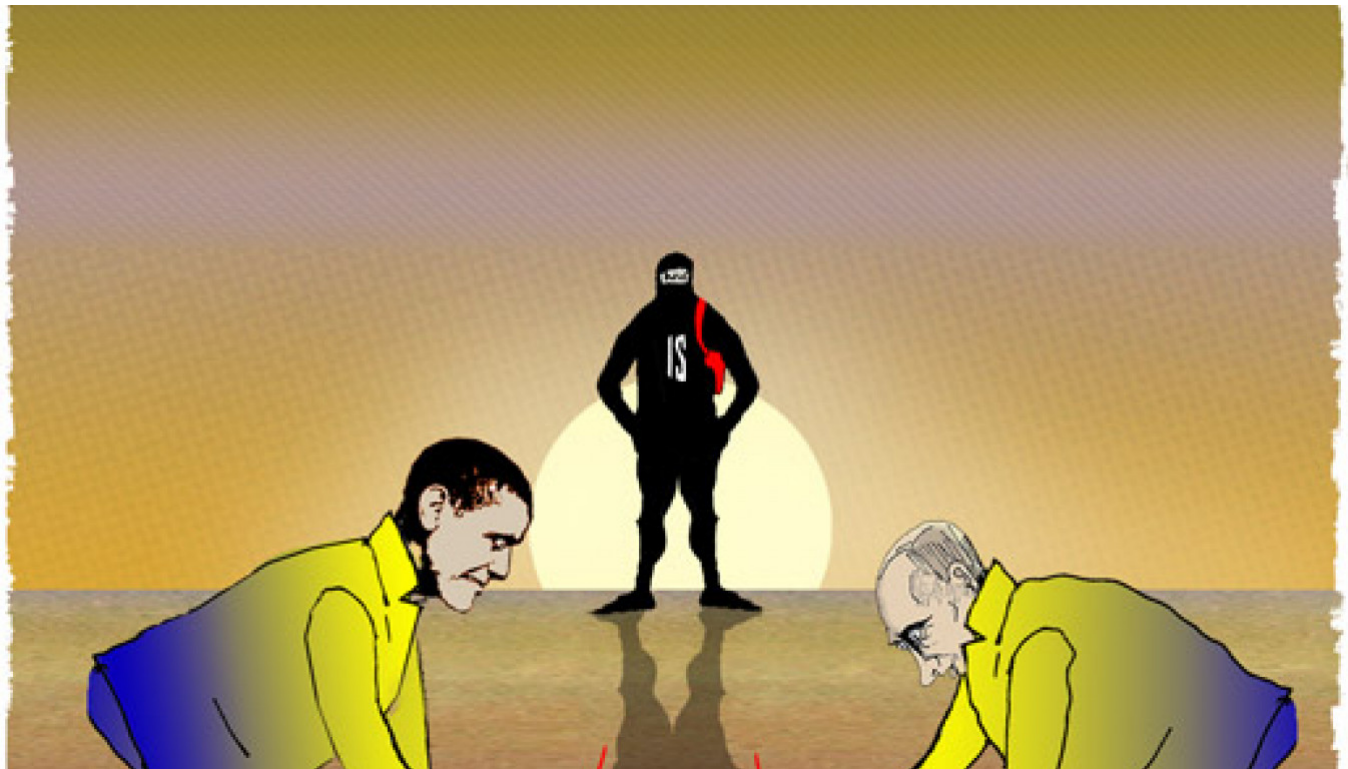


Could IS Bring Russia and the U.S. Together?

By [Roland Dannreuther](#)

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The start of a fragile cease-fire in Ukraine opens up the potential for some limitation of the dangerous escalation in tensions between Russia and the West. Yet even as U.S. President Barack Obama is directly accusing Russia of intervention in support of the separatists in eastern Ukraine, the meteoric rise of the Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East presents a serious threat to both countries.

The U.S. and Russia have been equally committed and determined to counter militant Islamist terrorism; both have been directly threatened by the group; both have an interest in a sovereign and unified Iraq; and there are growing voices in Washington suggesting that an accommodation with the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad will be needed if IS is to be repelled.

Unsurprisingly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has enthusiastically supported any potential favorable U.S. shift toward the Syrian regime.

Might Russia again play the role of interlocutor and mediator for Washington in the Middle East? The resonance here is with the deal struck by Russia in September last year over the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons stock.

The political context then in terms of U.S.-Russian relations had some similarities to the current situation. U.S.-Russian relations were similarly at a low ebb as there was a fundamental difference of opinion about what should be done about the Assad regime.

The U.S. demanded Assad's unconditional removal, while Russia insisted that this could not be a pre-condition for a resolution of the crisis. Both countries blamed the other for the intensity and bloodshed of the Syrian civil war. Russia argued that U.S. policy had only radicalized the opposition, breeding new extremist Islamist groups. The U.S. blamed Russia for undermining the moderate claims of the opposition through its unbending support for the criminal Syrian regime.

However, in the end, a convergence of interests between Russia and the U.S. emerged. As Obama faced the prospect of being compelled to intervene militarily — an extremely unattractive prospect — Russia offered a way out; securing the commitment of the Syrian regime to dismantle all of its chemical weapons.

Having engineered this diplomatic coup, Russia then made sure it was true to its word and, a year later, almost all of Syria's chemical weapons have been destroyed. The Russian leadership was also careful not to use this diplomatic gain to 'humiliate' the U.S. This restraint meant that there was a chance that this could have been the foundation for a pragmatic improvement in relations between the two countries.

The crisis in Ukraine extinguished any such hopes. Hawks on both sides have heralded a return to Cold War confrontation and zero-sum competition. Both countries have seen in Ukraine the crossing of 'red lines' that cannot be accepted.

The red line for Russia was the move toward the U.S. and the imposition of a pro-Western 'democracy' in a country directly neighboring Russia. For the U.S., the Russian annexation of Crimea undermined the post-Cold War European agreement to respect the new European territorial boundaries.

The question is, thus, whether the current state of U.S.-Russian relations is at such a depressed and destructive level that no real cooperation is possible, even in other less politically contested regions of the world. Clearly, the answer to this question depends significantly on what happens in Ukraine.

The resolve to impose a cease-fire on the pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine suggests that President Vladimir Putin might not see escalation as the only way to resolve the crisis in Ukraine in Russia's favor. The historic record of Putin's period at the apex of Russian power has been a pattern of oscillation between an ambition for improving relations with the West and a subsequent disillusionment and deterioration in such relations, leading again to an attempted renewal or 'resetting' of those relations.

It cannot be excluded that the cycles might move again and U.S.-Russian relations will start to be mended by the cease-fire in Ukraine.

In this scenario, the Middle East actually offers many areas for mutual cooperation. It is not like the Cold War period when the U.S. and Soviet Union ritualistically supported different camps in the region.

Nowadays, the U.S. and Russia have a common strategic interest in combatting international terrorism, the reason being that this represents a serious threats to the citizens of both countries, as seen in the recent threats from IS to Russia following those to the U.S.

While the US suffered from the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Russia has had to endure numerous terrorist attacks, mainly emanating from the Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus. For both countries, there is a shared sense of the gravity of the threat of international terrorism to their core national interests.

For these reasons, the U.S. and Russia view IS as a common enemy. As the apocalyptic language emanating out of Washington demonstrates, the U.S. actually views the threat from IS as strategically more important than that of Ukraine in the sense that direct national interests are involved.

For the American public, Ukraine appears as an obscure conflict in a distant land, while the execution of American journalist James Foley by IS has a shocking immediacy. If the conflict in Iraq and Syria escalates, and the U.S. becomes more involved, it might very well be that the Ukrainian conflict becomes marginalized. And any Russian support in the battle against IS, undoubtedly of a more indirect nature, would be welcomed by Washington.

If one looks at the Middle East more broadly, Russian and U.S. interests are actually closer than often suggested. Although there has been continued disagreement about Iran, both Russia and the U.S. are committed to seeing that Iran does not obtain nuclear weapons and the U.S. posture toward Iran has moved closer to that of Russia.

With the escalation of the crisis in Iraq, Russia can potentially play an important role in facilitating the coordination between Iran, the Iraqi government and Syria, which will be critical if IS is to be defeated.

Russia is also no longer the unconditional supporter for radical forces in the Middle East. Russia's major economic partners in the region are Turkey and Israel, and the economic and cultural links between Russia and Israel have never been stronger.

In fact, it could be argued that it is Russia which is the more conservative force supporting the regional status quo, while it is the U.S. which is the more radical actor seeking to overturn the regional order. Obama's much more realist and non-interventionist convictions actually represent a shift toward the Russian position.

There is, therefore, considerable potential for Russia and the U.S. to work together in the Middle East. However, this is clearly conditional on no further escalation in Ukraine. In that context, the likelihood is for conflict and confrontation to extend to other parts of the world, including the Middle East, even when in practice there is such mutual interest for cooperation.

Roland Dannreuther is professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, London.

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