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SYRIA- COULD THIS BE ANOTHER FOREIGN POLICY SUCCESS FOR RUSSIA?

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The Russian foreign policy is probably in its most interesting phase following the geopolitical developments taking place both in Ukraine and Syria. On the one hand, the Ukrainian crisis estranged relations between the West and Russia and led to the revival of debates over the start of the New Cold War. On the other hand, it also enabled Russia to make pragmatic shifts, whether in its relations with countries like China, Pakistan and Turkey or with the membership into the future emerging economic strongholds like the New Development Bank or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russian foreign policy has seen a tectonic shift from the one replicating the Western social democratic and liberal values to sheer pragmatism aimed at keeping Russia's national interest at the forefront.

This new approach has been demonstrated by Russia's responses and approaches to the various new developments taking place in the world and in this context, Syria emerges as an

important geopolitical theatre. There are quite a few reasons why Russia is extending its support to the Assad regime in Syria even at the cost of inviting criticism from the United States.

Russia's relationship with Syria stretches back to the Cold War years with Syria's refusal to join the Baghdad Pact, thus solidifying its relations with the erstwhile Soviet Union. All throughout the Cold War and even after Soviet disintegration, Syria continues to remain one of the biggest buyers of Russian military hardware. From an economical point of view, Syria is a well-established market for Russian weapons. However, if the regime change is to happen which the West aims at, it might have a negative impact for Russian military business and therefore the economy. Given the current state of Russian economy which has been marred by falling crude oil prices, the Kremlin would certainly not want its defence sector to suffer the same as its energy sector. This explains a lot why President Putin is so keen on keeping his strongman Bashar al-Assad in power in Syria.

Even strategically, Syria is important because it offers the only naval base abroad i.e. Tartus. For Russia, its strategic interest can be understood from the fact that the Tartus port along with Sevastopol are the only warm water naval bases for the Russian navy. A predominant view in Russian military circles revolves around the influence over the two seas- the Black sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Since Russia has failed to get a naval military base both in Bulgaria and Rumania and with the construction of the US military base in Rumania in 2005, Russia only has limited access to the Black Sea. That brings major impetus to the Tartus naval facility for the Russian naval ships to enter the Mediterranean Sea. Geopolitically the Tartus naval base serves as an important strategic location connecting Russia to the Muslim world.

After the power projection in Ukraine, Syria is another geopolitical theatre where Russia has flexed its muscle. Russia in the past has had its share of diplomatic triumph in Syria when it prevented the United States from intervening in Syria militarily in the wake of use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. The Chemical Weapons Convention supported by all the major countries was seen as a major positive development in Moscow's diplomatic manoeuvring against the United States.¹ Even in the current context, Russia's support to the Assad government is a way of aggressive posturing towards the United States and the West. It is hard to negate the fact that President

Putin may even propose the idea of having a much greater and active Russian troops' involvement in combat in Syria. The increase in the number of troops deployed would be symbolical in terms of Russian demonstration of power in the region.

The problem of the civil war in Syria can no longer be addressed by the West alone. If the idea is to have a regime change done in Syria, then it becomes important to ensure that the political set up of Syria is not left in a vacuum. Lack of commitment from the West for stability and security of the region may pave the way for the ISIS to take charge of the political administration similar to that of the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Thus, the threat of Islamic State taking political control in such chaos is also an ever endangering possibility which could jeopardize the stability of the entire region. At present finding a 'good leader' by and for the West in Syria may be a monumental task.

The public in the United States is also not supportive of the US participation in the ongoing civil war in Syria following the harsh experiences of intervention in Iraq.² However, this is not the case with Russia. The public opinion in Russia is very much on Putin's side given his growing popularity following the annexation of Crimea. Putin has a distinctive advantage on his side as far as convincing the people about an active military presence in Syria is concerned. The possible success in Syria would give Russia a greater chance of making a comeback to the

premier league of global powers with system changing capabilities. In Russia, this would further boost Putin's power and image as a strong leader that Russia wanted.

Following the experiences of Iraq, Libya and Syria, the West needs to understand that it is not enough to replace the old leader with the new one. Collapse of the Assad regime would mean a total fragmentation of Syria and its society. Already millions of people are fleeing Syria to find safer places in Europe. Imagining the collapse of the government in this regard would mean chaotic not just for Syria but also for countries like Turkey, Lebanon and Europe which are unable to cope with the problem of refugees. Another important question that the West needs to address is the problem of ISIS. The top priority for the US and the EU is to limit and eliminate the threat of ISIS and anybody who would help them to fight should be welcomed. In this context, the West can certainly not ignore Russia which has emerged as a major geopolitical player in the equation of the Middle East.

From a foreign policy perspective Russia is in a far better position as compared to the West on Syria. The fact that needs to be discussed here is; what price is the West willing to pay for accepting Russia's assistance. If the price is acceptance of status quo for Crimea then certainly it will be a major victory not just for Russian foreign policy but also for President Putin himself.

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(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Natalya Krainova, "Landmark U.S.-Russia Deal on Syria a Diplomatic Victory", *The Moscow Times*, 15 September 2015, see <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/landmark-us-russia-deal-on-syria-a-diplomatic-victory/486101.html>, accessed on 21 September 2015.

² Allan Gerson, "Intervention in Syria: Three Key Questions", *The Huffington Post*, 15 September 2013, see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/allan-gerson/intervention-in-syria-thr_b_3446230.html?ir=India&adsSiteOverride=in, accessed on 21 September 2015.