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US plays Monopoly, Russia plays chess

By Spengler

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Americans see individual pieces of geopolitical real estate in isolation, like hotels on the Monopoly board, while the Russians look at the interaction of all their spheres of interest around the globe.

Syria is of no real strategic interest to Russia, nor to anyone else for that matter. It is a broken wreck of a country, with an irreparably damaged economy, without the energy, water, or food to maintain long-term economic viability. The multiethnic melange left in place by British and French cartographers after the First World War has broken down irreparably into a war of mutual extermination, whose only result can be depopulation or partition on the Yugoslav model.

Syria only has importance in so far as its crisis threatens to spill over into surrounding territories which have more strategic importance. As a Petri dish for jihadist movements, it threatens to become the training ground for a new generation of terrorists, serving the same role that Afghanistan did during the 1990s and 2000s.

As a testing ground for the use of weapons of mass destruction, it provides a diplomatic laboratory to gauge the response of world powers to atrocious actions with comparatively little risk to the participants. It is an incubator of national movements, in which, for example, the newfound freedom of action for the country's 2 million Kurds constitutes a means of destabilizing Turkey and other countries with substantial Kurdish minorities. Most important, as

the cockpit of confessional war between Sunnis and Shi'ite, Syria may become the springboard for a larger conflict engulfing Iraq and possibly other states in the region.

I do not know what Putin wants in Syria. I do not believe that at this point Russia's president knows what he wants in Syria, either. A strong chess player engaging an inferior opponent will create complications without an immediate strategic objective, in order to provoke blunders from the other side and take opportunistic advantage. There are many things that Putin wants. But he wants one big thing above all, namely, the restoration of Russia's great power status. Russia's leading diplomatic role in Syria opens several options to further this goal.

As the world's largest energy producer, Russia wants to enhance its leverage over Western Europe for which it is the principle energy supplier. It wants to influence the marketing of natural gas produced by Israel and other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. It wants to make other energy producers in the region dependent on its good graces for the security of their energy exports. It wants to enhance its role as a supplier of military equipment, challenging the American F-35 and F-22 with the new Sukhoi T-50 stealth fighter among other things. It wants a free hand in dealing with terrorism among its Muslim minority in the Caucasus. And it wants to maintain influence in its so-called near abroad in Central Asia.

American commentators reacted with surprise and in some cases dismay to Russia's emergence as the arbiter of the Syria crisis. In fact, Russia's emerging role in the region was already evident when the chief of Saudi intelligence, Prince Bandar, flew to Moscow during the first week of August to meet with Putin. The Russians and Saudis announced that they would collaborate to stabilize the new military government in Egypt, in direct opposition to the Obama administration. In effect Russia offered to sell Egypt any weapons that the United States declined to sell, while Saudi Arabia offered to pay for them.

That was a diplomatic revolution without clear precedent. It is not only that the Russians have returned to Egypt 40 years after they were expelled in the context of the real world war; they have done so in tactical alliance with Saudi Arabia, historically Russia's nemesis in the region.

Saudi Arabia has an urgent interest in stabilizing Egypt, and in suppressing the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudi monarchy nightly views as a risk to its legitimacy. Saudi support for the Egyptian military against the Brotherhood is not surprising; what is most surprising is that the Saudi's felt to involve Russia.

Although there are a number of obvious reasons for the Saudi's and Russians to collaborate, for example controlling the jihadists in the Syrian opposition, we do not yet understand the full implications of their rapprochement. The Saudis leaked news that they had offered to buy \$15 billion worth of Russian weapons in return for Russian help with Assad. Rumors of this kind should not be read at face value. They might be misdirection - but misdirection towards what?

Putin's chessboard encompasses the globe. It includes such things as the security of energy exports from the Persian Gulf; the transmission of oil and gas through Central Asia; the market for Russian arms exports; energy negotiations now underway between Russia and China; the vulnerability of Europe's energy supplies; and the internal stability of countries on or near Russia's borders, including Turkey, Iraq and Iran.

For American analysts, most of this chessboard might as well be on the dark side of the moon. We see only what the Russians permit us to see. For example, Moscow first promised to provide Syria with the S-300 air defense system and then withdrew its offer. Saudi Arabia in early August let it be known that it was prepared to buy \$15 billion of Russian weapons in return for considerations in Syria. A negotiation of some kind is underway, but we have no idea what kind of carrots and sticks might be involved.

What we may surmise is that Russia now has much greater capacity to influence events in the Middle East, including the security of energy resources, that it has at any time since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. For the time being, it is in Russia's interest to keep its interlocutory guessing, and to enhance its future strategic options. Russia in effect has placed the burden of uncertainty on the rest of the world, especially upon major economies dependent on Persian Gulf energy exports.

President Obama evidently considers this arrangement beneficial to his own agenda. The president has no interest whatever in enhancing America's strategic position in the world; his intent may be to diminish it, as Norman Podhoretz charged in the Wall Street Journal last week, and I argued five years ago. Obama is focused on his domestic agenda.

From that standpoint, handing over responsibility for the Syrian mess is a riskless exercise. American popular revulsion over foreign military intervention is so intense that the voters will welcome any measure that reduces American responsibility for foreign problems. Although the elite of the Democratic Party are liberal internationalists, Obama's voting support has scant interest in Syria.

Public commentary on foreign policy is an exercise in frustration under the circumstances. Because America is a democracy, and substantial commitment of resources requires at least some degree of consensus, diplomacy was exceptionally transparent so long as America dominated the field. Think tanks, academia and the media served as a sounding board for any significant initiatives, so that important decisions were taken at least in part in the view of the public. That is no longer the case on Vladimir Putin's chessboard. Russia will pursue a set of strategic trade-offs, but we in the West will not know what they are until well after the fact, if ever.

Further dimensions of complexity will arise from the eventual response of other prospective players, in particular China, but also including Japan. The self-shrinkage of America's strategic position eliminates the constraint for Russia to choose a particular option. On the contrary, Russia can accumulate positional advantages to employ for particular strategic objectives at its leisure. And Putin will sit silent on his side of the chessboard and let the clock run against his opponent.

Putin may think that he is pre-empting a similar strategy on the part of the West. Fyodor Lukanov wrote on the AI Monitor website last March:

From Russian leadership's point of view, the Iraq War now looks like the beginning of the accelerated destruction of regional and global stability, undermining the last principles of sustainable world order. Everything that's happened since - including flirting with Islamists

during the Arab Spring, US policies in Libya and its current policies in Syria - serve as evidence of strategic insanity that has taken over the last remaining superpower.

Russia's persistence on the Syrian issue is the product of this perception. The issue is not sympathy for Syria's dictator, nor commercial interests, nor naval bases in Tartus. Moscow is certain that if continued crushing of secular authoritarian regimes is allowed because America and the West support "democracy", it will lead to such destabilization that will overwhelm all, including Russia. It's therefore necessary for Russia to resist, especially as the West and the United States themselves experience increasing doubts.

Russians typically assume that Americans think the way they do, gauging every move by the way it affects the overall position on the board. The notion that incompetence rather than conspiracy explains the vast majority of American actions is foreign to Russian thinking. Whatever the Russian leader thinks, though, he will keep to himself.

After 12 years of writing on foreign policy in this space, I have nothing more to say. The Obama administration has handed the strategic initiative to countries whose policy-making proceeds behind a wall of opacity. Robert Frost's words come to mind:

*As for the evil tidings
Belshazzar's overthrow
Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
What he soon enough will know?*

Or - as in Robin Williams' old nightclub impression of then president Jimmy Carter addressing the nation on the eve of World War III: "That's all, good night, you're on your own."