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Will New U.S.-Russia Deal on Syria Prove a Game Changer?

By Vladimir Frolov

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (L) and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shake hands at the conclusion of a joint press conference following their meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, Sept. 9, 2016.
Kevin Lamarque / AP

The new U.S.-Russia deal on the Syrian ceasefire could be a game-changer in international efforts to end the bloody war in Syria. Or the deal, the product of marathon talks since mid-June between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, could easily unravel as so many previous agreements have.

It faces daunting challenges: a gaping lack of trust between Moscow and Washington, unruly and suspicious local proxies, unhappy outside players in Iran and in the Gulf states, a hodgepodge of legal loopholes and lack of viable enforcement mechanisms. Its successful implementation is hard to fathom, but there is no other plan.

For the outgoing Obama administration, it is their final attempt at halting the violence in Syria and creating a breathing space for a negotiated political transition before the new administration takes over in January 2017.

The goal is to end the attacks on civilians and freeze the war between the regime forces and moderate opposition groups while carrying on with the central U.S. mission in Syria — defeating the Islamic State — a terror group banned in Russia — and Al-Qaeda. The removal of Syrian President Bashar Assad from power, while still a necessary condition for the political transition, is no longer an immediate U.S. objective. For Kerry, it is a diplomatic mission to secure his legacy.

For Moscow, the deal offered by the United States is extremely advantageous and meets most of Russia's political objectives for its one-year-old military intervention in Syria. It is perhaps the last available off-ramp leading to a dignified political exit from the war Russia could not win. The deal satisfies Moscow's obsession with achieving the international status of an indispensable global player on a par with the United States.

It legitimizes its military intervention to save the Assad's regime as a joint counterterrorism operation with the United States and recognizes Russia's future role in Syria as a key partner for the incoming U.S. administration. It helps freeze the military situation on the ground that is advantageous to the Syrian regime and its allies, while creating conditions to further weaken the opposition. There is so much for Moscow to love in this deal that it is surprising it took three months to negotiate.

The key part of the new agreement is the dual-key arrangement for the U.S.-Russia targeting selection process which would give Washington veto power over Russian air operations in designated areas where the opposition is intermingled with Nusra fighters, while essentially grounding regime planes over much of Syria. The United States will have a considerable amount of say in where, when and how Russia could strike Syria, vetoing the use of dumb bombs, cluster munitions and air-fuel charges. This is the only way to end the indiscriminate bombing of the civilian areas that fueled the recruitment for the extremists.

Moscow, in its turn, would also have a veto over potential U.S. strikes on regime and allied targets, like cratering regime's airfields with stand-off weapons (although Moscow allows Israel to bomb Syria at will). This dual-key arrangement will not affect freedom of air operations over Islamic State-held territory.

The renewed Cessation of Hostilities (CoH) — agreed in February, but since largely ignored by all sides — could create sufficient calm for the UN-sponsored political process to restart. The key requirement would be lifting of all sieges and allowing humanitarian aid deliveries to the besieged towns. Ending the siege of eastern Aleppo by the regime forces appears to be a key part of the agreement, with considerable attention paid to the security and logistical arrangements to deliver aid in a safe and secure way without clearing the city of its inhabitants and opposition fighters.

The key problem that could undo this U.S.-Russian agreement is the requirement for the vetted opposition groups to distance themselves on the ground from Nusra units which would then be jointly targeted by Russian and U.S. airstrikes. Nusra is locally embedded

in northwestern Syria, particularly in the Idlib province, and is on its way to becoming a Sunni version of Hezbollah. For many rebel groups, distancing themselves from Nusra, much less fighting it, is no longer feasible, as this will weaken their front against the regime. Since the agreement does not ban regime or Russian artillery and missiles strikes against the Nusra-infiltrated targets or require their vetting by the United States, it allows Assad to torpedo the CoH seemingly at will if Russia stands by.

The success of the deal will largely depend on Moscow's eagerness to end the fighting and extricate itself from the war on honorable terms by pressuring Assad into freezing the military situation (the last attempt in February-March 2016 failed miserably) and engaging in meaningful political dialogue with the opposition to secure a transfer of power to an inclusive Syrian government.

The odds are heavily stacked against the deal, but there is no better way forward.

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