

Policy Recommendation to the Syrian Civil War

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### ABSTRACT

The war in Syria is an ongoing conflict and an opportunity that the United States is squandering away to posture itself in an advantageous position for the inevitable and impending Cold War Two. Thirty years after the collapse of Soviet Union during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Moscow has reestablished their national power in the global arena despite their limitations. Meanwhile, the U.S. gets distracted with low intensity conflicts around the world to include the so-called “global war on terror” with minimal achievement to show for. Syria is but a pawn to offset the rising Bear, instead the U.S. is choosing the very side of the Syrian Civil War that the country had fought against since 9/11.

Armed conflict is the physical manifestation of policy to achieve a national goal. Public support for armed conflict can differ significantly from the reality to achieve a national strategic objective. War, being a destructive rather than creative action, is expensive. War without appropriation is no war at all. Consequently, there is often a significant distance between the world as it really exists and the world as it is imagined to exist. In the case of Syria, the popular dialogue in the West addresses events in isolation of global context and observes a number of built-in assumptions about national motivations for action. In short, the Western dialogue concerning Syria is based on a Syria that exists in the mind that pleases Western egos, not the actual Syria that exists on Earth with preexisting culture and geography. The most ready example of such built-in assumptions is the unstated yet near-universally understood point that American public perception concerning intervention – be it open war or military action labeled in a more palatable manner – ought to provide assistance to the rebels and not the government. The public discourse has not only avoided any discussion concerning what actions may or may not be in the national interest, but has gone as far as making the assumption that military action should be motivated by sentiment and humanitarian intentions alone. When viewed in the context of global geopolitics, a strong case can be made for the United States to intervene on the side of the Syrian government, not the rebels. Further, a strong historical case can be made that American wars motivated by sentiment tend to result in humanitarian catastrophe while American wars motivated by national interest tend to have incidentally “good” results from a moral perspective. An example of this would be Operation Desert Storm in 1991, when the true intent is to protect American trades in the region, not for the sake of Kuwaiti freedom. Fortunately, politics is neither a turn-based nor a zero-sum game and Washington still has the opportunity to take actions, which are both nationally advantageous and politically sustainable.

The world is often organized in a polar manner with two main players whose interests within their sphere of influence overwhelm whatever influence minor players would project regionally under more complex conditions. From a global standpoint this struggle is usually between the East and the West, and typically the East is a land power and the West is a naval one. Russia, China, Persia, the Ottoman-Turks, and Germany have all played the role of the Eastern power with supremacy on land warfare, while the U.S., France, Japan, England, and Ancient Greece have played the typical Western power role and tended to demonstrate naval supremacy.

Between England and France, land power in the 1800s belonged to France. However, in the fight between France and Russia, France was a western naval power when compared to the land and ice-locked Russia. Instead of playing to France’s geographic strengths Napoleon played to its weakness, and in doing so placed his armies on the wrong side of Sun Tzu’s advice concerning extended supply chains and picking the place of battle (Sun, 1971). That is why it is important that decision makers in the U.S. must understand and play to its naval strength and not get into prolonged ground warfare with historical land powers.

In the current day Middle East, as in the Cold War, global polarity is the main factor underlying regional events. For example, while the sectarian struggle between

Sunni and Shia has existed almost since the death of Mohammed, predating the existence of both the United States and modern Russia, the Sunni and Shia when viewed as political factions demonstrate near uniform organization along the lines of American and Russian interest. After World War II Russia and the U.S., playing the role of East and West, overwhelmed the regional interests of existing factions the world over. For the Sunni and Shia to continue their centuries-old struggle each had to pick a superpower to align with or risk facing an opposition uniquely reinforced by outside sponsorship. The global situation today, as in the Cold War, is once again one of polarity between East and West, and once again the main players are the United States and Russia. It is important for decision makers to understand and consider carefully the geopolitical imperatives of both the U.S. and Russia when evaluating courses of action in Syria – if for no other reason than the various factions in Syria and the Russians themselves certainly are.

The first imperative of the U.S. is to take full advantage of its favorable geography by fostering a free market. This implies that private rights to free trade and personal liberty must be taken for granted by the population. Without the creative force of the free market in effect the government would be bogged down internally in administering a command economy in geography far too complex to administer effectively by central authority and this would preclude any opportunity to project power externally. From this perspective the U.S. Constitution is a document that is principally aimed at safeguarding Washington's first imperative and incidentally providing personal freedom for Americans. American geographic blessings extend beyond economy, however. Once Washington has secured territorial integrity from coast to coast the need for buffer zones and strategic depth is removed and the North American continent becomes a natural bastion with two oceans as buffer zones insulating the country from European, African, and Asian affairs. Once the U.S. mainland is secured, the next imperative is for the U.S. to maintain political dominance of the Americas: North, Central, and South. This includes preventing non-American powers from maintaining a foothold that can creep up to threaten U.S. hegemony in its own backyard. Being buffered by two oceans and secured to the north and south the U.S. becomes a natural naval power. The next imperative is for the U.S. to leverage and extend its naval influence to gain dominance of the world's oceans and thereby promote free trade in its own interest as well as to raise the entry cost to credible naval competition beyond reason. Once dominance of the oceans is achieved achievement-based imperatives are exhausted and the next imperative becomes disruptive in nature: to prevent any single power from consolidating influence to the point that it becomes a regional hegemon and potential superpower. From this perspective it is easy to identify that Russia, the only player in any region to achieve local hegemony, has been the natural opponent of the U.S. since the end of World War II.

Cold and famine is a reality to Russians, and cold, hungry Russians are prone to revolution (Golubev, 2004). Food is a difficult commodity to market in Russia, not just because of a short growing season near Moscow, but because Russia has an almost complete lack of natural transportation infrastructure (Golubev, 2004). As a result, the first geopolitical imperative of Russia is to strong arm the fertile Ukraine to take a hit on profit and sell food to Moscow – a place that is difficult to transport food to overland –

instead of selling it down the waterways to Mediterranean and European powers. This implies that Russia must create a command economy by creating internal security organs to stifle personal freedom and prevent a free market from taking hold. The heart of Russia is Moscow, but Moscow itself is flat, forested and entirely void of natural barriers. Consequently, Moscow's second geopolitical imperative is to create vast buffer zones by expanding the borders of Russia or its sphere of influence at least as far east as the Ural Mountains, south as far as the Caucasus Mountains, southwest to the line extending from the Black Sea to Poland, and gain dominance over Poland and Sweden. After creating buffer zones Russia's next imperative is to gain access to waterways. This is an extremely difficult task for the Russians, as all Russian rivers but the Volga run north to the Arctic. The path to ocean access from the Volga itself faces a series of insurmountable geographic barriers: the Kerch Strait, the Bosphorus Strait, and alternately the Suez Canal or Gibraltar. With the path to naval dominance so costly, Russia's next geopolitical imperative turns from one of achievement to one of disruption: preventing foreign powers from interrupting an economy, which, by necessity, is directed by central authority.

The reality is that U.S. involvement in Syria is not about the perception of moral obligation to human rights. It is about the polar struggle with Russia. Syria is currently going through another Sunni versus Shia struggle between Bashir al-Assad, who is an Alawite, a branch of Shia, and the Sunni majority, which existed since his father, Hafez al-Assad, took power in 1971 (Wood, 2012). Any operations to support Islamic rebels in Syria risks over-commitment of American forces in a land-locked country that is geopolitically insignificant to the US, just like Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade. Such over-commitment happens to play directly to Russia's standing imperative to disrupt American focus on its own goals. Instead of following the Russian script and bogging the U.S. down in yet another Middle Eastern quagmire Washington could use the situation in Syria as an opportunity to create an opening with Iran, a fellow Shia nation that sponsors Hezbollah and the traditional regional hegemon.

For the last decade, the U.S. Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has been fought against groups, which follow an extreme form of Sunni Islam called Wahhabism. Wahhabists consider their faith to be the purest form of Islam and follow a literal interpretation of Quranic calls for "Jihad" (The Islamic Supreme Council of America, 2014). The Quran identifies two principal threats to the Caliphate and Islamic world peace: those with a misguided belief in Allah and the non-believers (The Islamic Supreme Council of America, 2014). The greater threat of the two is the "misguided" ones because they skewed the words of Mohammed and Allah, which is worse than "ignorant non-believers" (Mutahhari, Question 13: Non-Muslims and Hell). By taking the side of the Syrian rebels the U.S. is siding with the same groups it was recently at open war with in Iraq – a side which is not only, for its part, still an overt enemy of the U.S., but can provide no guarantee that it would be any more organized or humanitarian than the al-Assad regime were it to come to power. By allowing our moral assumptions to guide our actions and automatically game-saying Russia's support of al-Assad the U.S. is playing into the hands of Vladimir Putin by undermining U.S. interests with the goal of maintaining "moral authority".

The best play for the U.S. is to support the al-Assad regime. Bashir al-Assad is desperately trying to remain in power in Syria and the US can step in to facilitate that. In return Syria can create an opening for the U.S. with Iran. Iran is key terrain for both the U.S. and Russia – for the U.S. a sanctioned Iran acts as a cork in the bottle of Central Asian energy reserves, and for Russia a strong Iran is a regional competitor which must be kept weak.

Before the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran was a U.S. ally. This diplomatic relationship denied Russian access to the Arabian Sea and prevented a more convenient route for future pipeline projects in the south. Rather than shipping oil and natural gas across the Caspian Sea to be sold in Iranian ports, Soviets were forced to spend money to build costly pipelines going west to circumvent the most direct and cost efficient trade route through Iran. After the revolution, Iran was unwillingly forced to align itself with the Soviets. U.S. responded with sanctions and embargos that prevented both the Soviets and Iran from trade access into the Arabian Sea. Soviet Union countered the sanctions by providing nuclear technologies to Iran for the purpose of disrupting U.S. diplomatic influence in the region.

Current events in Syria can be used as an opportunity to give Iran the chance to realign itself with its natural ally, the U.S., and distance itself politically from its primary regional rival, Russia. The reason is because Russia is an economic competitor in oil and natural gas export to Iran. By aligning itself with the U.S., Iran can contain Russian expansion in Central Asia, because “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Al-Assad’s Alawite affiliation and Iran share a common bond in religious beliefs, so there is a natural affinity for the two to be allies with each other to counter the Sunni presence in the region. Al-Assad has supported the Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy (In Syria's Sectarian Battle, Who Are The Alawites?, 2012). This relationship has proven effective in the past in dealing with Lebanon, and now the current civil war (Taheri, 2014).

It is important to understand that there are two different sets of realities concerning Syria. It is in the interest of the U.S. to side with al-Assad as a catalyst to win over Iran and ultimately undermine Russia. This can offset Vladimir Putin’s political play in temporarily aligning with Syria, because the traditional playbook for the U.S. and Russia is to side with the opposition. However, decision makers must act on this position with public perception in mind. This runs into the risk of marginalizing the Sunni complex centered on Saudi Arabia’s influence.

Saudi Arabia has already publicly denounced the U.S. over the lack of commitment in supporting the Islamic rebels in Syria (Associated Press, 2013). This relationship strain with Saudi Arabia can undermine the long and established effort in GWOT in the short term. Meanwhile, Turkey continues to express frustration with refugees along the Syrian border, but that situation is unlikely to change whether the U.S. gets involved or not (Zalewski, 2013). With nothing to lose that isn’t already lost and a valuable regional realignment to gain, it is practical for the U.S. to risk short-term fallout in the interest of long-term strategic benefit in siding with al-Assad.

At home, Congress and the Obama Administration run into risks in terms of popularity and votes. Rhetoric of the media and Bush Administration labeled Iran as the “Axis of Evil” and demonized countries like Syria and Iran that can be in reality beneficial to the U.S (Friedman, 2013). The significant events that the American public remembers are the Iran Hostage Crisis, Iranian nuclear programs, the support to terrorist groups in the Iraq and Afghanistan War, Arab Spring, and the use of chemical weapons by al-Assad. Reshaping public perception of Iran and the Syrian government is a major challenge that cannot be overcome without considerable effort. Decision makers must be able to come up with a palatable dialogue that can sell the American people on the idea of Shia factional realignment and give legitimacy to the Obama Administration. With no elections left in Obama’s future he is primarily concerned with leaving a legacy. Foreign policy is where an American President has the most authority and being the one to “open Iran” could be sold to the Executive as a solid play.

The other perception that the U.S. must be mindful of is the legitimacy of al-Assad and Iran to their own people. There must be an “out” for their government to use as a legitimate reason for reversing polarity and suddenly becoming allies with the U.S. and thereby necessary adversaries of Russia. Otherwise, any efforts to force the issue will not gain traction, which ultimately undercuts U.S. efforts to undermine the Russians.

Events in Syria are about global polarity, whether the Western public is willing to see that or not. From the perspective of the U.S. this means that involvement in Syria must be understood as a play in the greater game against the Russians, not as an action taken for the sake of Syria itself. Al-Assad has already proven in the past that he is a credible power and can provide a singular political focus to Syria unlike his untested, fragmented Islamic rebel contemporaries. The U.S. has already missed a few beats and let the Russians dictate the tune in Syria, but if properly managed the current situation provides an opportunity to neutralize Moscow’s recent advances, gain an opening with Iran, and undermine the Russian Bear. The United States is strong but decision makers must start posturing the country to respond to a rising Russia. Syria is a good place to start.



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