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Russia Versus the United States in Syria

By Ivan Eland
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The villainous Vladimir Putin is pretending to hit ISIS targets in Syria, but instead has his aircraft striking other opposition groups in that country, including what U.S.-supported "moderate" rebels still exist, according to the Obama administration. Apparently, the administration is aghast that Russia would act in its own interests in Syria, even though U.S. interests diverge from those of Russia – although they shouldn't necessarily.

For the Russians, saving the sinking Assad regime in Syria, a longtime Soviet/Russian client in the Middle East and Russia's last foothold there, is their top priority. Because ISIS is one of the groups opposed to Assad government, the Russians, always leery of radical Islam that can be a threat even within Russia, are opposed to the group, but killing it is only their secondary priority. In contrast, killing ISIS appears to be the first priority of the United States, even over its contradictory goal of getting rid of Assad. If anything, the U.S. goals of getting rid of both ISIS and Assad, two nasty opponents of each other, are at cross-purposes and too grandiose – since both now look unlikely.

In the Russian mind, the United States and its coalition are attacking ISIS by air, so that Russia, to save Assad, should attack other opposition groups – other radical Islamist groups, including al Nusra, the al Qaeda affiliate, and U.S.-trained "moderate" rebels. Instead, the United States wants to get rid of the thuggish, but secular, Assad and continues to hold the fantasy that replacing him will miraculously lead to the rise of moderates in Syria or a settlement in which all

the radical Islamic opposition groups just give up their efforts to institute Islamic law there and accept a post-Assad coalition government. Unbelievably, Obama has learned nothing from the recent disastrous overthrow of secular dictators in Iraq (during the George W. Bush administration) and Libya (its own foible). Also, war is an evolutionary hothouse in which the most ruthless people usually prevail, so the much beleaguered moderate opposition in Syria is most likely to be eventually exterminated by the more militarily effective militant Islamists. For example, the first very small group of U.S. military-trained moderates was wiped out by al Nusra and the second small group abandoned its advance weapons to the radicals and ran.

Although Assad is a thuggish autocrat and only controls a part of Syria (the 20-25 % figure often heard is misleading because much of Syria is desert), he is better than the radical Islamists of all stripes. What is needed to effectively fight such radicalism – and which is in dire shortage – is secular (not moderate or democratic) local ground forces; the Kurds and the remnants of Assad's Syrian army are the only game in town. Therefore, in order to have any prayer at all in combating ISIS, Obama should abandon his goal of getting rid of Assad and quietly accept him. This would bring U.S. and Russian goals closer together. Despite Obama's idealized vision, it essentially comes down to Assad versus radical Islamists of all stripes – which both Russia and the United States oppose. (However, it would still not prevent the two powers from jockeying for position in the last bastion of Russian influence in the Middle East.)

However, ISIS will not be defeated in Syria by either U.S. or Russian air power alone. In my book, *The Failure of Counterinsurgency*, I note that if a great power is fighting guerrillas with air power in lieu of substantial and knowledgeable local forces on the ground, it is likely to fail. Fighting such radical groups from the air usually inadvertently or carelessly kills civilians, thus inflaming hostility and creating more terrorists. For example, in Syria, since the U.S. bombing started, ISIS has grown from 15,000 to 30,000 fighters and this is likely why.

If the United States, as the global cop, insists on using the Syrian civil war to challenge Russia's attempt to shore up its longtime and eroding client government in Syria, perhaps it should think twice. Russia's provision of air power to back up the Assad regime only increases the chances that it will be enmeshed in the Syrian tar pit, as it was when it invaded and occupied Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s. In this conflict, Russia is putting its prestige on the line by committing air power. Nevertheless, if Assad's fortunes keep declining, that hit to the Russian pride may require a deeper involvement in the conflict.

Unfortunately, Obama's strategy in Syria is not as sophisticated as Jimmy Carter's and Ronald Reagan's when they lured Russia into a quagmire in Afghanistan years ago. Obama committed U.S. prestige to fighting ISIS – mainly a threat only to the Middle East region – even before Russia did. Obama should have stayed out of Syria and let three bitter U.S. foes annihilate each other – the Assad government, ISIS, and al Nusra. As noted before, Obama's effort from the air has failed. Predictably, he is now funneling more weapons to the Kurds and other selected Syrian opposition groups on the ground – even though that strategy has failed previously in fighting ISIS in both Syria and Iraq.

What's next? To preserve U.S. prestige, will Obama or his successor commit U.S. ground forces to Syria (and increase those countering ISIS in Iraq)? Russian air power will likely also fail. For

the same reason, the Russians may also be faced with a decision to either let Assad fall or insert Russian ground forces to prevent that from happening. Enmeshing the Russians in a quagmire might ordinarily be a good U.S. policy, but this time, they may just join a United States already in the bog.