

Syria, Black Swans and International Power

By John Bruni

Upon reading *'The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable'* by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, I am drawn to re-examine the highly improbable,



according to public statements and media speculation, with respect to Syria and the anticipated Russo-American plan to disarm the civil war wracked country from its chemical weapons stockpile.

According to the standard international narrative 'a tired international behemoth', the United States, drained psychologically and financially after a decade of war in the unforgiving lands of Afghanistan and Iraq, is in no position to launch another war in the Middle East. President Obama favours a multi-lateral diplomatic solution to the problem of Syria's chemical weapons – weapons that UN weapons inspectors concur had been recently used by the government in its counter-offensive against rebel forces (August 21).¹ In this time of obvious decline in American fortunes, fortuitously for Syria, Russia, a long-time friend of the Alawite Syrian republican dynasty of Bashar al-Assad, steps in and proposes a diplomatic opening which both Damascus and

Washington accept. President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, agreed to disclose the locations of his country's sole strategic deterrent, its chemical weapons. Simple? Not so!

While many pundits agree that Washington is uneasy about this agreement, we should not dismiss the fact that America, in spite of being war-weary, is still the number one military power on Earth. We should be under no illusion that the government of Vladimir Putin, while certainly more stable and effective than that of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, is weak in historical terms. Today's Moscow is not the Moscow of the Soviet Union. Putin's military was strained during its minor campaign in South Ossetia (2008), a breakaway Georgian province across the border.² Putin's Russia has not the strategic power projection of the USSR of old, nor has it the desire to protect friends and allies beyond its 'near abroad', the Russian Diaspora on the southern rim of the Central Asian steppes. Yes, Russia is a key energy supplier to Europe and can threaten to turn off the spigot in a fit of rage.³ However, it cannot over-play this hand. Doing so would irreparably harm Russian long-term commercial interests in Western Europe. Western capital flight out of Russia would in effect destroy that country's economy.

There are significant risks all round.

Russia has a major naval base in Port Tartus (northwest Syria). It is its only strategic naval asset in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Would Moscow be willing to chance its already fragile relations with the US over this asset? In a post-heroic and post-ideological age where money governs most human transactions and pragmatism rules, Port Tartus could be (though perhaps reluctantly) cut loose by Moscow well before Russia feels compelled to stretch its military resources to confront US power in the Levant.⁴

The Obama administration has, curiously, allowed itself to be played by the Russians over Syria. I use the word ‘curiously’ because I find it odd that the most powerful country on Earth looks hesitant and faltering in the eyes of the international community. Putin has certainly annoyed Washington ever since his ascension to power in 2000. He has turned the Russian Federation into a kind of Soviet Union ‘lite’, or at least has given this impression. But under the cover



of a chastened US, perfectly summarised in the ‘hang-dog’ expression of US Secretary of State, John Kerry, could all

of this diplomatic manoeuvring be a cover for something more? The US Navy and Air Force have deployed enough firepower to the Middle East to degrade the Syrian armed forces and take out suspected chemical weapons sites. This would require no boots on the ground. And, so long as Obama doesn’t flinch and ends any standoff missile and air campaign sooner rather than later, he

could decisively tilt the civil war in Syria in favour of rebel forces. The US would not even have to pay for such a mission. Gulf Arab governments, long-time enemies of Alawite Syria, have indicated that if the Americans conduct a military strike, they would pay for it. With such a favourable circumstance, why is Washington dithering? Why doesn’t Obama use his presidential prerogative and launch a strike in the shadow of what the UN has now openly called a ‘war crime’?⁵

Timing.

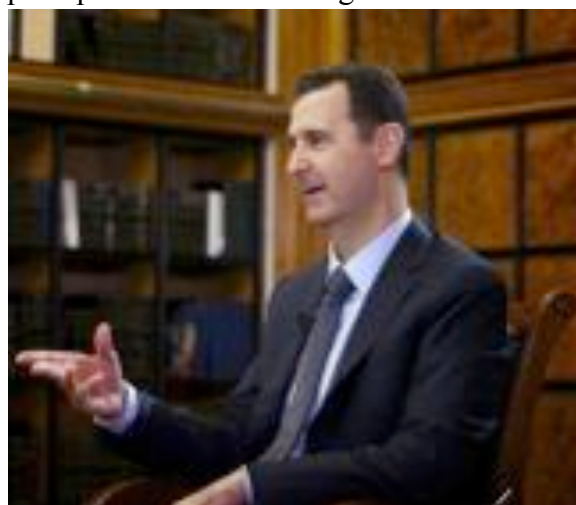
And this is when the Black Swan appears. While everyone is talking about the political minutiae and practicality of the Russo-American disarmament framework – a cumbersome beast indeed – plans might already be afoot to launch a standoff strike. All that is required is target information. US geospatial assets are excellent vehicles for ascertaining where many things are on the ground, but they are not perfect. Satellite information comes in ‘in near-real time’, not ‘real time’. Human intelligence is hard to pilfer in an active civil war, especially one being fought in built-up urban areas. Up to now, Syria has scattered its mobile chemical weapon delivery systems and stockpiles, but under the terms of the Geneva disarmament agreement, Damascus is, in under a week (at the time of writing), to hand over the locations of all its chemical weapons assets. With this information, the US can more accurately target missile and air strikes, while at the same time, create a better collateral damage profile. This hypothesis is

bold and would catch the international community by surprise. It would humble Moscow and at the same time tear a hole in the Syrian military from which it may never recover. And, if the US were truly reticent about going ahead with such a plan, they could sub-contract it to the Israelis. The Israelis have a record of successfully penetrating Syrian airspace and striking targets deep within that country. The Israelis and Gulf Arabs have, over recent years, built up a pragmatic relationship because they share very real concerns about Iran and Alawite Syria – Assad's Syria is considered by Israel and the Gulf Arab capitals as being an extension of Iranian power in the Levantine and therefore a danger to them both.

The only other rational alternative to the above hypothesis is to move ahead with the proposed misshapen disarmament process, the likes of which has never been attempted before.

It will result in the US being the chastened giant, and Russia the mouse that roared. It may also expose weapons inspectors to kidnapping, assassination and assault by both sides of the Syrian imbroglio. Inadequate protection details, either via the UN or private security, will probably raise the ire of advocates for a stronger presence on the ground, requiring large contingents of soldiers – the very thing the US and its supporters fear. Mission-creep would take care of the rest. Unintended consequences – the Black Swans – that might come from this, would make for a seriously unstable

and contentious time. But what if the US supports diplomacy only to launch a surprise attack on Syria via its standoff air and naval capability upon receipt of accurate and verifiable locations of Syrian chemical weapons and operational delivery systems, courtesy of the Syrian government? The Black Swan in this scenario would be that America would be resurgent and Obama's legacy as a leader repaired both domestically and internationally. The US might never again be considered trustworthy, but then again, there is already little trust between the political hierarchy in Moscow and Washington. The US has more to gain by betraying Russia rather than going along with Russia. Going along would, in time, bring about a perceived collapse of American power, ushering in a political and strategic vacuum that Moscow could perhaps partially fill. This certainly cannot be in America's national interest, nor in the longer-term interest of America's many allies, all of whom are highly dependent on perceptions of US strength for their own



strategic positioning. As for Assad, for the past two years he's been playing for time.

Syrian government forces may be presently winning battles and rolling back rebel forces, but in the medium to long term the tide is against Assad and the Alawite clan he rules.⁶ Assad's only friend in the region is Iran, and then he has his loose affiliation with Russia. Assad has and can call on the support of southern Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy, and to a lesser extent the Palestinian resistance group Hamas in the Gaza Strip. But they are small groups that have to contend with their own complex threat profile which includes Israel, the US, the Lebanese government, the Egyptian government and the hostile collective of the Gulf Arab states. So it is questionable just how much effort they can continue to expend in saving Assad, while defending themselves from their long list of enemies. What might be expected once the Assad regime crumbles in Damascus is the displacement, persecution and possible genocide of Alawites and their non-Sunni Muslim collaborators. Such a horror scenario may happen as a prelude to the eventual break-up of Syria into a Sunni Muslim state and a smaller Alawite state. This is certainly a possibility that would indeed be a Black Swan of the highest order. But as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in reference to his character Sherlock Holmes once wrote: "*whenever you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth*".

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

Images Accessed: 18/09/2013

Kerry-Lavrov in Geneva

http://www.thehindu.com/multimedia/dynamic/01584/Kerry-Lavrov_1584542g.jpg

Kerry in Geneva

http://www.globalpost.com/sites/default/files/imagecache/gp3_small_article/photos/2013-September/175868359.jpg

Assad image

<http://s1.reutersmedia.net/resources/r/?m=02&d=20130917&t=2&id=794835123&w=460&fh=&fw=&ll=&pl=&r=CBRE98G0VCA00>

ENDNOTES:

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² Klein M., *Russia's Military Capabilities: "Great Power" Ambitions and Reality*, SWP Research Paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, October 2009

³ Barysch K (ed.), *Pipelines, Politics and Power: The Future of EU-Russian Energy Relations*, Centre for European Reform, London, 2009

⁴ Gardner F., *How vital is Syria's Tartus port to Russia?* BBC News, Middle East, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18616191> 27/06/2012, date accessed: 18/09/2013

⁵ AAP, *Ban calls Syria chemical weapons a war crime*, Australian Financial Review, http://www.afr.com/p/world/ban_calls_syria_chemical_weapons_6mZL11VgGHm6UTMs4Lfx5J 17/09/2013, date accessed: 18/09/2013

⁶ Hubbard B., *Momentum Shifts in Syria, Bolstering Assad's Position*, The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/18/world/middleeast/momentum-shifts-in-syria-bolstering-assads-position.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 17/07/2013, date accessed: 18/09/2013