

Latest U.S.-Russia Effort on Syria Remains Flawed (Op-ed)

U.S.-Russian relations in Syria are warmer after Trump and Putin's visit, but some fundamental policy differences are hard to overlook

By [Nikolas K. Gvosdev](#)

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Russian Defense Ministry's International Mine Action Center in Syria

Donald Trump's informal meetings with Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the recent APEC summit in Vietnam produced a single concrete result: the Nov. 11 U.S.-Russia Joint [Statement](#) on Syria.

The bilateral diplomatic effort has elicited optimism from officials, but what does it amount to really? Does it represent a promising step forward to “save tremendous numbers of lives,” as Trump told reporters on Air Force One?

Does the statement provide a workable roadmap for effective American-Russian collaboration

and coordination? Is it — as Putin's spokesman [characterized](#) it — so clear in its language that it "does not require comments" and is not open to multiple interpretations?

Is this latest statement — another in a long list that have been hailed as groundbreaking efforts to end the fighting in Syria — really going to make a difference this time around?

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The Da Nang statement builds on previous modest steps that Russia and the United States have achieved: the use of de-escalation zones and limited cease-fires to tap down fighting; the continuation of deconfliction efforts to ensure that U.S.- and Russian-backed forces don't engage in direct clashes; the agreement to work with Jordan to stabilize southern Syria and maintain tenuous truces between pro- and anti-regime forces; and the ostensible support for the complete destruction of the Islamic State and getting a post-conflict political reconciliation process underway.

However, just as with the [agreements](#) reached over Syria during the last year of the Obama administration, this latest statement is open to multiple interpretations.

Both sides continue to use vague language and terms deliberately left undefined to accommodate the still considerable divergences between Washington and Moscow over Syria's future.

While both sides agree on the necessity of fighting ISIS, Moscow has a much broader definition of who constitutes "associates" of ISIS — in order to encompass some of the groups that the United States views as legitimate opposition to the Assad regime.

Moreover, while Russia keeps open the possibility that Assad could be re-elected as president of a post-war Syria, the United States finds it inconceivable that, in any free and fair election, Assad could win a majority of the ballots cast.

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Both sides concur foreign fighters should leave, but are the Iranian Al-Quds units of the Revolutionary Guard or Hezbollah combatants permitted to remain at the invitation of the government in Damascus?

Also, the statement never mentions the "Syria National Dialogue Conference" that Moscow has now postponed until next month. The conference represents the Kremlin's efforts, along with its partners in the Middle East, to define the "acceptable" members of the Syrian political constellation who could be brought into some sort of power-sharing agreement.

At the same time, some of those who will not be invited to or would not take part in the planned conference in Sochi are precisely the political forces that the United States hopes would play a leading role in a post-war Syria.

Meanwhile, although Trump may be prepared to accept a cooperative role for Russia in charting Syria's future, he has almost no political support for this position in the United

States — either within his own national security establishment or from Congress.

Assad's departure from power remains a stated U.S. objective, even if the Trump administration is more flexible than its Obama Administration predecessors in how its provisions are implemented. Limiting or even reversing Russian influence in the Middle East continue to be two operative principles guiding the formation of U.S. foreign policy.

The United States will not passively "sign on" to decisions on Syria reached largely by the trilateral Russia-Iran-Turkey dialogue — yet Russia, in turn, is not going to yield the gains that its air power has won for the Assad regime on the battlefield.

The joint Da Nang statement is important because it recognizes the crucial task of preventing any sort of clash between Moscow and Washington in Syria. It sends a clear message to the military establishments of both countries to take the steps necessary to avoid any accidents.

But for those who argue that the statement heralds an imminent shift in the trajectory of U.S.-Russia relations, I do not share in their optimism.

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