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For Russia, There's No Way Out of Syria (Op-ed)

Syrian President Bashar Assad has trapped Russia into fighting until the bitter end

By Vladimir Frolov

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Bassam Khableh / Reuters

In Syria, Russia is discovering that winning the war might be easier than winning the peace.

Each time President Putin declares victory or announces a drawdown of Russian forces, like he did in December, the fighting flares up with a new intensity and Moscow is required to fly in reinforcements.

Having saved Syrian President Bashar Assad from being toppled by Islamist rebels with a carefully calibrated series of airstrikes, Moscow is now struggling to parlay its military gains into an internationally legitimate political settlement that would help Russia recoup its

investments in the conflict. For now, Syria remains ungovernable and splintered into fiefdoms run by regional players with their own interests.

Moscow's initial plan was to secure Assad's position by weakening rebel groups. But it also envisioned imposing a real power-sharing settlement between the regime and the armed opposition, which would remain in de-facto control of considerable real estate, so long as it pledged loyalty to the Syrian state.

It was an arrangement that might have resembled Chechnya, and whose goals were enshrined in the UNSC Res. 2254, which was developed both by Russia and the United States.To expedite a settlement, Moscow launched the trilateral talks in Astana. Turkey and Iran were the guarantors of de-escalation agreements between the regime and the opposition.

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The de-escalation zone in Eastern Ghouta, now the scene of intense fighting, was agreed directly between Russian officers and the rebels in secret talks in Egypt. Convenening the Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi last January to move forward on the constitutional process was Moscow's attempt to jump-start the UN-run Geneva talks where the regime-opposition had binary reached an impasse.

But that strategy is no longer operative. It depended on Russia acting as an honest broker between the regime and the opposition, ready to enforce even-handedly the terms of the deals reached.

That never happened. The de-escalation zones are now dead. The only one still working is in the south-west of Syria and was negotiated by Russia and the United States outside of the Astana process. Now, the regime is using the zones as a way to more economically deploy its military to secure a complete military victory.

Assad refuses to discuss any terms of a political settlement. He derailed the Sochi talks by insisting on making only symbolic amendments to the existing Syrian constitution. Damascus shot down Russia's draft of a new Syrian constitution that would have devolved significant powers to local authorities.

With Russia, Assad has successfully pursued a strategy of entrapment. It has drawn Moscow deeper into the war and denied the Kremlin any opportunity to extract itself from the conflict. Assad has forced Moscow into supporting the regime's objective of a full military victory.

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Assad correctly gambled that Russia would not try to leverage the regime by withdrawing air support. To do so would quickly weaken Assad's military position and negate Russia's gains in the conflict, humiliating the Kremlin. Assad knows that Moscow is stuck with him and cannot afford to reduce its support.

Ironically, Russia's success on the battlefield has weakened not strengthened its leverage with Damascus, hampering Russia's ability to dictate its terms of the settlement. This strengthens

those in Russia's defense establishment who endorse Assad's goal of a full military victory, while weakening those who are wary of overstaying in Syria where another military disaster is always around the corner.

To be able to have political leverage and influence, the Kremlin would need to have a presence on the ground to hold terrain. Moscow is using mostly airpower, while deliberately keeping a small ground footprint to minimize casualties.

The party that has control over terrain and much more substantial influence on Assad is Iran, which is also pursuing the entrapment strategy with Russia. At the same time, hopes in the U.S. and Israel that Russia would somehow be able to curtail Iran's influence in Syria are unrealistic.

Moscow has missed the exits. It could have distanced itself from Assad when he used sarin gas against rebels in Idlib in April 2017. But the use of chemical weapons was another of Assad's tactics to entrap Russia into sticking with the regime to the end.

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Moscow bought into it by providing Assad blanket protection in the UN Security Council at the expense of undermining the international norm against the use of chemical weapons.

With U.S. President Donald Trump again threatening force against the Syrian regime to stop the atrocities in Eastern Ghouta, and with Washington essentially controlling large chunks of eastern Syria to force Assad into negotiating with the opposition, Moscow finds itself in a precarious position.

It would have to provide military support to the regime were it attacked by outside powers, including Israel, which is pushing the limits here too. Or, the Kremlin would need to be prepared to stand down and watch Assad's forces decimated, as it did when U.S. forces destroyed regime forces in Deir-ez-Zor in early February when a number of Russian mercenaries were also killed. Both options are unpalatable.

Moscow should also be cognizant of the fact that Washington may decide to fight back against Russian efforts to undermine its geopolitical position around the world. Were it to do so, Russia's exposure in Syria could provide the U.S. with a perfect offset to make Russia's foray into the Middle East a very taxing endeavor.

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