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Middle East Strategic Landscape Goes Through Drastic Changes (I)

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Washington dug its own grave in Syria

With all the existing diversity of views on the Russian operation in Syria, essentially everyone agrees that it testifies to the failure of West's Syria policy. The Russian action will have a far-reaching effect on the whole situation in the Middle East. Some people predict a failure, but an impartial assessment shows it was the right moment for active interference into the procrastinated Syria's conflict. The choice of time was a great success.

The Russian Aerospace Forces are capable of drastically changing the balance of forces in the region. The intervention effectively excludes the possibility of the Syrian war sliding towards an international conflict of broader scale.

It is obvious that when The United States provoked an acute crisis in Ukraine – an area where Russia has vital interests – roughly two years ago, it was aimed at diverting Moscow's attention from Syria and its support of President Assad. The White House believed those days that the total failure of its Middle East strategy was not its fault – there was somebody else to blame. It still appears to be subject to this blissful delusion. In the heat of the Ukrainian crisis the United States enjoyed relative freedom of action. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria got worse, including

the spread of terrorist activities.

Unexpectedly, Russia's involvement in the Ukraine's crisis made its position in the Middle East even stronger.

One reason is the Crimean Peninsula. It's an open secret that if the peninsula did not become part of Russia, its military activities in the eastern Mediterranean would be greatly restricted. Crimea has crucial strategic importance for providing logistical support for the Russian Aerospace Forces. The peninsula allows to create a «bubble» protecting military operations in the Black Sea and in the eastern part of Mediterranean. Foreign experts were rather surprised to see how rapidly Russia boosted its military capabilities in Crimea.

The fact that the peninsula became part of Russia made irrelevant alarmist «doomsday» scenarios predicted for Syria. Supreme Allied Commander, Europe and Commander of US European Command four star General Philip Breedlove said, that with Crimea becoming its part «Russia has developed a very strong anti-access/anti-denial/air defense (A2/AD) capability in the Black Sea». «Essentially, their [anti-ship] cruise missiles range the entire Black Sea, and their air defense missiles range about 40 to 50 percent of the Black Sea,» the General noted. «We're a little worried about another A2/AD bubble being created in the Eastern Mediterranean», Breedlove added.

Jeffrey Sachs, an American economist and political scholar, a special advisor to the United Nations Secretary General, believes that «the United States' current approach – a two-front war against the Islamic State and President Bashar al-Assad's regime – has failed miserably». A strange union of two sources of American foreign policy lies at the root of US strategy in Syria. One comprises the US security establishment, including the military, the intelligence agencies, and their supporters in Congress. The other source emerges from the human-rights community. Their peculiar merger has been evident in many recent US wars in the Middle East and Africa. The results have been consistently devastating.

The problem, as human-rights advocates should have learned long ago, is that the US security establishment's regime-change model does not work. It often devolves into chaos, anarchy, civil war, and burgeoning humanitarian crises, as it happened in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now Syria. Jeffrey Sachs writes, «If the US wants better results, it should stop doing it alone. The US cannot impose its will unilaterally, and trying to do so has merely arrayed other powerful countries, including China and Russia, against it. Like the US, Russia has a strong interest in stability in Syria and in defeating the Islamic State; but it has no interest in allowing the US to install its choice of regimes in Syria or elsewhere in the region».

The US and its allies launched the operation against the Islamic State (IS) a year ago. The results are stunning. With 7 thousand strikes delivered the effort has gone down the drain. The outcome is quite the opposite of what was expected. Since the anti-Islamic State coalition was formed, the group has made new gains, seizing Al Anbar and Ramadi provinces of Iraq, the Syrian cities of Deir ez-Zor, and Palmyra (the city that has been in the public limelight so much recently), as well as other territories. The military are not the only ones to blame. The main responsibility lies

with politicians.

The US did not bomb the Islamic State near the line of engagement with government forces, where the targets could be easily detected by aerial reconnaissance, thinking that it would help Assad. Instead they attacked IS-controlled territories and urban areas where the militants mix with civilians. It has resulted in significant civilian casualties. Even more often the US aviation raided infrastructure, roads, bridges etc., bombing Syria back into the Stone Age. It's clear that, the Syrian government forces equipped with hardware need roads more than light and highly mobile IS formations.

The operation launched by the Russian Aerospace Forces gave the US military a kind of impetus to review the situation. The command started to ponder a scenario which would envisage establishing control over the eastern part of Syria, including Al-Raqqah, the capital of Islamic State, «to keep one step ahead of Russians», preparing on the Euphrates an inverted version of the meeting on the Elbe River. The prospects, however, are bleak.

The United States excludes the option of boots on the ground, especially during the pre-election campaign. Voices are heard advocating the use of some local forces as infantry units to launch an offensive, for instance, the formations of Syrian Kurds. If only the White House could see things as they are at least for a minute without the imaginary picture imposed by its own propaganda. Then it would realize that Kurds will never leave the territory under their control. The only «infantry» capable of fighting the Islamic State on all fronts in the country Syria is the regular government army. No surprise, Washington has failed to respond when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov repeatedly asked to share the information on the positions of the Free Syrian Army.

The United States drove itself into a strategic trap. No matter what step it takes, the things will only get worse. Throwing its support behind Russia in its fight against terrorism would correspond to common sense and become the best solution for all. But Washington rejects this option as threatening to its credibility in the Middle East and strengthening the position of Moscow in the region. Hot heads in the United States and Saudi Arabia call for getting together and arming all groups of Syria opposition. But whom will they fight for? The Islamic State, the group which shocked the world by ominous pictures of mass executions, extermination of Christians and destruction of historical sites? Even seasoned US propaganda masterminds cannot make such an ally to be favorable.

Reacting to the events in Syria and Russian active intervention, the White House still has to take public opinion into consideration. According to the polls, public would hardly welcome the steps supporting international terrorism. That is exactly how the attempts to obstruct Russian military operation would look like.

In this sense, it's worth to mention the stance of Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump. On September 29 he told NBC's «Today» program: «I side with the group that says 'if Russia wants to go and fight ISIS, you should let them', as opposed to saying 'we're jealous, we don't want you to do that'».

Asked about his attitude towards Syrian government, Trump said in his interview with CNN on October 6, it is not clear who can take the place of Assad: «I would certainly like to see what's going on. I'd like to find out who these people are that we want to give billions of dollars to. We have no idea. And sure, Assad is a bad guy, but you can have worse. And maybe these people are worse. We have no idea».

Emma Ashford of Cato Institute writes in a Newsweek article: «U.S. officials must avoid increased intervention in Syria, where a knee-jerk reaction to Russia's actions could be disastrous». It would be foolish to increase the support of for extremist groups just because Russia sees them as targets – an enemy of my enemy is not always my friend. The author offers a simple solution – not to stand in the way of Russians.

Perhaps, this is the best thing the United States can do under the circumstances. No doubt, Washington will seize any opportunity to say Russian pilots lack professional training, the strikes are «indiscriminate» and the strikes are delivered at wrong targets... The right way to react has already been chosen. Priority should be given to maximum accuracy and transparency. It's hard to distort anything when the events are highlighted in real time. Crimea provides valuable experience. The accession of Crimea has become a turning point in regard to its influence on Russian strategic thinking.