

All or Nothing at All: US Foreign Policy

The world of international politics took a dramatic turn on September 30, 2015 with the military action of Russia in Syria, the first operation beyond the boundaries of the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. It coincided with the admission of the U.S. Pentagon that its efforts to establish a group of “moderate” rebel militants able to fight against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, in spite of their being checked and screened, had failed.

The fatuous explanation is that US military officials underestimated the complexities on the ground. How is this possible? After countless reporting on the morass in Syria, and the activity of the CIA and other US intelligence services no one could be mistaken about the issue. Anyone with minimum knowledge of the morass in Syria and the power struggles involved could understand them, even if some of the complex details are obscure.

The anti-government protests in Syria starting in March 2011 escalated into civil war between the majority Sunni population of the country with a variety of rival and conflicting different groups and the Alawite sect led by Assad, and to a proxy war of regional and international powers. The US and its supposed coalition, Russia, Turkey, and Iran all play some role in support of or opposition to Assad.

The four years of fighting have caused more than 200,000 killed and over ten million displaced from their homes. The fighting has led to war crimes, murder, torture, rape, enforced disappearances, shortages of water, food, and health services. The country has also suffered from the brutality of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) which in its occupation in northern and eastern Syria has been responsible

for mass killings of opponents, beheadings of hostages, public executions and amputations.

The U.S. response to the Syrian has been hesitant, often cautious, while the Russian position has been consistent and increasingly assertive. U.S. Pentagon officials assert that they waited months for White House replies to their plans and questions about the nature of their missions. They knew that the priority of Obama was to avoid sending an American force, the so-called boots on the ground, to the battlefield. The dilemma prevailed. Very limited engagement was the mantra to the question of all or nothing at all. Action against the Islamic State is, as General Martin E. Dempsey stated, tactically stalemated.

The cautious policy of President Barack Obama, sending limited amounts of arms and ammunition, approving a limited training program for acceptable rebels, and authorizing limited air strikes, has been insufficient. The President acknowledged this was the case, and that his "program" has not worked the way it was supposed to do, and that the US had difficulty in finding allies in Syria. The US "mission" was unclear, certainly not transparent, if it existed at all in any systematic way.

The result is that American military and diplomatic influence is at a low ebb, and the tide of Russian influence has rushed in to rescue the ailing Assad regime from drowning. While the US temporized Russia acted. Russia participated in an intelligence sharing arrangement with Iran, Iraq, and the Assad regime. Russia blocked UN Security Council resolutions critical of Assad, and continued to supply him with weapons.

To the surprise of US policy makers, Russia on September 30, 2015 began air strikes in support of the regime and with the objective of assaulting the forces of the Islamic Republic. It deployed air to air fighters, a mixture of types, and an air defense system to relieve the pressure on Assad who Russia

regards as the bulwark against ISIS. It did bomb the ISIS facilities in Raqqa, the capital of the Caliphate. But Russia has not ruled out attacking other than ISIS rebel positions. Indeed, Russian Foreign Minister has confessed that Russia is targeting "all terrorists" in Syria.

At the same time, Russia is protecting the naval facilities it leases at the port of Tartous, the Mediterranean base for its Black Sea fleet, and has increased its forces at the air base in Latakia, in the Alawite heartland. NATO has issued a statement warning of the extreme danger of "such (Russian) irresponsible behavior," and urged Russia to cease and desist. Russia in present circumstances is unlikely to pay heed.

The light has begun to dawn. The Obama administration has always called for a negotiated settlement to end the war and for the formation of a transitional administration without Assad. It is beginning to recognize, as Russia does, that the main enemy is not the cruel, brutal dictator Bashar Assad but the fanatical Islamic State, the declared Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and the threat to world civilization. Its war crimes besides its massacres now extend to the destruction of monuments and temples in the area it controls, including at Roman-era sites, UNESCO World Heritage sites and most recently the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra in Syria.

Belatedly, President Obama is preparing the Pentagon to provide ammunition and some weapons to Syrian rebels, and planning to increase air strikes, using the base in Turkey. The effort is supposedly concerned to fighting against the forces of the Islamic State. It is encouraging to learn, from Secretary of State John Kerry, that the ISIS will soon face increasing pressure from multiple directions across the battlefield in Syria and Iraq. However, some skepticism is in order. Since the proposed operation, involving support for Kurdish and Arab fighters, is cloaked in secrecy for reasons of "operational security," it is perhaps too soon for ISIS to hang its tears out to dry.

It remains however for the US to join Russia in the fight against and the destruction of ISIS. In spite of the Russian actions and remaining differences of opinion between the two countries on strategic and tactical priorities concerning Syria, cooperation not confrontation is crucial.

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