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Russia Duped Kerry on Syria

By James Sherr

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In May, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry became the latest victim of Russia's hard diplomacy.

Soviet leaders used to keep foreign emissaries waiting in order to test their strength and intentions, and on his first trip to the Kremlin as secretary of state, Kerry was kept waiting three hours before President Vladimir Putin received him. If Kerry was aware of these precedents, he didn't show it. His tone at a news conference with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (at which he thanked Putin for his "very generous welcome") was elaborately conciliatory.

In substance, too, the visit confirmed what President Barack Obama's April letter to Putin already conveyed: The U.S. is seeking to deepen its ties with Russia. The question is how far it is prepared to do so on Russia's terms. The answer will depend not only on Russian policy, but on perception management.

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Since taking over from Hillary Clinton, Kerry has spoken with increasing fervor about U.S. and Russian "common interests" regarding the conflict. But sending arms shipments to Bashar Assad's regime is not a common interest, and resolving that issue was one objective of Kerry's visit. No such resolution took place. What emerged instead was an agreement to convene a new conference in Geneva in language consistent with Russia's view that the government of Syria be co-author of the country's fate.

The departure of Assad might still be a personal issue for Kerry, but it no longer appears to be a condition. Fearing as much, British Prime Minister David Cameron flew to Sochi on May 10 to reiterate that it remains a condition for Britain and, incidentally, reminded Putin that Britain remains a veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council with a policy of its own. Yet neither these concerns nor a call by Lavrov to include Iran in the Geneva talks appeared to shake Kerry's conviction that by working together, the U.S. and Russia "have the ability to change the course of ... events."

Russia's signals on arms to Syria do not reinforce these perceptions. Despite entreaties from the U.S., Britain and Israel, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov announced on May 28 that Russia would honor its contracts to Syria. Whether the weapons arrive tomorrow, in 2014 or not at all, they already constitute a virtual deterrent against external intervention and a further point of discord inside the EU, whose arms embargo lapsed at the end of May. But they do not support the scenario that Russia will, in Kerry's words "use its good offices" to bring Assad to the table.

At about the time of Obama's letter to Putin, a second channel of influence over Washington emerged. The April 15 Boston Marathon bombing gave credence to two key themes of Russian public diplomacy: Russia and the U.S. face a common enemy. The Chechens and al-Qaida are one and the same. Obama's brief meeting on May 22 with Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev demonstrated the degree to which the U.S. president has internalized these conclusions. The problem is that they are being strained at operational level. The FSB's arrest of U.S. diplomat Ryan Fogle on May 14 is the latest indication that the CIA feels it has been gulled by the FSB on the Tsarnaev brothers and has begun to pound the pavement in search of real intelligence. Russia is determined that these efforts not succeed.

In the view of independent Russian experts, the Obama administration now faces choices over Syria that it is unwilling to confront. In 2011-12 Washington had the luxury of viewing Syria's

ordeal through the prism of human rights and became increasingly confident that Assad would fall. Now it is looking at a different dynamic, one that seems more likely to strengthen either Iran and Hezbollah or Sunni jihadists. Faced with this realization, Washington, in the words of analyst Fyodor Lukyanov, has chosen to "appeal to Russia."

Russia is a country that knows its own interests and pursues them. Its core interests in Syria are to prevent regime change by external means, to maintain Assad's regime in whole or in part and to maximize its influence in whatever scenario unfolds. Beyond this, it has no solution for Syria or the wider region. It might fear extremism and regional instability, but these are not the fears that drive its policy. The U.S. and Russia might have common interests in this mix, but they do not have common aims. It is probably only a matter of time before Washington reaches this conclusion itself.

James Sherr is the author of "Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad" (Chatham House), which was published this month.

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