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Why The Crisis in Ukraine Will Determine What Happens in Syria

By Alexander Shumilin

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Twice in the last six months, Russia has managed to divert attention from what had previously been the central focus of international relations: the conflict in Syria. The first time was in September, when Russia averted a U.S. military strike against Syrian forces by proposing that Syrian President Bashar Assad instead eliminate all of his country's chemical weapons. That effectively shifted the world's attention from the country's ongoing and bloody civil war to the goal of "depriving Damascus of its chemical weapons arsenal." It also bought Assad time to gather strength, receive additional fighters and weapons from Hezbollah and launch a large-scale offensive against insurgents across the country. The second diversion occurred when Russia's actions in Ukraine altered the global security picture and pushed the Syrian conflict into the background.

Now, global players are most concerned about the unexpected appearance of a "European front" in Ukraine, where NATO and Russian interests come into conflict and their military forces stand at only a short remove from each other. That situation is of far greater importance for the world than what is happening in distant Syria.

Although these conflicts might appear unrelated at first glance, they have emerged as a result of several common factors. These include the desire of Russian leaders to counteract the Tahrir Square and Maidan-style uprisings that have toppled legitimately elected leaders and to assert a "new role for Russia that the West cannot ignore," their geopolitical interest in maintaining Russia's presence at its Black Sea port in Sevastopol and its Mediterranean Sea port in Tartus, Syria, and the desire to mobilize and consolidate President Vladimir Putin's electorate at home. Putin's foreign policy "success" in fending off a U.S. bombing of Syria might have won him a dozen or so popularity points with voters, but the annexation of Crimea unleashed a flood of patriotic fervor that, with the help of state-controlled media, boosted his ratings to record highs and effectively drowned out all voices of protest.

Two others factors connected with Russia's stance on Syria have also played an important role in its approach to Ukraine. First, Moscow positioned itself as a "peacekeeper" in Syria, helping the "legitimate regime fight Islamist terrorists" — a role for which Putin was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Kremlin then expanded on that idea by claiming a desire to "save the Russian-speaking citizens of Crimea" — and possibly those in southern and eastern Ukraine as well — from the "pro-fascist forces that illegally seized power in Kiev." Of course, the means Moscow employed in Ukraine differed somewhat from those it used in Syria.

Second, Russia has come to expect a relatively restrained reaction from the U.S. and the European Union in response to what Moscow calls its peacekeeping and humanitarian operations in Syria and Ukraine. The West ultimately came to understand — or reconcile itself with — Russia's attempt to neutralize the "fascist regime" of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili during the Russia-Georgia war of 2008. Why shouldn't the West respond in a similar manner to the current situation in Ukraine?

The problem is that Russia went much further in Ukraine than it did in Georgia and especially in Syria: It annexed territory formally owned by another country. This is the first incident of its kind in the postwar period since World War II, with the minor exceptions of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's brief but unsuccessful annexation of Kuwait in 1990, and the independent states of Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The result is that a qualitatively different situation has developed concerning Ukraine, one that, even with any further escalation, promises to persist long into the future. And that means the effects of the Ukrainian crisis will largely determine the outcome of the Syrian crisis.

The U.S.-Russia confrontation over Syria and Ukraine can develop in one of two ways. First, the two parties reach a tentative agreement in which they pretend as if international organizations remain unaffected by recent events and whereby they continue appealing to the United Nations Security Council and its related bodies concerning the situation in Syria. The advantage to this approach is that both Washington and Moscow avoid further aggravating relations over Syria when they already have their hands full with Ukraine.

According to this scenario, both sides would refrain from taking any drastic steps and would turn a blind eye to such "minor violations" as the Assad regime delaying the removal of chemical weapons and permitting the monitoring of their production and storage facilities. Leaders would work for a sort of "Geneva 3" agreement while the Syrian regime conducts so-called "elections" in which, not surprisingly, Bashar Assad would once again emerge

triumphant. Moscow and Washington would offer different opinions about Assad's "re-election," announce that their positions on Syria have not changed and accept a continuation of the conflict there on the grounds that the Syrians are "working it out between themselves." This approach is a losing option for the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama because his opponents will point to it as a sign of U.S. weakness in international affairs — the very problem Obama's critics claim prompted Moscow to feel it could seize Crimea with impunity.

In the second scenario, Washington tries to "get even" with Russia for its actions in Ukraine by taking a more forceful political position on Syria. But for that to happen, Obama would have to hold Assad strictly accountable for violations of his obligation to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, for the use of excessive force against civilians and other infractions. A great deal will depend on whether Obama continues to regard the UN Security Council as the highest body and final arbiter in such cases, or if he concludes that it is now defunct by virtue of Russia's actions in Ukraine.

In any case, Assad will doubtless draw his own conclusions from events in Ukraine. For example, he might very well conclude that, given the current state of world affairs and the lack of confidence he can have in any security guarantees offered by outside states, it would be reckless to give up all of his chemical weapons and would make more sense to hide a few from the eyes of international inspectors.

He might also draw another lesson from Ukraine — that the preservation of a state's territorial integrity is no longer sacred and the highest constitutional duty of the president. That would make the idea of splitting Syria into two or more states no longer seem as improbable as it once did. And who knows, perhaps partitioning is a solution for Syria as well.

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