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Putin Wants Syria Talks to Last Forever

It's the only way for Russia to build a long-term military presence in the Middle East

By Leonid Bershidsky

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The Syrian National Dialogue Congress, Sochi syria-dialogue.tass.photo

(Bloomberg) — A Syrian opposition group that flew to the Russian resort of Sochi for a peace conference this week saw the gathering's logo — the flag of President Bashar Al-Assad's government unfurled between the wings of a dove — and flew back to Ankara without even going through passport control. That must've pleased the Russians, who didn't really want Assad's opponents to attend.

It was the latest example of the game Russia is playing in Syria: It isn't interested in any kind of resolution to the conflict even as it plays along with the peace process.

Russia's official position is to back Syria's territorial integrity and a United Nations-sponsored political solution to end the country's civil war. The Syrian National Dialogue

Congress in Sochi ostensibly served that purpose.

But Russia knew ahead of time that the Syrian opposition's UN-recognized negotiators wouldn't come, and the organizers did their best to scare away everybody else who wanted to speak up against Assad. It didn't quite succeed — Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was heckled as he opened the conference — but, for the most part, the gathering allowed pro-Assad delegates to have some nice meals and load up on souvenirs.

What Russia really did at Sochi is put on a show for the UN's special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, who initially worried that Russia, Turkey and Iran — the three countries behind the congress — were trying to set up an alternative to the official Syria talks in Geneva.

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The Sochi congress officially decided to hand off talks on a new constitution to a new Geneva-based committee representing all sides. De Mistura was, at least outwardly, satisfied, thanking the delegates and organizers for backing the UN-led process. It would have been counterproductive for him to reject assurances that the pro-Assad side was open to mediation.

But De Mistura probably won't be surprised if the new committee is deadlocked from the start. The Russian government isn't rolling out a red carpet for the Assad supporters because it wants to point them toward Geneva. Rather, it wants them to feel like valued long-term allies.

In July, 2017, the Russian parliament ratified an agreement with the Assad government allowing Russia to keep its air force base in Khmeimim for at least another 49 years, with subsequent extensions every 25 years.

A similar deal has also been made for the naval base in Tartus, which swelled significantly from a modest resupply facility during the Syrian war and is undergoing further expansion.

Russian President Vladimir Putin clearly regrets his earlier moves to shrink Russia's overseas military presence, and the two Syrian bases are valuable to him as Russia's only strongholds in the Middle East.

Putin, however, would be unlikely to keep the bases under a plan like the one proposed by the U.S., the U.K., France, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, whose representatives met with the UN-recognized Syrian rebels in Vienna last week. The idea of that plan is to devolve much of Assad's authority to the parliament and to regions.

That body, however, would have few reasons to recognize Assad's agreements with the Kremlin. Indeed, no one but Assad and his loyalists have a deep-seated interest in maintaining them. And the only way Assad and his loyalists can hang on to undiluted power is if Syria remains partitioned, with all the meddling foreign powers in de facto military control of their own areas.

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Whatever Russian officials, including Putin, say about a political solution, what they really want is for Syrian constitution talks to go on for 49 years, and then for another 25.

The U.S. is in a very different position in Syria, where it has about 2,000 troops. While its presence there is characterized as open-ended and focused on the "strategic threat" from Iran and countering terrorist groups, the U.S. already has enough bases in the Middle East. A political solution in Syria, especially one along the Vienna lines, would mitigate those threats. It might be enough for the U.S. to retain a presence in neighboring Iraq.

Similarly, Turkey is only involved in Syria as long as the chaos there creates a threat to its borders. But Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan doesn't appear to believe in a lasting political solution, and he appreciates Russia's acquiescence to his action against the Syrian Kurds.

A de facto partition and a semi-frozen conflict (in which, like in eastern Ukraine, people keep dying every day but no major military action occurs) is the only viable option for Russia, the best one for Iran since it retains influence on Assad, an acceptable second-best scenario for Turkey and an unnecessary nuisance for the U.S.

But since Russia isn't likely to believe any Western guarantees that it can retain its bases indefinitely under any alternative arrangement, none of the alternatives are feasible.

That makes De Mistura's position unenviable. He'll be forced to attend more Russian-produced circuses as the pro-Assad side stalls further talks.

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