

In Syria, Moscow Is Defending a Narrative, Not a Country (Op-ed)

Moscow does not want a war—but it does want Russians to stick to a war mentality.

By [Maxim Trudolyubov](#)

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Li Muzi / Zuma / TASS

Russia condemned the U.S.-led military strikes launched early last Saturday against targets in Syria. Russia responded by convening an emergency session of the UN Security Council, which then rejected a Russian-backed resolution denouncing the strike.

The limited scope of the Western operation may have come as a relief to Moscow, but the disappointment underlying Moscow's reaction was palpable.

Moscow has long been stoking domestic alarm over an imminent new war cycle in Syria. Russia's General Valery Gerasimov described a menu of possible provocations and Russia's

plans for retaliation if Russian servicemen were harmed in U.S. strikes.

Last week there was a lot of talk in Russia of a new “Cuban crisis,” evoking the breathtaking showdown between the U.S.S.R and the United States in 1962 over Moscow’s installation of nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba. In response to Russian bravado, President Donald Trump tweeted about America’s “nice, new and “smart”!” missiles.

But behind the smokescreen of the American president’s flamboyance and Moscow’s World-War-III innuendo, both sides have shown cool-headed restraint. The United States and Russia quickly moved to de-escalate as soon as the operation was over. Military and diplomatic contacts continued.

Given the circumstances, it is a good outcome. But for the Kremlin, it is bad television. Moscow wanted an engrossing new story about an evil aggressor deterred by a righteous Russia.

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Commentators on Russia’s state-run television had few comforting stories to tell apart from praising Syrian air defenses, all Soviet designs from the 1970s, doing a superb job shooting down Western missiles. Syria intercepted 71 out of 103 cruise missiles fired by the U.S. and its allies, the Russian Ministry of Defense said on Saturday.

The U.S. military denied the claim. A military representative stated that the Syrians launched around 40 surface to air missiles after the last U.S. missile hit its target. At no time, he added, were Russian air defense systems engaged. The U.S. did acknowledge that they did not strike all the sites believed to be involved in Syria’s chemical weapons program.

Bashar Assad demonstrated his defiance by meeting soon after with a group of Russian lawmakers and resuming airstrikes against the remaining rebel-held territories.

Militarily, that was it. The story quickly returned to the usual old bickering. Moscow changed its line from at first denying the fact of a chemical attack to then claiming that the attack was staged as part of a “Russophobic campaign” orchestrated by an unnamed country.

It later emerged that the country Moscow meant was Britain: “We have evidence that proves Britain was directly involved in organizing this provocation,” General Igor Konashenkov, spokesman of the Russian defense ministry, said.

The Kremlin prefers a military narrative for Syria because it puts Russia and the U.S. on an equal footing. A military narrative makes Syria a story of two great powers fighting for dominance in an important part of the world.

But the U.S. president ended up choosing the most restrained of the military action plans offered to him by Pentagon. Instead of sticking to Russia’s script, both the U.S. and Britain quickly moved on to planning additional economic sanctions against Moscow for supporting the Syrian government and its alleged use of chemical weapons.

And sanctions are not an attractive story for the Kremlin; and especially when aimed at Russia's moneyed elites, they do inflict economic pain.

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This point was driven home immediately the following Monday as shares in the Russian aluminum producer Rusal declined an additional 21 percent in the morning trade in Hong Kong.

The Hong Kong-listed Rusal and its main shareholder, Oleg Deripaska, were among those Russian oligarchs directly targeted by US sanctions announced on April 6. Rusal shares had already lost more than 50 percent in value on April 9 following the earlier announcement of sanctions.

Fortunately for Russia, on Monday President Trump reversed his administration's plans for additional sanctions against Moscow.

Moscow is considering restrictions on U.S. goods and services, but it is unable to enact any retaliation as biting as U.S. sanctions: Russia is too weak economically. This is not lost on ordinary Russians who have long resorted to dark humor in discussing the issue.

The [meme](#) of choice is that Moscow will respond to further Western sanctions by "bombing Voronezh," which is to say that as long as Russia cannot inflict economic pain on the U.S. it will punish its own citizens.

This is why the military narrative is so important for the Kremlin. It relishes the story of a "Great Game" rivalry. For its home audiences, the Kremlin wants to convey the drama of an evil power pushing for a regime change and a good power defending the legitimate government of a sovereign nation.

Moscow does not want a war—but it does want Russians to stick to a war mentality. The images of war flickering on the screen help foster a great story of Russia, Putin at its helm, waging a just war against U.S. aggression.

The Kremlin seems to love a great story better than a great country. Make Russia's story great again, not Russia itself, seems to be the strategy. The Kremlin, of course, hates being brought down to earth by the ugly reality of its economic weakness.

Russia's leadership would be wise to try to reassess its economic shortfalls and start thinking of long-term solutions instead of playing dangerous games of military brinkmanship.

The U.S., for its own part, should take pause and reflect on the fact that Russia's proposed resolution may have been easily defeated in the Security Council over the weekend, but it did have one mighty supporter apart from Russia itself: China.

Maxim Trudolyubov is a senior fellow with the Kennan Institute, where this article was originally [published](#). The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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