The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Into the Trap: How U.S. Risks Direct Confrontation With Russia in Syria

With a Russian-backed offensive in eastern Aleppo underway, military confrontation between Russia and the United States is no longer fantasy

By Vladimir Frolov

September 30, 2016

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu (C) visits the Hmeymim airbase in Syria, June 18, 2016 **Russian Defense Ministry**

When Russia entered the war in Syria exactly a year ago, it seemed like a clever political gambit.

Making a virtue out of necessity, Moscow intervened to save its embattled ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad. Back then, Assad's regime was teetering on the brink

of defeat by armed opposition and radical islamist forces, including terror groups like Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda affiliate the Al-Nusra Front. A short, but intensive air campaign to support the ground offensive by the Syrian army and Iranian allies was conceived as a way of reversing the military situation on the ground. The calculation was that Assad could then be pushed into a political settlement that would have kept him in power as a bulwark against the chaos and instability of the U.S.-promoted Arab Spring.

Presenting this operation as Russia's contribution to the war against IS, already waged by the U.S.-led international coalition in Iraq and Syria, would have given Moscow coveted international legitimacy. It would have secured even more important, but unarticulated Russian objectives. The first was to break through diplomatic isolation by the West, which was Russia's reality after its actions in Ukraine in 2014. The second — to reestablish Russia as a great power with a global reach that could challenge the U.S. dominated world order.

One year on, the results are mixed. The objective of shoring up the regime has been met. Assad has regained control over the strategically important parts of Syria and can no longer be overthrown, provided Russia and Iran keep fighting for him. The moderate opposition groups have been weakened and are merging with jihadi terrorists, thus ceasing to be a legitimate alternative to the regime.

At the same time, Russia is still stuck fighting the jihadists in increasingly bloody battles in Aleppo and Idlib. A quick exit from this war is no longer feasible, since it would result in the regime's collapse. Assad disrupts Russia's efforts at political settlement as he has no incentive to see Russia exit the war.

The goal of securing a strategic breakthrough with the West and geopolitical parity with the United States remains elusive. Russia has made itself indispensable in Syria, but beyond that, the West has not negotiated with Russia over Ukraine and the post-Cold War security order in Europe.

Washington worked closely with Moscow on securing a durable cessation of hostilities, and moving toward a political settlement in Syria. Russia came close to what U.S. President Barack Obama's former Middle East hand Phil Gordon described as a "clean win" in Syria with the Geneva deal of Sept. 12. This deal would have prevented regime change in Damascus for the foreseeable future, facilitated direct military and intelligence cooperation with the United States against terrorist groups, and reduced the cost of conflict for Russia.

But this agreement is now unraveling. It has been beset by mutual recriminations over its implementation, highfalutin rhetoric and more war. With the regime offensive in eastern

Aleppo underway, Syria is turning into a new area of confrontation and potentially direct military clash between Russia and the United States.

The deal was probably doomed from the start. Both sides knew they could not enforce their end of the bargain — pushing Assad and the rebels into a lasting ceasefire and the resumption of the UN talks on political transition. The Russians knew the United States was not in a position to deliver on separating the moderate rebels from al-Nusra. Nonetheless, they pushed through this demand to secure unfettered bombing rights against the largest islamist opposition groups Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam.

The United States hoped Moscow could ground Assad's air force to stop attacks on civilians. But Assad wanted to defeat the rebels in Aleppo at all costs, since it would have ended the rebellion in large cities. Moscow eventually agreed with Damascus that securing a military victory in Aleppo was more important than a shaky deal with Washington to freeze the stalemate.

Now the pressure is on the Obama administration "to raise the costs for Assad and Moscow" for their indiscriminate bombing in Aleppo. "Non-diplomatic" options are being developed like more weapons deliveries to the moderate rebels with long-range artillery and MANPADS thrown in, or stand-off strikes with cruise missiles against the regime's air assets and airfields.

If approved, such strikes would plunge Washington into direct military confrontation with Russia. Moscow would try to shoot down U.S. missiles with its advanced air defen
ses, and
escalate bombing raids against rebel supply lines. Staring down Washington would hand Moscow everything it wanted: a recognition by the U
nited States
of Russia's equal status
and an invitation to discuss Russia's geopolitical interests. The latest
rhetorical overkill
employed by Moscow — accus
ing U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby of
instigating terrorist acts in Russian cities — may indicate the Russians are prepared
to duke it out.

Obama, who has been masterfully dodging a fight with Putin, would be walking straight into his trap.

Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra are all terrorist organi
zations banned in Russia.

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