

Syria, another failure by the US-led alliance

By Tom Switzer, The Australian, 1 October 2015

Since Russia's incursion into Ukraine 18 months ago, the West has indulged in the rhetoric of moral indignation, punished Moscow with economic sanctions and treated Vladimir Putin as a pariah in world affairs. "Russia is isolated with its economy in tatters," President Barack Obama declared in January. "That's how America leads — not with bluster but with persistent, steady resolve."

Somebody forgot to tell the Russian President. Putin's address to the UN General Assembly this week, following his lightning military deployment to Syria, marks Russia's resurgence on the global stage. The Russians, far from being marginalised in international relations, are playing a weak hand rather skilfully and are being allowed to do so because of considerable ineptitude and vacillation on the part of the Obama administration.

The upshot is that Washington will have to take the Kremlin far more seriously in the future.

Russia's intervention in Syria

This is not just because Putin's support for the embattled Assad regime will help degrade and destroy Islamic State jihadists in a four-year civil war that has claimed nearly 250,000 lives and displaced more than nine million people. Rather, Russia's intervention in Syria shows how rational Moscow's concerns over Western policy in the Middle East are, and that the Obama administration had better start treating it like the great power it still is.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Moscow voluntarily jettisoned the Warsaw Pact and acquiesced in the expansion of NATO and the EU on to the frontiers of the former Soviet Union. But the limits of Russia's post-Cold War retreat have been evident since the Western-backed coup against a pro-Russian ally in Kiev in February last year. Putin has played hardball to protect what Russia has deemed as its sphere of influence in the Baltics long before Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin appeared on the scene. And in the Middle East it is determined to protect what it perceives as its vital interests.

Putin fears that if Bashar al-Assad's regime falls, Russia's presence in western Syria and its strategic military bases on the Mediterranean will be gone. That is why he has sent tanks, warships, fighter jets and troops to bolster the regime, which has faced a troop shortage and loss of towns as it seeks to maintain Alawite rule over an overwhelming Sunni majority.

Putin is positioning Russia again as a key player in the Middle East

And by reaching an understanding with Syria as well as Iraq and Iran to share intelligence about Islamic State, Putin is positioning Russia again as a key player in the Middle East, and one that is more willing than the West to defeat Sunni jihadists. In the process, he has exposed the shortcomings of the White House's policy towards Syria.

Until recently, the prevailing wisdom held that the Assad regime — the nemesis of Sunni militants — was on the verge of collapse, an outcome that Washington, London and Canberra had enthusiastically encouraged for much of the past four years. And although Malcolm Turnbull and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop now recognise that Assad must be part of any

negotiated political solution, the Obama administration continues to insist that any resolution of the conflict must lead to the exit of the dictator.

Washington's futile attempts to destroy the Sunni jihadist network

US Secretary of State John Kerry warns Russia's continued support for Assad "risks exacerbating and extending the conflict" and will undermine "our shared goal of fighting extremism". British Chancellor George Osborne goes so far as to say the West's aim should be to defeat both Assad and Islamic State. But given Washington's futile attempts to destroy the Sunni jihadist network during the past year, most seasoned observers of the Syrian crisis are entitled to think that such strategies are manifest madness.

The consequences of removing Assad would be dire

The consequences of removing Assad would be dire. The regime would collapse and its Alawite army would crumble. Sunni jihadists such as Islamic State and al-Qa'ida's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, also known as al-Nusra Front, would exploit the security vacuum and dominate all of Syria. The ethnic minorities — the Alawites, Shi'ites and Syrian Christians — would be massacred. And there would be the flight of millions more refugees into Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

If we are to avoid these horrific outcomes, Russia will have to play a central and positive role. It has had significant influence in Damascus during the past half century; indeed, many Syrian military officers have received training in Moscow. Russia's navy and advanced anti-aircraft missile systems are based along the Mediterranean. It's likely to deploy ground troops to the eastern coast. And Moscow has recognised that notwithstanding Assad's brutal conduct, his regime is fighting the jihadists that Western leaders repeatedly say pose a grave and present danger to the world.

Obama says the US would work with any nation to end the fighting in Syria. But to engage Russia, the West needs to change its policy approach substantially. Alas, the prevailing Russophobia in Washington and Brussels remains a serious obstacle in the path of reaching accommodation with Moscow.

Most Crimeans are glad to be part of Russia

The problem in Ukraine is not related to a revival of the Soviet empire, as some hyperventilating politicians and pundits argue. The problem is the widespread Western failure to recognise an old truth of geopolitics: that a great power fights tooth and nail to protect vital security interests in its near abroad. Take Ukraine: it is a conduit for Russian exports to Europe and covers a huge terrain that the French and Germans crossed to attack Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most Crimeans are glad to be part of the country they called home from Catherine's rule to that of Nikita Khrushchev.

From Moscow's standpoint, the expansion of NATO and the EU into Russia's traditional sphere of influence, taken together with efforts to promote democracy, is akin to Moscow expanding military alliances into Central America. Some may respond by saying that Ukraine, however ethnically and politically divided it remains, has every right to join the West. But did communist Cuba have a right to seek political and military ties with the Soviet Union in 1962?

Not from Washington's perspective. Does Taiwan have a right to seek nationhood? Not from Beijing's perspective.

A weak, inept and cautious Obama administration

This is a shame, but it is the way the world works, and always has. Not only does Putin know it, he calculates that a weak, inept and cautious Obama administration won't push the issue despite the dire threats and warnings from congress and the Pentagon.

And so it was inevitable that the Russians would push back in the Baltics, first to secure the Crimean peninsula, the traditional home of the Russian Black Sea fleet (which Russian intelligence feared would become a NATO base), then to destabilise Ukraine with the aim of persuading Kiev's anti-Russian regime to protect the minority rights of ethnic Russians and maintain its status as a buffer state.

US-British aligned Sunni states aided and abetted the Sunni rebellion

As for Syria, the problem here is not the Russians — or even Iran's Shia crescent of Damascus, Baghdad, Hezbollah and the Yemeni rebels. After all, they're committed to fighting Sunni jihadists. The problem is that US-British aligned Sunni states — Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arabs — have aided and abetted the Sunni rebellion that has morphed into Sunni jihadism. Yet these reactionary regimes still have the temerity to call for Assad's ouster. Following regime change, we're told, a US-led coalition of Arabs and Turks can create a peaceful and prosperous Syria.

Leave aside the fact Assad's support stems not just from Moscow and Tehran but also from Syria's military, political and business elites, including many urban Sunnis. Assad is a brutal tyrant. He has used chemical weapons against his own people (*Editor's note: to be balanced, it should be noted there was as much evidence that the chemical weapons came from Western sources as false flags. The facts are unlikely to ever emerge*). And he has launched relentless barrel bombs in rebel areas. But he is more popular than ever in the one-third of Syria his regime still controls (which happens to be the major cities and the coastland). That is largely because many know his demise would lead to widespread ethnic cleansing.

The idea that Assad's fall would lead to something approaching a peaceful transition of power is as delusional as the neo-conservative views about Iraq and Libya in 2003 and 2011 respectively. The downfall of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, it was confidently asserted, would lead to viable democratic states. If anything, both post-Saddam Iraq and post-Gaddafi Libya are failed states that have attracted terrorists like flies to a dying animal.

Syria is another artificial state

As in the case of Iraq, Syria is an artificial state and an ethnically divided society created out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. In both nations the invasion and civil war, respectively, have unleashed centrifugal forces that are eroding political structures and borders that have prevailed since the end of World War I.

In Iraq, the 2003 invasion ended the nation's sectarian imbalance between the minority Sunni and majority Shia communities. Ever since, the Shia have been more interested in seeking

revenge against their former Sunni tormentors than in building a nation. The result: a Sunni insurgency that has morphed into a plethora of jihadist groups, including Islamic State.

In Syria, the Arab Spring in 2011 encouraged the Sunni majority to challenge and destroy the minority Alawite regime. The result: centrifugal forces that threaten the viability of Syria as we have known it for nearly a century.

As unfashionable as it is to acknowledge, partition is the likely outcome of the civil war. According to Joshua Landis, a veteran Syria observer and director of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, many Syrians, and Alawites in particular, privately acknowledge that the prospect of outright military victory against the Sunni militants is highly unlikely and that it would be impossible to coexist with Sunni fanatics.

For Syria, partition would most likely mean an Alawite Shia state in the regime's western heartland and a Sunni state to the southeast. Notwithstanding statements to the contrary, this is the emerging reality on the ground.

As long as the regime endures, it at least prevents Sunni jihadists from consolidating their hold over the whole nation and creating a strategic sanctuary along Syria's coasts.

The moral and political problems posed by Syria's civil war during the past four years have been real and extremely difficult ones. Assad heads a brutal regime that, according to *The Washington Post*, has killed about seven times as many people as Islamic State in the first six months of this year (*Editor's note: with what credibility?*).

But the cold, hard reality is that if the US and its allies are serious about defeating the Sunni jihadists, and not merely determined to feel virtuous and moralistic, we will need to tone down our anti-Russian bombast, restore a dialogue with Putin and recognise the madness of regime change in Damascus. And if that means accommodating Putin's power play in the Middle East, so be it.

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