

MARCH 2019

# The United States and Russia in the Greater Middle East

James Dobbins & Ivan Timofeev

---

Though the Middle East has not been the trigger of the current U.S.-Russia crisis, it is an area of competition. The American and Russian militaries are pursuing different objectives and are in close proximity in Syria, with a risk of unintended incidents. The views of the United States and Russia on Iran and its role in regional affairs are significantly different. Moscow and Washington have disagreements on the fate of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), sanctions against Iran, and the future of its nuclear program. They approach the Iranian political system and regime differently and have divergent attitudes toward Iran's role in Syria. These differences overlap with disagreement regarding the resolution of the Syrian conflict as well as other disputes in the Middle East.

These tensions are further exacerbated by an unprecedented deterioration of the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship in general. Congress has imposed sanctions on Russia over Moscow's support for the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad and is likely to further increase pressure in the near future.<sup>1</sup> Sanctions legally define Russia as a challenger and competitor of the United States. In other words, U.S.-Russia relations are in a negative path dependency which may perpetuate the logic of rivalry even if there are opportunities for cooperation. Still, U.S. and Russian interests in the Middle East and Afghanistan are not wholly incompatible. Despite the many disagreements, there is also space for common interests and joint action.

## *Iran and the JCPOA*

On May 8, 2018, the United States announced its abandonment of the JCPOA and in November reestablished the sanctions regime which had existed before the agreement was signed. One of the most significant measures is an extra-territorial ban on Iranian crude oil exports. No other signatory of the JCPOA has supported the U.S. withdrawal and key consumers of Iranian oil have voiced their strong

---

1. Existing sanctions norms on Syria against Russia are fixed in PL 115-44 (the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act or CAATSA) at Sections 234-236. More sanctions are implied by the Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression Act or DASKAA, which will be debated by Congress in the near future. Theoretically, the new legislation may require the Department of State to identify if Russia is a state-sponsor of terrorism. This may be a trigger for rapid escalation of U.S.-Russia tensions, though the probability of this is low.

discontent. Washington has already made temporary exceptions from sanctions for eight countries. However, such exceptions are hardly a concession, since the significant reduction of oil imports from Iran is a condition for Washington agreeing to a prolongation of these waivers in the future.

Despite its international isolation on JCPOA, U.S. strategy has its own coherent logic. The renewal of the U.S. sanctions forces Iran to choose between two alternatives. The first is to renew its military nuclear program and abandon JCPOA, though this alternative would likely be too costly for Iran. Tehran would have to violate UNSC Resolution No. 2231, which would leave it in total isolation and open an avenue for internationalization of sanctions in the UN. Moreover, Iran seemingly does not have enough capabilities to quickly produce reliable nuclear weapons and play a game similar to that of North Korea. Further efforts to produce nuclear weapons may also provoke U.S. military intervention. The second alternative for Iran is to stay committed to the JCPOA, trying to isolate the United States and diminish the effect of sanctions via cooperation with others. New sanctions would hardly change Tehran's political course. However, they will do more damage to the Iranian economy, decrease Tehran's exports, and, the United States believes, create risks for the stability of Iran's political system. So far, Iran has chosen the second option. It is staying within JCPOA, but the United States now has a stronger leverage to press Iran internally and externally.

Russia supports Iran's commitment to JCPOA. Like other partners in the deal, Moscow will be critical of the U.S. decision to withdraw from a multilateral agreement. Moscow is not interested in the restoration of the Iranian military nuclear program, but U.S. plans to close civil nuclear opportunities for Iran would still not be appreciated by Russia.

A reduction of Iranian oil exports is not greatly beneficial for Russia either. The deficit of Iranian supply is compensated for by Saudi Arabia, leaving global prices basically unchanged. The prospect of eliminating a competitor for the oil market is not a motivation for Russia to support the U.S. efforts.

For its part, the Trump administration has largely chosen to shape its policies toward Iran around Israeli and Saudi objectives. Put simply, these objectives are to eliminate Iranian influence anywhere in the Arab world and to prevent Iran from reviving even the civil aspects of its nuclear program. As long as Washington clings to these objectives, there is little room for collaboration with Moscow on Iran-related matters.

The Saudi-American connection has been shaken, however, by the murder of Saudi dissident, American resident, and Washington Post journalist Jamal Kashoggi at the hands of Saudi officials. The resulting crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations could lead President Trump, on his own or under Congressional pressure, to adopt a more independent course (the U.S. Treasury has already sanctioned 17 Saudi officials connected to the incident). A change in the U.S. approach has become evident with respect to the Saudi-sponsored conflict in Yemen.

U.S. officials are now calling for a ceasefire in Yemen and supporting a UN-led peace process. But since neither Washington nor Riyadh are willing to talk directly to Tehran (which supports the Houthi rebels) and the Saudis continue to pursue a military outcome in Yemen, there has been little progress. The situation on the ground could change if the United States begins cutting back its military support to the Saudi war effort, as a growing number of members of Congress urge. In such circumstances, Russia might play a useful mediating role between Washington, Riyadh, and Tehran in support of a UN-led peace effort for Yemen.

Regarding the JCPOA, it is Tehran that is refusing to talk to Washington. Russia, along with all the other signatories, has been working to keep Iran in the agreement, which requires resisting and evading America's extra-territorial sanctions. As long as this standoff persists, there is little room for U.S.-Russian

cooperation. There is some chance that the Iranian regime may come around to accepting Trump's invitation for talks, although there is no chance that Tehran will ever agree to Secretary of State Pompeo's stated objectives for such negotiations. To be persuaded to enter any such talks, Tehran would need to be convinced that the other JCPOA signatories will continue to resist any changes that alter the basic JCPOA bargain and also continue to resist and evade efforts to penalize their trade with Iran. Should this outcome lead to renewed talks between Iran and the other JCPOA signatories, Russia would have a role in helping steer these negotiations constructively.

In sum, Washington and Moscow share an interest in preventing the renewal of the Iranian nuclear military program. However, disagreements on the means to achieve this goal as well as on other issues like Iran's civil nuclear program, decrease their motivation to cooperate. Among other issues, Moscow will be critical of attempts by Washington to promote regime change in Iran. While the United States is calling for democracy and human rights, Russia is stressing sovereignty and the right of Iran to define its own domestic affairs.

## Syria

The resolution of the Syrian conflict is complicated by the presence of multiple players with divergent interests. It is a common interest of Russia and the United States to prevent Syria's further descent into chaos and a revival of the Islamic State and other radical organizations.<sup>2</sup> However, they see the paths to achieve this goal differently. Moscow has placed its stake on the government of Assad, and Washington on a transition to a new political system. It will be difficult to reconcile these two approaches.

Both Russia and the United States have military leverage to promote their strategies, which increases the risk of incidents on the ground, in the air, and at sea. Even after the planned withdrawal of U.S. ground forces, Washington intends to continue air operations against Islamic State targets. Common interests of Moscow and Washington are to avoid incidents themselves and have a mechanism to exclude further escalation if an incident happens. There is a direct line between the two sides. However, incidents may occur in cases of new U.S. strikes against Syrian government forces, provocations (by any actor) with chemical weapons, and actions of proxies of different kinds on the ground, among others.

The U.S.-Iranian-Russian triangle in Syria is asymmetric. Iran is a partner (though not an ally) of Russia and the Assad government while it is a threat and foe for the United States and Israel. Russia is not interested in further escalation of Iran-Israel tensions due to possible damage to its relations with Tel Aviv. At the same time, Moscow has limited influence on Iran in Syria and could hardly affect the level of its military presence, whatever the United States desires. It is doubtful that Russia will use its political capital in relations with Iran to promote any concessions by Tehran in the interests of Washington. Iran will continue to use Syria as a means to challenge U.S. interests, especially considering increasing U.S. sanctions pressure. Iran will also try to contain the influence of Saudi Arabia in Syria.

Although Washington and Moscow have long sought to cooperate in ending the Syrian civil war, they have not been successful. Deconfliction rather than actual collaboration is the best they have achieved so far. The United States is seeking the creation of an interim Syrian government, national elections, and Assad's eventual departure. But Washington's priority objective is the departure of all Iranian and Iranian-backed militia forces.

---

2. Prohibited in Russia.

Iran is never going to entirely abandon Syria. It was influential there before the war and will be influential afterward. But the Iranian-backed military presence is likely to be reduced somewhat when the active phase of the war is over. In such circumstances, both Assad and Moscow will likely wish to see most of the Iranian-backed foreign militia elements return to Lebanon, Afghanistan, and the other lands of origin.

So the time may come when the fighting has essentially ceased, when the Iranian-backed militia no longer perform a function that serves Assad's or Moscow's purposes, and when both Russia and the Assad regime may be ready to join Washington in wishing these foreign fighters gone. It is at this point that the U.S. and Russian efforts might lead to a significant reduction in the Iranian-backed militia presence.

Such a withdrawal would also reduce the incidence of Israeli-Iranian clashes in Syria and the threat of more direct conflict between the two, a de-escalation which both Moscow and Washington would favor and could cooperate to promote.

The U.S.-Turkey-Russia triangle in Syria is different. Russia partners with Ankara, though the level of interaction is still limited. Turkey has strong disagreements with the United States on the Kurdish question. However, Ankara and Washington are strategically interdependent. This reality makes Russia a weaker part of the triangle. Russia might nevertheless play a helpful role in working out arrangements satisfactory to Damascus and Ankara that allow the Kurds in eastern Syria to retain some limited degree of autonomy within a unified Syria after the U.S. military withdrawal.

In sum, Russia and the United States have common strategic interests to prevent radicalization and the return of chaos to Syria, to de-conflict their military activities, to prevent use of chemical weapons, and to avoid an increase of third-party influence and the resulting complications with partners and allies. However, technical achievement of these goals is complicated by different visions of political transition in Syria and different kind of relations with third parties such as Iran and Turkey.

## *Afghanistan*

Afghanistan can be an area of cooperation between Russia and the United States. Both are interested in preventing the Islamic State from taking root in the country and would like to guard against the spread of instability to Central Asia. Both seek to reduce the trafficking of narcotics from Afghanistan, and both are also interested in some form of compromise between the Taliban and the government in Kabul. Moreover, Moscow and Washington have cooperated on Afghanistan in the past. Still, practical cooperation will not return to the levels that existed before 2014. At best, Russia will remain a supplier of necessary equipment for the government.

However, Moscow may play a role as mediator in the internal Afghan dialogue. This effort will be significantly complicated by the lack of unity within the Taliban, as well as among national and local actors on the Afghan government side. The Taliban is not a centralized and unified force. Furthermore, it is hard to expect coherent internal consensus in Afghanistan even if there is a compromise between the Taliban and the government in Kabul. Washington's positions are more constrained due to its military presence, while Russia may be more flexible. Finally, the Central Asian dimension would be critical for Russia in shaping its interests in Afghanistan and respective relations with the United States.

Three events could be game changers. The first is a decisive military success by the Taliban against the government. In this case, Kabul may have to accept the Taliban's conditions. The second is disintegration of the Taliban. The third would be the collapse of the government in Kabul as a result of indecisive national elections. None of these is likely, but the third is the most likely.

Russia and the United States could coordinate their efforts to achieve a more or less stable internal “pact” in Afghanistan. However, Washington seems, so far, to be very careful in dealing with Russian initiatives and prefers to test the waters with the Taliban on its own. Yet both sides want to see a peace process launched that ends the war, integrates the Taliban into the larger national fabric, and further marginalizes the local affiliate of the Islamic State. The main obstacle to such collaboration is less any divergence of objectives and more the poor state of the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship more generally. The Trump administration has prioritized the launch of such a process and named an experienced envoy for that purpose. If Russo-American collaboration can advance anywhere, it should be here.

*Ambassador James Dobbins is a senior fellow and distinguished chair in Diplomacy and Security at the RAND Corporation. Ivan Timofeev is director of programs at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).*

*This report is made possible by the generous support of Carnegie Corporation of New York.*

**This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, taxexempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

**© 2019 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**