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Are the US and Russia Reaching Understandings about Syria?

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Recent weeks have seen a series of intensive contacts on the international scene about the Syrian crisis, including meetings between Western officials and the Syrian opposition; Russian contacts with the Syrian regime (including a visit by Syrian Foreign Minister Muallem to Russia) and with the leaders of the Syrian opposition; and a series of high level Russian-American contacts, including a meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry. Presidents Putin and Obama, who have recently spoken on the phone, are expected to meet in the near future. In addition, messages to the effect that both sides are working to promote a settlement in Syria have been disseminated of late, and there are new American decisions on limited cooperation with the Syrian opposition.

The situation on the ground in Syria has remained largely unchanged, and despite an ongoing exchange of blows, it is characterized by deadlock. At the same time, certain changes in mood are evident, and there is growing expectation of increasing outside intervention to find a solution.

In the meantime, Russia persists in its familiar policy of providing political and military aid, albeit controlled, to the Assad regime. Joining its efforts of recent weeks to exert leverage by isolating the Syrian theater of operations is its deployment of a significant naval presence along the Syrian coast, accompanied by messages that this is a permanent deployment that demonstrates Russia's long term intentions in the Middle East. Russia backs not only the Syrian regime, but also the Shiite axis in general (Iran, Syria, Hizbollah), thereby seeking to block the Sunni challenge, which in Russia's understanding is backed by the West, clashes with the Shiite system, and threatens Russia's regional position and perhaps its national security as well. Russia's policy in the region implemented over the past eighteen months aims to exploit the Syrian crisis to promote its regional goals, namely, to neutralize the effort by the Sunni-Western axis to push Russia out of the Middle East, and its global goals, to transform the Syrian crisis into a lever of pressure on the United States to promote issues critical to Russia. Currently, however, relations between the United States and Russia have recently

deteriorated, and little is left of the understandings built in the framework of the “reset” policy. Russia now feels challenged by NATO in areas essential to its interests, including NATO’s renewed wish to place an anti-missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

However, the use of the Syrian lever, although it has proven its effectiveness in extending the life of the Assad regime, has not succeeded, at least until recently, in attaining the desired Russian influence on US policy in the Middle East. It appears that these and other considerations are behind the new Russian international activism, particularly in the Middle East, which is an intensive effort to tailor new solutions to an increasingly complicated situation. Concomitantly, certain recent changes are evident in US foreign policy, including toward Syria. The background to these changes is the accumulation of several apparently connected factors: a reexamination of aspects of foreign policy for President Obama’s second term; disappointment with the negative developments in Syria, both in the direct context of the war, which is lasting longer than expected, and concerning the destructive influence of Russian involvement in Syria and among the Shiites in general; and the Syrian opposition’s move toward Islamization.

These and other emerging considerations were likely behind the new round of contacts between the United States and Russia. The series of high level meetings noted above perhaps bespeaks a real intention to achieve understandings between Russia and the United States concerning the future of the Syrian regime. While there is no certainty that the parties have already reached final understandings, it appears that the rhetorical tones and the actions on the ground (such as the new decisions by the United States concerning controlled aid to the Syrian opposition, possibly in coordination with Russia) reflect changes in their approach. In any event, Russian officials no longer dismiss the possibility, until recently vigorously rejected, that a formula will be found allowing Assad to depart and a new government to be established that would incorporate opposition elements and moderate elements from the current regime. Of course this requires not only an understanding between Russia and the United States but also the actors in Syria, who have a complicated history, and there is no certainty that they are still under control.

It is clear, however, that Russian concessions to the Americans in Syria, if they materialize, will be made only in exchange for US reciprocity on other issues that are important to Russia. These comprise a long wish-list, the gist of which is a kind of return to the reset plan, and include the new American deployment in Euro-Asia, which has geopolitical implications for Russia, and the most immediate and urgent subject, the stationing of an anti-missile defense system in Eastern Europe. Of course if a settlement on Syria is not found in the current round of contacts, the Russian message about going all the way, including preparations for the dismantling of the state, is valid.

Along with their activity on the Syrian issue, the Russians have recently attempted to promote action along other channels in the Middle East. The Iranian issue, which also involves a longstanding American-Russian dispute because of Russia's ambivalent position, is of major importance. Contacts with other states in the region are underway, and deals with Qatar and Bahrain are under consideration. Russia recently has shown noticeable interest in reviving the Israeli-Palestinian channel, and the assumption is that restarting the negotiations will provide them with welcome dividends. All of these developments indicate that Russia is still far from ceding its position in the region.

Thus while it is still not certain that a compromise will be reached on Syria's future, it appears that there has been an awakening and perhaps even progress on this issue, at least in the dialogue between the major powers. Of course it is still too early to predict the events that will take place in Syria, where even the Russians have recently been at a loss. However, it seems as if the subject has matured to the point that outside actors, first and foremost Russia and the United States, are willing to combine their efforts to forge a way out of the imbroglio. If this occurs, and the situation does not get out of hand, this would be a considerable achievement for Russia, which has succeeded in taking advantage of the Syrian crisis while playing a complex game in the region. Russian success could be crowned with an arrangement whereby it remains in the region even after the change of regime in Syria, as well as payment in the global arena (on the issue of ballistic missile defense or other issues).

