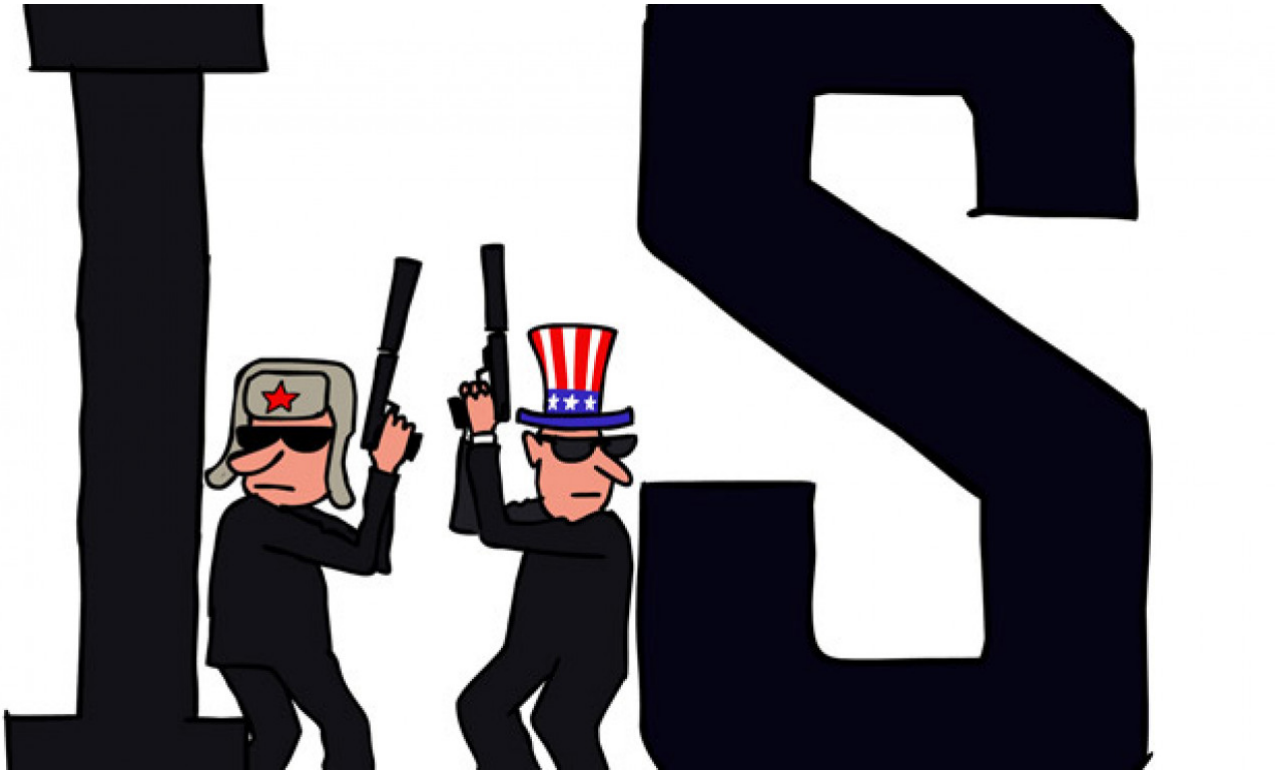
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Why Russia Must Share Islamic State Intel With U.S.

By Mark Galeotti

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On Oct. 15, Washington announced that U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry had agreed with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Russia would share intelligence about the Islamic State movement in the Middle East. Kerry affirmed that they had decided to "intensify intelligence cooperation with respect to [the Islamic State] and other counter-terrorism challenges of the region."

A day later, Moscow seemed to be backtracking, with reports that Kerry had overstated the case. Nonetheless, sharing such information would actually be very much in Russia's interest, and it will be a worrying sign if they decide not to follow through with this after all.

Any such intelligence-sharing would be limited and carefully assembled, as is inevitably the case between even the closest of allies — and Moscow and Washington are hardly that.

Even back in the days of much closer collaboration, it was clear that Russian intelligence provided to the West was often artfully framed to present their struggle against the Chechen

insurgency as simply one more battle in a global struggle against jihad, with no hint of the nationalist rather than theological aims of many of the rebels.

Furthermore, the Russians would — quite reasonably — want to protect their best sources and obscure their most effective methods.

Of course, it is not clear whether the Russians really have much better intelligence on the Islamic State than the West, but at the very least they will have different sources, and that counts for something. In the world of espionage, alternative perspectives are often crucial as analysts try to piece together a picture from incomplete, contradictory and often unclear evidence.

Besides, Russia is able to draw on the resources of Syria's brutal but not incompetent security service, the General Security Directorate, and its companion Military Intelligence Directorate, something undoubtedly denied to the Westerners who are committed to bringing down the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Beyond that, Russia's GRU (foreign military intelligence) operated electronic eavesdropping facilities in Syria and possibly also reconnaissance drones, providing an additional layer of tactical intelligence.

Such intelligence-sharing would certainly be of use to the U.S. At the same time, it is also very much in Russia's interests. A significant number of Islamic State militants come from former Soviet states, many from the North Caucasus.

At present, the Islamic State is acting as a sponge, soaking up ambitious and impatient young radicals from the North Caucasus, to whom the chance of victory in Iraq or Syria seems more appealing than probable death after a few inconclusive attacks in their home regions. This helps explain the decline in recent terrorist attacks in Russia.

One day, though, the Islamic State will have either won or lost, and then either way these militants are going to return home, battle-hardened and, as with the Chechen emigres who came to fight in the 1990s, bringing with them foreign funds and allies. So as far as the Russian security agencies are concerned, much better to help the Americans bomb them into the sands of the Middle East rather than let them live again to fight another day back inside Russia's borders.

So this would seem to be a rare case of geopolitical win-win: Washington gets extra intelligence, and Moscow gets its enemies killed. In the longer term, though, this also offers additional potential advantages to Russia.

It gives them a chance to be useful to the Americans, and that can often be translated into a degree of leverage, something Moscow palpably lacks at present. To be sure, we should not overstate this. The White House is hardly, for example, going to reverse its sanction policy as a result.

But especially if Moscow can demonstrate the value of cooperation with the regime in Damascus, it might be able to help convince Washington that Assad, for all his murderous flaws, represents a known known, a lesser of potential evils.

After all, the U.S. has just blacklisted as a terrorist organization Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, a Chechen-led Syrian group that has explicitly affiliated itself with the Caucasus Emirate, the North Caucasus insurgent umbrella movement. The leaders of the group are wanted by Russia, and the Federal Security Service considers it a primary link between the Caucasus Emirate and wider jihadi circles.

Given that it poses no specific threat to the U.S. and is no more extreme in and of itself than many other Syrian militant groups, this move looks like a piece of quid pro quo to satisfy Moscow.

It is difficult to see what downside there is to this policy of "the enemy of my enemy is my reluctant ally." And that means that if it really is true that Moscow has decided against cooperation — and is not simply playing hard to get — then it will be one more piece of evidence suggesting that pique and paranoia really are outweighing pragmatism and professionalism in Russia's new foreign policy.

Mark Galeotti is professor of global affairs at New York University.

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