in the Middle East, the conflict and increase of terrorism across the globe gives the U.S. and Russia opportunities to address common issues and a need to resolve friction in Eastern Europe.

Additionally, the conflict in Syria provides many key aspects to consider as the new administration develops a strategy or strategies, which should encompass all aspects of national power, to ensuring the peace between the U.S. and Russia, assuring allies and partners in Europe, and addressing rising tensions with an increasingly multi-polar world.

New diplomatic efforts to solve the issues in Syria and Eastern Europe are critical to determining the effectiveness of the other national strategies, and must address the areas where the U.S. is willing to negotiate, where it is not willing to negotiate, and make those areas clear. The information realm is increasingly more important and the disparity of self-regulation between Russia and the West limits options. The U.S. needs to think creatively to counter Russian information and misinformation campaigns. Lessons observed and learned regarding Russia's military capacity and political agendas are critical to measuring effective ways of countering Russian aggression, but also determining where the two nations could potentially work together to solve common problems. And finally, the economic might of the U.S. and the West provide enormous

leverage if they are willing to use the differences to either incentivize or dissuade Russian policies.

Why is Syria Important? – Historical Background and the Road to War

The Syrian landscape and its people have a deep history of war, division, and external influences that still resonate in today's crisis. The eclectic demographics of Syria fluctuated after millennia of invasions and conquest. Eastern Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and a diverse blend of religious minorities such as the Druze, create a complex human terrain. The coastline is narrow, hindering strong sea trade, and the rugged interior steppes, few river valleys, and vast desert are not conducive to feeding the populace or providing border security. Prior to independence from France in 1946, Syria had only been united as an independent nation twice in the previous 2,300 years: the Seleucid Dynasty from 301 to 141 B.C., and the Umayyad Caliphate from 61 to 749 A.D.[1]

In 1916, the governments of France and Great Britain signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which laid out the post-World War I zones of French and British influence of the region that stretched from Israel to Iraq.[2] Syria fell under French influence and traditional colonial control. France and Britain originally brokered this with the cooperation of Russia. Once Russia withdrew from WWI, it removed its inclusion in the final agreement, but did not remove its interest in the region.[3]

Following Syria's independence from France in 1946, its governments were unstable and unreliable, and changed often based on military coups and political overthrows, and were marked by conflict with Syria's neighbor Israel. Syria turned over 20 different cabinets and four separate constitutions in ten years. In 1956, following the

Israeli, French and British invasion of the Sinai Peninsula, Syria signed a pact with the Russian-led Soviet Union.[4]

The Syrian pact with the Soviet Union provided the Soviets with a foothold in the Middle East to counter growing U.S. alliances in the Arab world and also provide a counter to NATO's influence through Turkey, which joined in 1951. The equipment provided through the Soviet pact provided the military and security forces in Syria with the means to concentrate power. After a brief merging of Syria with Egypt in 1958, which formed the United Arab Republic but disbanded in 1961, Syria was again racked with coups, bloody riots and civil disorder, and lost the Golan Heights to Israel during the 1967 Six Day War. To usher in the modern Syrian government, then defense minister Hafez Al-Assad led a bloodless coup and seized power between 1970-71.[5]

Hafez Al-Assad, a former pilot and commander of the Syrian Air Force, quickly gained control and organized a government structure, which helped confirm his election during the following national referendum. His Ba'ath Party formed the base of power for a coalition of parties that established elections in 14 governorates and adopted a new Constitution in 1973. Syria became a Socialist state with a secular government, but recognized Islam as the majority religion.[6]

The Assad Regime began a period of Alawite minority rule in Syria. Although a Shia-aligned minority sect from the coastal areas of Syria, the Alawites had been favored by the French as a counter-weight to the majority Sunni tribes further inland. The Alawites also were prominent figures in the Syrian military and Ba'ath Party.[7]

President Al-Assad ruled for 30 conflict-laden years, often resulting in outcomes that favored the Shia-backed Alawites and its regime elites, and not the majority Sunni

population. In 1973, Assad allied with Egypt and attacked Israel, in the Yom Kippur War, as a result of which Syria lost more territory in the Golan Heights. In 1976, Assad ordered the Syrian Army into Lebanon to intervene in the civil war there and ensure the Maronite Christians remained in power. This intervention began a long-standing relationship between the Assad Regime and Lebanon. When Israel attacked Lebanon in 1982 due to conflicts with Lebanese-based Palestinian Liberation Organization elements, Syria lost badly in the conventional fight. In the same year, Hafez ordered the military, under command of his brother Rifaat, to quell a Muslim Brotherhood uprising in the town of Hama. The resulting death toll of the Sunnis is estimated to be near 20,000.[8] In the ensuing three years, Syria worked with proxy militias, namely the Hezbollah in Lebanon. As a result, Syrian troops remained in Lebanon for 20 more years and the Assad regime continued its relationship with Hezbollah, which remains a critical Shia ally.[9]

President Hafez Al-Assad died in 2000 and the Ba'ath Party quickly facilitated the elevation to power of his son, Bashar Al-Assad. The political and government institutions Bashar inherited were weak, as Hafez deliberately designed them to compete against one another in order to keep any one particular entity or person from gaining too much power. Bashar gradually pushed aside his father's clique, mainly from the rural Alawite areas, and replaced them with his urban and social elite, which further undermined key institutions.[10]

President Bashar Al-Assad's first real international challenge came in March 2005. Following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, which many accuse Syria of masterminding, Lebanon demanded the withdrawal of Syria's 15,000

strong occupation force. [11] The Syrian forces had previously been ordered to withdraw under UN Security Council Resolution 1559, in September 2004, but had thus far ignored the order and continued to dominate Lebanese politics.[12] After demonstrations and protests from multiple nations, Syrian troops withdrew from Lebanon the following months, but Assad maintained a vital and close relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shia and Syria-friendly groups.

Under Bashar's rule, Syria became extremely important to Iran and its goal of maintaining its role as the vanguard of the Shia and establishing a Shia Crescent of power from Iran to Lebanon. Assad helped establish a strong Hezbollah military in Southern Lebanon, promoting an anti-Israel and anti-U.S. stance in the region. Together, Syria and Iran replenished Hezbollah's supply of rockets after the 2006 Hezbollah war with Israel. All of this effort to make Syria a player in regional affairs, however, did not strengthen Assad's domestic support.[13]

After taking power from his father, Bashar Al-Assad promised domestic reform to quell the growing dissatisfaction amongst Syria's Sunni population and improve the declining economic situation, which was exacerbated in 2006 by the worst drought Syria had seen in almost 900 years. Farms dried up, livestock were decimated, and rural citizens, as many as 1.5 million, were forced to move into already crowded cities to find work. Water was scarce and food prices increased.[14] Assad's limited and ineffective response fueled already simmering anger and resentment towards the regime.

Syria was not the only country to face internal domestic challenges, where the seeds of rebellion were sown during decades of despotic rulers. About the same year, 2005, in Egypt, President Hasni Mubarak's regime refused to allow the Muslim

Brotherhood to take 88 seats they won in Parliament. Mubarak's backing by the United States and other Western powers, mostly due to his anti-Iran stance and his importance in maintaining peace with Israel, did not sit well with many Arab citizens and made him look like a Western puppet.[15]

Syria's neighbor, Iraq, was embroiled in a full scale sectarian civil war a few years after the U.S. led invasion. Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other Sunni terrorist groups were railing against the perceived U.S. occupation and subsequent Shia-led government under Nuri al-Maliki. Iraqi refugees fleeing to Syria added to the already stressed environment and Syria's government refused to address the problem.

Fast forward a few years to 2010, in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, where Mohamed Bouazizi was trying to sell fruit to feed his widowed mother and six siblings. Tunisian police demanded he turn over his cart and produce because he didn't have a permit. Angered and humiliated, he set himself on fire in front of one of the government buildings. Local citizens captured the event on cell phones and it quickly spread across social media. Protests against President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime immediately erupted. The Arab Spring swelled across North Africa and into the Middle East like a tsunami, toppling governments in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and starting the civil war in Syria.[16]

Overview of the War

Syrian citizens, cramped and crowded in cities with refugees and displaced persons, little access to water, heightened food prices, a declining economy, suffering under a minority led dictatorship, and encouraged by the Arab Spring in North Africa, took to the streets and protested. When government forces captured and tortured teenagers who painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall in March 2011, protestors

filled the streets. Assad's security forces responded by shooting and killing several, which enraged the citizens of Syria, who were already a tinder-box of resentment and rebellion. By July, 2011, a civil war was well under way. By 2012, fighting reached Damascus and Aleppo.[17]

The war quickly turned into a sectarian conflict with multiple sides all fighting for different reasons. The most prominent conflict is the Shia-Sunni divide. Most of the fighting groups inside of Syria are backed by supporters of religious leanings. The Shia-aligned Alawi Assad Regime turned to its state and non-state allies for assistance. Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah began sending economic aid, military supplies, and some military advisors to help Bashar al-Assad quell the rebellion. The rebel groups, almost exclusively Sunni, turned to the Gulf States and neighboring Sunni populations for support. The Syrian Kurds had not yet become an important fighting force and remained outside of the majority of the fighting until 2013-2014, and are not aligned with the Sunni or Shia groups. Their goal remains to establish autonomy from the regime and Sunni rebels.

One of the biggest developments in the civil war occurred in 2013, when the Sunni Salafi militant group AQI changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and began taking large swaths of territory in eastern and northern Syria. ISIS funded and equipped its operations with massive armories and supplies it captured from Syrian military garrisons. ISIS quickly established its notorious reputation by beheadings, extreme Sharia law, and by fighting anyone and everyone it contacted who did not pledge allegiance to it, including Al Qaeda-aligned al-Nusra and other Sunni extremist groups. ISIS began operations to secure northern Syria to the Turkish border

by attacking the Syrian Kurds. The Sykes-Picot boundary proved irrelevant to ISIS, however, which soon increased its influence in Iraq.[18]

Since U.S. forces left Iraq in 2011, Nuri al-Maliki's Shia led government from Baghdad had increasingly disenfranchised Sunni groups in northern and western Iraq. This led to protests and Sunni groups looking for an alternative to Baghdad. Local protests turned violent and ISIS turned its attention to its old operating bases in Iraq. ISIS used the equipment, training, and resources it gained in Syria to overthrow Iraqi forces in the Sunni province Al Anbar, specifically Fallujah, in January 2014. In March, 2014, ISIS crossed the northwest border of Iraq and seized Mosul, a town of over 2 million mostly Sunni citizens. Iraqi security forces crumbled as disenfranchised Sunnis paraded and celebrated ISIS. In June 2014, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the Islamic Caliphate in Mosul, which resonated globally to marginalized and radical Sunnis. By the fall of 2014, ISIS claimed huge swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq, including the eastern, southern, and northern outskirts of Baghdad. ISIS was able to move fairly quickly through Sunni populated areas, but faced stiff resistance as it moved east and south towards Shia and Kurdish held territory. This pressured Iran to provide aid to Iraq through limited conventional forces, and to arm tens of thousands of Shia Militants in various groups. When ISIS forces attacked the Iraqi Kurds and threatened U.S. interests in Irbil, and began a genocide against a small minority group, the Yezidis, ISIS drew a U.S.-led coalition and the Iraqi Kurds into the conflict.[19]

<p style="text-align:center">U.S. Involvement and Interests</p>

U.S. interests in Iraq were fairly clear: uphold the Baghdad government and prevent the collapse of the Iraqi state. In Syria, U.S. interests were not by with and through a host national government, and the policy to this point had been non-

involvement. The U.S. backed some less-radical Sunni groups in order to counter the Assad regime, Russian, and Iranian efforts, but this backing was limited to logistics and therefore ineffective. Just after the civil war in Syria broke out, the U.S. let the Russians take the lead in brokering the arrangement to destroy and remove Assad's chemical weapons arsenals he had allegedly used against rebel and civilian targets. President Obama's realist/liberalist stance to the region became clear as he developed a Sun Tzu strategy to Syria and Iraq: use the least amount of engagement necessary to help host nation partners defeat ISIS, and encourage the regional Arab states and international community to find a satisfactory political outcome. The U.S. has no vital national interests in Syria, therefore, the Obama administration saw no reason to go to war there.

After ISIS ruthlessly attacked the Kurds in Kobane and threatened to destroy the Kurdish population in northern Syria, while it simultaneously attacked the Kurds in Iraq – and subsequently threatened American lives in Irbil, U.S. interests in Syria became clear: destroy ISIS' ability to generate combat power and attack U.S. interests in Iraq. This led the U.S. to expand airstrikes into Syria in November 2014. For several weeks, ISIS forces tried to seal the Kurdish northern border with Turkey, committing thousands of fighters to that effort. U.S. airstrikes and Turkey's opening of the border to allow Iraqi Kurd reinforcements saved Kobane and pushed ISIS forces south. This was the beginning of the U.S. – Syrian Kurd alliance, which became the primary U.S. backed force in Syria.[20]

The Syrian Peshmerga and U.S. alliance is complicated by Turkey, a NATO member and key ally who provides logistical support and basing rights for U.S.

surveillance and attack aircraft. Turkey has a long history of conflict with Kurdish separatist groups and expressed criticism at the U.S. policy of arming the Syrian Kurds and increasing their military capabilities. Although Turkey's goals in Syria are to overthrow the Assad Regime and it supports Sunni rebel groups, it does not desire an autonomous Kurdistan that stretches along its southern border in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. has had to limit its support to eradicate ISIS in Syria with its most effective fighting force, the Kurds, due to the vastly more important relationship with Turkey. As a NATO member, Turkey provided decades of balance to Soviet-backed Syria.[21]

Russian Interests and Involvement

Russian involvement in Syria is polycausal; there are three main reasons Russia is intervening in Syria to uphold the Assad Regime. First, the long standing Russian alliance with Syria provides a foothold in the Middle East and acts as a place where Russia can enter the global stage and be a counter to U.S.-backed Israel and Arab states. Second, the warm water ports in Latakia and Tartus provide access to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Third, to prevent the fall of another secular state to Sunni extremism, a concern President Vladimir Putin has expressed because of the large number of indigenous Russian Muslims and the history of conflict with Sunni extremists in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and its Volga region.[22] [23]

In September 2015, two days after Presidents Putin and Obama met in New York about coordinating military efforts against ISIS, Russian forces based out of areas near Latakia conducted air strikes against rebel held territories in central Syria. Russia claimed they were willing to partner with the U.S. to fight against ISIS' forces, and suggested their targets were against ISIS. However, Russia categorizes all rebel forces as terrorist forces and does not necessarily separate ISIS from rebel Sunni opposition

groups. This type of indiscriminate bombing sparked concern and some outrage over the last 16 months, as civilians increasingly became collateral damage from Syrian and Russian airstrikes in rebel-held territory.[24]

Russia's direct involvement with military forces slowed and eventually reversed the gains rebel groups made against Assad's forces. Although Russian forces have not succeeded in ending the conflict, they have achieved their main three goals thus far in the campaign: entered the global stage as a player in Middle East affairs, prevented rebel Sunni forces from threatening the ports at Tartus and Latakia, and ensured Bashar al-Assad's regime stays in power in the areas it controls. Additionally, Russia's air defense systems were capable of area denial to U.S. aircraft. Although it didn't enforce a no-fly zone for U.S. and coalition aircraft, it maintains the capability as possible leverage should Russian politicians desire to use it.

Russian forces in Syria guarantee the Kremlin a seat at the table for any cease-fire and conflict ending negotiations. For example, by December 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, which acknowledges the role of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), as the central platform to facilitate a political settlement in Syria.[25] The ISSG is co-chaired by the United States and Russia. Although the ISSG was ineffective, it elevated Russia to equal status with the U.S. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Federation Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, met multiple times over the summer and fall of 2016 intending to deconflict U.S. and Russian interests in Syria, but failed to make a final agreement. Likely, it is the fundamental differences in political objectives of the U.S. and Russia that prevent coordination and cooperation.[26]

Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned

In addition to achieving its political objectives, Russia used Syria as a test bed for many of its weapons platforms. Some of the lessons learned are useful for U.S. politicians and the new administration to apply towards U.S. policy on Russia. Analytical judgments on Russian logistics, main battle tanks, air defense platforms, and long range aircraft are helpful in understanding Russia's capabilities, and therefore helpful in determining military deterrent and response options to achieve political objectives.

Russia's inventory of aircraft, troops, and equipment rotated and varied depending on the missions required. The first group of aircraft in Syria included about 32 fixed wing collection, jamming, interceptor and air to ground platforms: Su-24, Su-25, Su-30. Additionally, 32 Mi-24 and Mi-8 rotary aircraft, and about 1,500 troops deployed to Syria. The initial equipment included artillery, main battle tanks, and air defense weapons. Some of these weapon systems were reinforced in December 2015, and rotated in March 2016 and again in June 2016. In January 2017, Russia maintained about 40 fixed wing aircraft, an estimated 3,000 troops, a Military Police battalion, MLRS artillery, 2 Iskander TELs, and a Coastal Missile unit in Tartus.[27]

With the equipment and military mission in Syria, Russia began rotating pilots and crews to train them in combat missions and test system durability. Since the end of the Cold War, Russian pilot training and aircraft technology have lagged behind those of its Western peer-nations. Russian analysts estimate there is a 20-year difference between Russian technology, pilot training and sustainability, and those of Western air forces. Additionally, most of the ordinance dropped in Syria is not laser or GPS guided, and due to the threat of MANPADS in rebel held areas, Russian aircraft had to release

ordnance from a high altitude. This resulted in a low-efficiency rate for munitions dropped on targets, which also resulted in much higher collateral damage.[28]

Russia's ability to sustain its forces in Syria nearly broke its naval logistical system. Russia's operations to set the theater for its military forces in Syria began in March 2015, six full months before forces began direct and unilateral operations. The Russian Navy was initially used to supply Russian forces, but quickly realized it could not sustain the operations. Most of its supply ships are 20 to 25 years old and the Navy was operating at maximum capacity within a few weeks. Russia was forced to buy or lease commercial cargo ships in order to continue supply operations. Judging by the size of the force deployed, about a brigade of combat troops and a brigade of rotary and fixed wing aircraft, Russian analysts suggest Russia's capability to deploy and sustain an expeditionary force atrophied over the last two decades and it is currently operating at its maximum force projection capability. Considering Russian-backed separatist operations in the Ukraine are land-based, it is likely Russia could not deploy any additional forces anywhere else and only surge some forces into Syria.[29]

Some of the benefits Russian forces received from operations in Syria should also be considered. First, Russia had not worked in a coalition in recent history. Forcing Russian military leaders to coordinate with Syrian, Iranian, and proxy militia groups like Hezbollah increased Russia's ability to lead and direct combined, joint operations, albeit this capability still lags severely behind those of the U.S. and its allies. Russia's use of a Mediterranean Sea-based aircraft carrier to launch strike operations also increased its much-atrophied capability from the Cold War era and illuminated technology and training gaps that Russia is likely to address in the next few years.[30]

U.S. Policy towards Russia

Current U.S. policy towards Russia focuses on deterrence through alliance with European allies and attempting to deconflict with Russia in areas that have the potential to escalate into hostile actions by either side. The policy end is to deter Russian aggression and increase opportunities for improved relations. In order to meet these objectives, there are several ways and means laid out, spurred by national interests.

The policy outlined by Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State for Eurasian Affairs in the Obama Administration, illustrates four ways and means to achieve the President's ends. The fifth is addressed by the DoD Strategy on Cyber Defense. The first of these is to deter Russian aggression through strength and unity with allied nations. In order to achieve this, the U.S. has increased military cooperation and exercises with NATO and Eastern European partners, primarily using the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) funding ($985M) from Congress in FY 2015. Additionally, the U.S. has pressed NATO allies to meet their commitment of spending two percent of their GDPs on defense forces. Only 70 percent of member nations are on track to meet this goal. In coordination with military forces, tough economic sanctions against Russia are intended to influence Russian behavior in the region and prevent further aggressions into Ukraine. Finally, through diplomatic measures, the U.S. is supporting France and Germany in their efforts to fully enforce previous Russian agreements.[31]

The second of the ways and means is to build the resilience and decrease the vulnerability of Allied nations, which aligns with the larger U.S. commitment to self-determination. The primary recipients of U.S. aid include those nations closest to Russia's borders and increasingly subject to pressure from Moscow, including Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Georgia and the Balkan states. The diverse program includes

military training and equipment, increases in funding for justice and anti-corruption systems, and economic growth. Another key aspect of this effort is to help these countries become energy-diverse and rely less on the Russian energy monopoly they were subject to for the last few decades.[32]

The third area, and possibly the most difficult, is to cooperate with Russia on shared interests. The most notable area deals with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) counter-proliferation, including nuclear weapons. Three focus areas are North Korea, the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, and the efforts in Syria. In addition to the WMD programs the U.S. has in common with Russia in Syria, the civil war has created both opportunities and challenges in working with Russia on counter-insurgency/terrorism operations and finding an acceptable lasting political solution to the conflict. The stand-up of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) has been tested daily and as mentioned, is ineffective in ceasing hostilities, but it provides a place for negotiations and communication that otherwise does not exist.[33]

Fourth, the U.S. is engaged with Russian society in various forums, mostly pro-Western businesses and individuals who are working towards a more prosperous Russian relationship with the West through educational, environmental, and cultural programs. The U.S. continuously condemns Russian laws or practices that prevent an open civil-society, a free press, and political pluralism.[34]

Fifth, the DoD program is only part of a larger cyber defense strategy to protect U.S. information systems. The increased use of cyber-attacks as political influence and weaponization of the digital cyber-realm pose a significant threat to the U.S. in almost every aspect of government and national interests. Russia has an advanced cyber

capability and one of the main goals of the DoD strategy is to be part of a larger whole-of-government dialogue with Russian military specialists in order to create stability in cyberspace.[35]

Conclusions

In order to fully address strategy options, the U.S. must be aware of Russia's goals outlined in its most recent National Security Strategy, released on December 31, 2015. This follows Russia's release of its new Military Doctrine on December 24, 2014. First, Russia's objectives (or ends) are multiple – it desires prestige and respect on the world stage, a return to a role as one of the world's great powers, to be a player in solving the world's international problems, and to grow its GDP to one of the largest in the world. One of the most prevalent themes, according to some analysts, is the document's focus on Russia's domestic agenda and less on foreign policy. One of the means and ways on Russian strategy is domestic support, unity, and a resurgence of what it means to be "Russian." Putin has taken measures to increase national unity through various mechanisms of Russian culture, religion, labor, and traditional Russian values. This strategy goes hand in hand with Russia's actions and statements of defending all ethnic Russian speakers, a claim they have made to justify their actions in Crimea and Ukraine.[36]

Russia lists a broad range of threats: global instability, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, information warfare, U.S. missile defense systems stationed abroad, and militarization of space. Russia also sees the U.S. as a primary aggressor in creating a potential flash point in Eurasia, including supporting the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, the rise of the Islamic State in the aftermath of Iraq, and sanctions against Russia, leaving out the fact the sanctions are tied to Russia's actions in Ukraine. Finally,

Russia identifies an equal threat from extremist groups inside Russia as the threats it lists from without. This may be one reason that Putin is pushing national unity, to address both threats from within and without.[37]

Using lessons learned in Syria, the new U.S. administration has several options in identifying a policy towards Russia, not confined to Syria, but focused on the broader U.S. – Russia strategic relationship. Using all instruments of national power: diplomacy, information, military, and economics, the new administration can develop a strategy to deter Russian aggression while influencing it to focus on the threat from near-peer competitors like China, and rogue states like North Korea.

Diplomatically, the U.S. has to assure its allies it is committed to their sovereignty without being drawn into a larger conflict with Russia. The Obama and Bush administrations ceded the Crimea and parts of Georgia to Russia with economic and diplomatic penalties, but essentially invited more of the same behavior while sending the signal to NATO allies that the U.S. is willing to appease Russia when pressed with conflict. In Syria, the U.S. has very little to gain by challenging Russian interests, but shares a common goal of ending ISIS' ability to establish a safe haven for extremist Islamic terrorism. One could argue the U.S. should have done more to secure Eastern Europe's sovereignty and care less about Syria's. Moving forward, the U.S. should aggressively support diplomatic efforts to end the conflict over Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine and engage Russia in diplomacy to reinforce the U.S. and NATO commitment to the Baltic states, while pointing Russia to the more existential threat of Chinese encroachment in Siberia and its increasingly aggressive South China Sea policies. Without an acceptable political solution in these areas, the likelihood of

using the other instruments of national power to cooperate, coerce, or compel Russia becomes more complex and vulnerable to Russian domestic support for Putin's policies.

Information is power. Russia's use of information to generate domestic support and influence regional and global opinion far outstrips U.S. and western information campaigns. Mostly, Russia does not limit itself to free press and striving to moral standards in truth and transparency. This gives Russia an upper hand in the information realm. The new administration should pursue policies that increasingly counter Russian information and misinformation campaigns, while promoting Western values in transparency and free press, thus not always being on its heels and ceding Russia the initiative in this domain. This requires both "offensive" and "defensive" information strategies to complement diplomatic and military strategies.

The U.S. can use Russian military lessons learned in Syria to develop a policy that leverages Western strengths against Russian weaknesses. The new policy should be adequately informed to deter or respond to Russian military policies, not only in Syria, but across the broader Eastern European Theater. Russian analysts assess the U.S. and the West are 20 years ahead of Russian military equipment, technology, and training. Moreover, Russia has no capability to project force for long periods of time, considering its logistics and fleet of air and sea craft are old and require heavy maintenance. If Russia and the West got into a conventional war, Russia would rather quickly face the decision to escalate from a losing conventional war to nuclear weapons. It does not have many options in between a short-term conventional conflict and nuclear war. This is clearly a concern of the U.S. and its allies, as Russia continues to act as a spoiler in Eurasia and the Middle East.

The new administration can firmly reassure its NATO and European allies by rebuilding military forces in Europe, specifically operational headquarters and larger force rotations in Eastern Europe. This would act as a deterrent and provide necessary flexibility for response options should Russia engage in conventional conflict.

Russian "gray zone" operations are much more difficult to address. Fighting fire with fire is one approach. The U.S. policies tend to lean towards being at war, or at peace. With Russian operations, somewhere in the middle, but below U.S. thresholds for military responses, the U.S. limits itself in the ability to counter Russian influences in Ukraine and Syria. The new administration can change policies in Eastern Europe to be similar to those in Iraq and Syria, thus allowing host and partner nations' capabilities to fight against these gray zone operators without fully engaging in conflict.

When dealing with Russia, the U.S. has to consider its position in comparison to Russian positions economically. The U.S. Gross Domestic Product is over $18 Trillion, which is over 13 times more than the Russian Federation's $1.3 Trillion. The buying power and capacity of the U.S. to economically destroy Russia, provided its allies in Europe follow suit, is devastating and Russia is far outmatched. It could not possibly keep up with the U.S. economy if war broke out between the two nations. The new administration can use the economic sanctions as a bargaining tool to influence Russian attention away from Eastern Europe and more towards ending the conflict in Syria and dealing with the rise of Chinese power.[38]To conclude, the conflict in Syria is complicated and there are no easy solutions, but it provides a place where the U.S. can analyze Russian capabilities and develop options towards a new policy on Russia. The U.S. and Russia could either radically alter their relationship and focus on common

near-peer competitors, or maintain the slow-grind status quo and focus on differences in Eurasia, the Middle East, and policies towards Iran. If the U.S. and Russia were to solve the crisis in Syria, it would require both sides to abandon their political ends concerning the Assad Regime or a transition of power. If Russia were to quit on Assad now, it would betray Iran and its allies in the Middle East and compromise its position as a global player. The U.S. would have to make a deal with Russia to continue fighting ISIS, yet convince Gulf States and other allies to stop aiding Sunni opposition groups fighting against Iran, which may decide not to participate in any peace process and continue defending Shia interests.

Somehow, Russia continues to see itself on par with the U.S. in a multi-polar world, yet it lacks the economic and military capability as a near-competitor. As long as Russia sees the West as a threat, it will continue to find partners in its attempts to balance power. If the West were to find common ground with Russia and co-opt some of its demands as a global player, the two entities could focus on balancing power with the rise of mega-cities in central and east Asia. If Russia would stop looking West towards Europe and the U.S., it could focus efforts on shoring up its incredibly vast boundaries with China, North Korea and Central Asian states, its infrastructure, and maximize efficiencies in its natural resources. The new U.S. administration has opportunities across the instruments of national power to influence a better U.S. Russian relationship and focus on common enemies, while being careful not to incite a Thucydides Trap scenario with a rising Chinese power.

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