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KERRY'S VISIT TO MOSCOW: IS THERE A 'REAL' PROGRESS IN RUSSIA-US RELATIONS?

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Last year, the attention of the world and the rivalry between the United States and Russia deflected from the Ukraine imbroglio to the Syrian crisis which soon emerged as the epicentre of international politics. While the US has been fixated on the ouster of the Bashar Al Assad regime in Syria, Russia on the other hand is determined to defend the leadership. The interaction between the leaders of both the countries – President Barack Obama and President Vladimir Putin – has been clouded by tensions due to the divergent approaches to the Syrian crisis. In 2015 alone, the two leaders have met face to face only three times. The shooting down of Russian fighter aircraft by Turkey- a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member - further aggravated the intense situation in the Middle East geopolitics.

The Syrian crisis has indeed soured the relations between both the countries further. However, one cannot deny that attempts to revive the interaction continue to exist. One such endeavour was the visit by the Secretary of State John Kerry to Moscow on December 15, 2015. The agenda of the meeting was to organize new round of talks aimed at finding a common ground to deal with the Syrian crisis and also fight the immediate threat- Islamic State- which is seeking dominance in the Islamic world. In one of his statements, Kerry told the Putin that “together the United States and Russia have the ability to make a significant difference.” One of the agenda of the meeting was also regarding the involvement of Syrian President Assad in any settlement to the conflict.¹Mr. Kerry said that “The United States and our partners are not seeking regime change in Syria”.² In fact, Kerry's visit to Russia was termed as 'real progress' in the Syrian crisis as this statement is seen as a dramatic shift from the previous US stance on the Assad regime.



On the issue of the growing threat of ISIS, Kerry said: “Russia and the United States agree that this is a threat to everybody, to every country, that there’s no negotiation. These are the worst of terrorists. They’ve attacked culture and history and all decency and they leave no choice but for civilised nations to stand together and to fight and push back and destroy them.”³ Lavrov called coordination “our parallel work” in fighting terrorism.⁴ It seems that with a resurgent Russia since 2000 and its success in events such as the Ukraine imbroglio, handling of the Syrian crisis and its anti-ISIL campaign has made the US finally concede that Russia is fast emerging as an important player in international relations.

Despite the positive signalling taking place post-Kerry’s visit to Moscow, the ‘doubting Thomases’ in the academic community continue to negate that there is ‘real progress’ in the relations between the two countries.

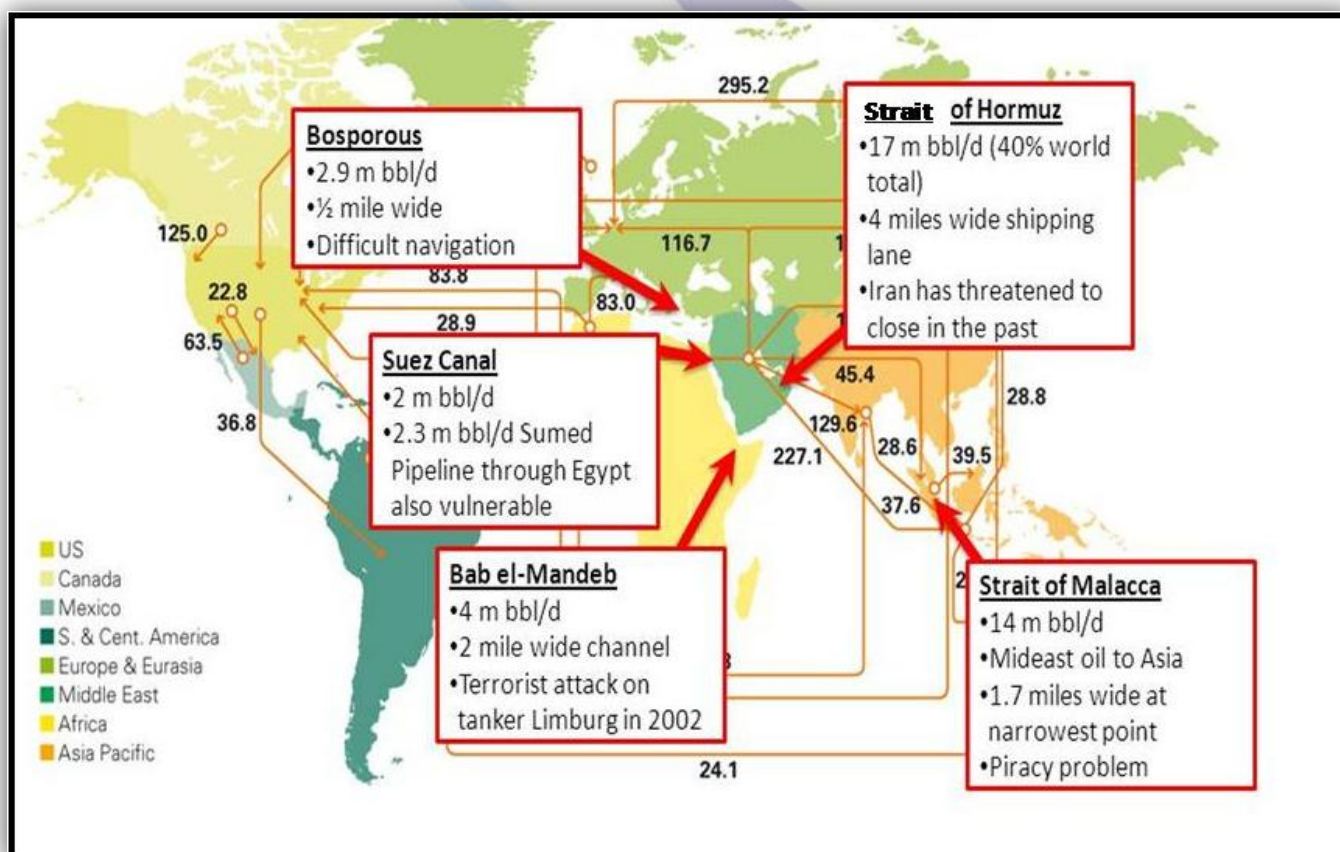
Some of the glaring factors in this regard are: Russia was and continues to be disappointed with the West as it has time and again failed to acknowledge and support Russia as a new entity post Soviet disintegration. Despite ‘de-ideologization’ of its foreign policy, ‘isolation’, ‘encirclement’, and ‘containment’ continue to remain keywords in the US’ foreign policy approach towards Russia. The West failed to tap the long term opportunity that Russia had offered in the early 1990s as it began to pursue a Western-centric foreign policy and abrogated the Warsaw Pact. Russia’s international engagement, including in the former Soviet territories, has also been under the constant scan of the US. The expansionist policies and the offensive capability of NATO have inclined the Kremlin to question US intentions towards Russia. Scepticism and apprehension would continue in Moscow until Washington acknowledges a resurgent Russia. The hostile attitude of the US towards Russia and vice versa thus will be a major impediment in developing closer ties between the two countries.

With a new gained confidence after its engagement in the Ukraine crisis with the accession of Crimea, Russia is seeking greater influence in areas no longer confined to the former Soviet territories. ‘Pivot to Asia’ and the Middle East has emerged as a key geopolitical theatre for the Kremlin. Apart from Syria, Russia has for long enjoyed cordial strategic partnership with other Middle Eastern countries such as Iran with which it formed an axis in the Caucasus alongside Armenia against Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Moreover, anti-US interests in the Persian Gulf also include Iraq and Lebanon. However, the US is the stronger player in the region as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – a NATO member – are its strong allies. The signing of the nuclear deal with Iran may have also paved the way for future prospects for the US in the geopolitics of the Middle East. This is again a

major cause of concern for the US-led Western allies as they may not be too keen in sharing or welcoming Russia as another influential external actor in the region.

Another key aspect is the geopolitics of oil and gas trade. Since the sanction politics on Russia by the US-led Western allies post Crimean referendum, Russia too retaliated by imposing counter sanctions on Europe. Due to huge economic and energy interaction between Russia and Europe, sanctions and counter-sanctions brought Europe under pressure to reduce its dependence on Russian energy markets, not to forget the impact on Russian economy and the downfall of oil prices. The only other region that is seen as a potential alternative to energy supply market is the Middle East, especially Iran and Qatar. The important question however is determining the pipeline route and the large investment involved in its construction. Elaborating further on this aspect, Qatar's main shipping route to Europe has to pass through choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and Suez Canal.

Major Oil Movements and Choke Points



Source: Alberta and Oil Sands Overview, National Conference of State Legislatures. slideplayer.com

As seen in the map, some of the key alternative pipeline routes for Europe are located in politically volatile regions which make the political elites of European countries apprehensive. Conversely, another option for Europe is the pipeline running from Qatar to Syria where it could reach the European countries via Syrian LNG ports. Since the Assad regime is a pro-Russian government and Russia would not want a huge energy market such as Europe to find an alternative energy supply source, the Kremlin will protect its interests in the region and would ensure that the leader in power in Syria would assist in Moscow attaining its geopolitical, economic and energy diplomacy interests. There will thus be clash of interests between the influential external actors in the region mainly among Russia, the US and Europe.

US withdrawal after the Iraq, the failure of the Arab Spring, the coming of Islamic State and the sectarian divide between the Shias and the Sunnis and the failure of the US in executing a concrete foreign policy in bringing regional stability has created a vacuum which has automatically drawn Russia into the power play in the Middle Eastern geopolitics. Syria is seen as the bastion of Russian aspirations in the region and hence any transition or instability in Syria would have a catastrophic impact on Russia too. Russia's large scale military action in the Syrian crisis and anti-ISIL campaign has helped Russia emerge as a well-entrenched player in the geo-politics of Middle-East region.

These are some of the impediments that would persist in strengthening of ties between Russia and the US post Kerry's visit to Moscow. But, would it be right to say that Syria is 'THE' factor in assisting Russia to emerge as a strong player in the geopolitics of the Middle East? Russia, in order to gain more access to the region cannot possibly rely on Syria alone as other important regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan and many other countries are strong US allies. Furthermore, while the relations between Syria and Russia have strengthened manifold, relations with other key regional players such as Turkey are on a downward trend. Mending ties between Russia and Turkey will be one of the key factors for smooth sailing of Russian goals in the Middle East as Turkey is not only a major regional player but also a strong NATO ally, apart from being a potential transit country for Russia's energy pipeline routes. Russia cannot also disregard the impact of long term military action in Syria on its domestic issues especially its economic condition. Russia is already suffering from an economic crisis post sanctions by the US and its allies. This may in the future make Syria emerge more as a liability for Russia than an asset. Even if the US and Russia succeed in finding a 'middle path' in resolving the Syrian crisis, the Ukraine imbroglio would continue to be a major hindrance in bringing a definitive thaw in the relations as yet as neither is Russia in a mood to return

Crimea back to Ukraine nor is the US and European Union willing to lift the sanctions post Crimean accession by Russia.

Thus, the real 'progress' in Russia and the US relations will see the light of day only when the hostility, suspicion and understanding between the two countries emerge in which their respective interests and aspirations can co-exist peacefully.

(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 Alexey Eremenko, "John Kerry Aims to Make 'Real Progress' With Russia's Putin on Syrian Crisis", *NBC News*, December 15, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/john-kerry-aims-make-real-progress-russia-syrian-crisis-n480136> accessed on January 02, 2016.

² Andrew E. Kramer, "John Kerry Visits Moscow to Prepare for Talks on Syria", *New York Times*, December 15, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/europe/john-kerry-visits-moscow-to-prepare-for-talks-on-syria.html?_r=0 accessed on January 02, 2016.

³ Shaun Walker, "Kerry Tells Putin US and Russia Can Make 'Significant Difference' In Syria", *The Guardian*, December 15, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/15/john-kerry-moscow-vladimir-putin-syria-strategy-sergei-lavrov> accessed on January 16, 2016.

⁴ Kramer, n.2