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Moscow's Syria gamble has worked

Now the most influential actor in the Middle East, Russia looks positively at its engagement in Syria

Read this article in German and Russian.

The Russian military intervention in Syria that began in 2015 came as a surprise to most Russian commentators. There were concerns at first, with parallels being drawn with the USSR's engagement in Afghanistan and US activities in Iraq. The objectives of the intervention were unclear, and there appeared to be no exit strategy. The risk of a confrontation with the armed forces of other military powers in the region, not least the US and Turkey, was especially alarming. This could have happened by mistake and the damage caused would have been irreversible.

After four and a half years, however, observers find themselves rather surprised by the outcome. A military turnaround was to be expected once one of the world's largest military powers entered the conflict. But almost no one imagined that Russia would become a central player throughout the Middle East, exercising significant influence over the distribution of power in the region and developments in Syria. How did this come to pass?

Unlike the more impulsive nature of Russia's other foreign policy ventures, Syria is a linear case. Right from the very start, Russian diplomats announced their intention to support Bashar al-Assad's government and secure its hold on power. This approach had less to do with the long history of relations between Damascus and Moscow and more with a fundamental conviction that stability in the region can be achieved only by strengthening the existing regime rather than encouraging regime change. The latter leads to growing chaos, as the examples of Iraq, Libya and Egypt show.

The main catalyst were the events in Libya, where Russia opted not to oppose outside interference. This experience encouraged Moscow to throw its weight firmly behind Assad – firstly with political and diplomatic means, and then with military force. Military intervention entered the equation when it became clear that Damascus might fall.

The ‘Astana triangle’

Russia’s task in Syria still remains unchanged: to strengthen the Assad regime and restore control over as much Syrian territory as possible within its internationally recognised borders. In doing so, it has made skilful use of various instruments in the areas of military action, diplomacy and cultural information. The flexibility it has demonstrated in Syria is rather atypical of Russian foreign policy. Without exception, Moscow is managing to maintain working relations with all key players.

Another reason for Russia’s success in Syria is that none of the other external players pursues anything even close to a systematic plan for the region.

One unique feature is the so-called ‘Astana format’, a regular summit on the Syrian issue with the involvement of Russia, Iran and Turkey. The interests pursued by these three players in Syria may not be completely contradictory, but they are undoubtedly very different. As the three parties of what is also known as the ‘Astana triangle’ do not enjoy the desired degree of reciprocal trust, most commentators believed the format would come unstuck soon after negotiations began in January 2017. Instead, they have succeeded in overcoming acute crises and continuing their cooperation.

This persistence does not come down to shared interests or mutual sympathy. Instead, it is more pragmatic: None of the three parties to the negotiations would be able to achieve its objectives in Syria without the involvement, or at least the neutrality, of the other two. This understanding has laid the foundations for reasonably effective cooperation.

Russia and Turkey

The Russia-Turkey relationship is particularly interesting in this respect. The countries have traditionally held conflicting positions and were even on the verge of war shortly before their cooperation in Syria began (after the Turkish military shot down a Russian aircraft in autumn 2015). However, common sense and the need to work together to solve certain issues ultimately prevailed.

Today, Russia and Turkey are cooperating closely and on a daily basis. Obviously Turkey’s President Erdogan is pursuing his own agenda when it comes to relations with Washington. He’s playing a high-risk game with Trump by acting independently in many respects. In doing so, he’s

using Turkey's relationship with Russia as a lever, including the countries' cooperation in the area of military technology. Ankara has no interest in actually breaking off relations with Washington, but it would like to engineer greater room to manoeuvre.

Moscow is well aware of this. That's why it's working with Turkey on a purely pragmatic basis and with no great strategic expectations. Nevertheless, that cooperation is now fairly well advanced, most likely because of the openness involved – each party knows exactly what the other wants and what it's prepared to do to achieve it, with no sentimentality or ideology.

The US and the EU have no Syria policy

Another reason for Russia's success in Syria is that none of the other external players pursues anything even close to a systematic plan for the region. The US lost sight of any policy objective long before Trump came to power. It was uncertain as to exactly what the Obama administration was seeking to achieve in Syria. Things have become a little clearer under Trump – put simply, there are no interests beyond defeating the Islamic State. The inability of the US to formulate clear objectives in the region at the outset, and its subsequent unwillingness to make serious investments, led to a vacuum.

And this vacuum was filled by other players, most notably Russia. The EU is taking little or no part in the Syrian conflict or the upheaval in the wider Middle East. The EU does not have the necessary tools at its disposal because the situation soon took on a traditional military policy feel, something that is not its strength. Now Europe is pinning its hopes on post-conflict rehabilitation, as there will be a need for what the Old World has to offer, namely money for rebuilding. This could help Europe to regain some influence in Syria.

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In terms of the regional players, it has become clear that influence is available to those who are willing to take serious risks and act decisively. Proxy war tactics alone are not enough. This is why Turkey, Iran and Russia have far greater clout than Saudi Arabia, for example.

In the meantime, Russia has indeed established itself as the most influential player in the region. Almost nothing gets done in Syria without Moscow's approval and involvement. This does not mean that Russia has the potential to resolve the Syrian conflict, but it gives Moscow more possibilities to influence the situation than others.

Russia's international standing

Some players in the Middle East expect that Russia will now replace the US as the main protector or seek to restore the Soviet Union's status in the region. But these expectations are unfounded. The model of a regional protector may have been typical of the previous century and persisted into the 21st century, but it is gradually becoming a thing of the past. Nowadays, it's impossible to administer entire regions – as examples from East Asia and Latin America to the Middle East illustrate all too well. Instead, a niche has emerged in which intermediaries can be active.

Russia has undoubtedly scored on this front. Thanks to its activities in the Middle East, Russia's status in the international hierarchy has risen considerably. When the Syrian military operation began in autumn 2015, the Western nations were actively restricting their dialogue with Russia to the Minsk Protocol and the conflict in Ukraine. The situation has since changed dramatically – driven to a large extent by Russia's involvement in the Middle East. Russia's aim is to strengthen its strategic position in Syria by using its own military bases as footholds in the Mediterranean area. However, this objective is about its own international positioning rather than control in the region.

The intervention in Syria has not become a major domestic policy issue in Russia. The impact on public opinion was positive – not least at the start, when the Russian army achieved some rather impressive and broadly unexpected successes – but reporting from Syria has never had the same edge to it as the reports emanating from Ukraine. Over time, it has become a matter of routine rather than something that stirs up a great deal of emotional resonance. Experts today are well aware that, in spite of the success achieved, Russia's presence in Syria remains a highly complex and risky issue that requires painstaking work at all levels. A solution to the problem is still a long way off.



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