



LOOK AT SYRIA, SEE AFGHANISTAN

Russia's New Geostrategy in Southern and Central Eurasia

Situation Analysis Report

Minsk 2016

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FOREWORD

The present report was drafted and finalized by November 15, 2015. But publishing it was impossible due to technical issues.

Since then a number of crucial events took place both in the Middle East and Central Asia. But the authors decided not to update it, but instead to publish it as it was and complement it with an updated chapter taking into consideration the most recent trends and events that have taken place from November 15 till December 14, 2015. Such an approach seems most adequate and allows us to check the validity of the basic hypotheses that lie in the foundation of our analysis.

The report was published in Russian on December 15, 2015. The present English edition was finalized on January 5, 2016 with no amendments to the original Russian text. It included though several remarks that are presented as footnotes.

We also underline that the present report is a follow up to a previously issued report [“Russia's New Geostrategy: Implications and Challenges for Architecture of International Security”](#).

We hope that publishing this report will contribute to a frank discussion on the present international situation.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of Russia's military campaign in Syria was the second 'surprise' for the White House and other decision-making centres in the West, following the Ukraine crisis. The surprise seems to have been so surprising that it provided ground for holding a hearing in the US Congress regarding the work of American intelligence.

Since mid-summer, right after reaching a historic agreement on Iran's nuclear program in Vienna, Russia has utilized all its diplomatic and intelligence efforts for the sake of elaboration and promotion of the initiative to create a global coalition against terrorism. It was announced by Vladimir Putin at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in late September and assumed equal cooperation between Russia and the United States in the fight against “IS” (Daesh).

This Kremlin initiative was aimed at diverting the world's attention from the Ukraine crisis, in particular – from the failure to meet the deadlines of the Minsk Agreement, and the results of the investigation on the Malaysian Boeing crash near Donetsk in 2014.

The Kremlin failed to exchange the creation of the anti-terrorist coalition based on equal footing between Russia and the USA for Washington's concessions on the Ukraine crisis, namely, recognition of the annexation of Crimea and lifting of sanctions against Russia. After

that Moscow declared the start of its own Air Force operation, creating a parallel anti-terrorist coalition, together with Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Western observers called Moscow's move unpredictable, aggressive and risky. Nevertheless, analysis shows that the Syrian campaign is not only an integral part of Russia's quite rational and pragmatic new geostrategy, but also will most definitely not be the last foreign campaign for the Russian Armed Forces.

In getting involved in the Syrian crisis, Moscow is conducting a multi-pronged and multi-level game, associated with an increase in its critical impact on the geopolitical processes not only in Syria but also in the Middle East as a whole. It is not connected with the unconditional support of Bashar al-Assad or the fight against ISIS.

Over the past few months Russia was visited by the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, the commander of the Al-Qods Revolutionary Guards brigade Qassem Soleimani, Saudi Arabia Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the crown prince of the Abu-Dhabi Emirate Mohammed bin Zayed, the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Kremlin has also held a series of talks with representatives of insurgent groups and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, including its leader, Khaled al-Khoja, former Syrian General Manaf Tlass who has previously been part of Bashar Al-Assad's inner circle, and even his disgraced relatives – uncle Rifat and his son Siwar.

Thus, Moscow maintains contacts with all parties to the conflict both in Syria and abroad. This suggests that the Russian government is considering various options for solving the Syrian problem, depending on prevailing regional and global conditions.

Today it is obvious that Russia is putting pressure on Bashar al-Assad in order to force him to launch the transition period that includes holding new presidential elections and launching the process of constitutional reform. In fact, it was to this end that Assad was invited to the Kremlin. Moscow managed to make him almost completely dependent on its military and political support against the backdrop of Iran's review of its involvement in the Syrian conflict. Thus today, Bashar al-Assad is forced to accept the plan of the Syrian settlement, which is now being actively promoted by Moscow and its European and Middle Eastern partners. As soon as Moscow finds the most advantageous way to exchange their influence on Assad for economic and military-political dividends from regional players, the Kremlin will be out of the Syrian crisis, switching its efforts to other states.

Despite the fact that from a formal point of view, Moscow's actions in Syria are legal, the overall direction of its efforts and its immediate objectives continue to put the modern architecture of international security under threat of destruction.

RUSSIA'S GEOSTRATEGY AND SYRIA'S ROLE: NOTHING TO DO WITH TERRORISM

Syria is a tidbit for Russia's geostrategy. The war-torn country, located at the crossroads of important routes and interests of key powers is a handy tool for Moscow to influence the Middle East where it has its own goals.

What are those goals?

First, to promote further intensification of conflict dynamics in the region, hoping to transform it into a large-scale regional war that will ensure the growth of oil and gas prices globally. Moscow's prime method in this case is organizing the collision of different regional players in order to divide the region into two (or three) groups of large opposing camps and then support the weaker to prevent a decisive victory of any one of them.

Second, to divert the attention of Western countries from the more important steps being taken by Moscow in Central Asia (see below) and Eastern Europe.

Third, to weaken the US position in the region with the ultimate goal of undermining the Iranian-American partnership or else putting the United States into choice between maintaining its relations with Tehran or Riyadh.

Fourth, to use its "anti-terrorism efforts" as the basis for legitimizing its new geo-strategy and in particular Moscow's actions in its "sphere of influence" (including actions against the Ukraine).

Fifth, stake a claim for Syria's Mediterranean coast and consequentially impose its own conditions and participate in development of offshore oil and gas fields together with other states and companies from the Middle East and Europe.

As can be seen, neither the fight against terrorism nor saving Bashar al-Assad are a top priority for Russia. The "Islamic State" does not represent a significant threat for Moscow neither in the Middle East nor Central Asia. If we take into account the remaining contacts between the Russian side and the former Baathist military and government officials, which formed the backbone of the military and administrative machine of the "Islamic state", Moscow's relations with the "Caliphate" should be considered very ambiguous and hardly hostile. The interim results of the Russian military campaign in Syria show convincingly that the "Islamic state" benefits from Russia's strikes nearly more than anyone else in the region, including the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, recent events demonstrate that Moscow itself embraces the idea of executing "regime change" in Syria under the guise of peacekeeping efforts and "good offices" of mediating a compromise between the various forces in the country. Most likely, the power in Damascus in this case will be given precisely to those forces that are most associated with the "Islamic State" through their business and political interests.

For this reason, for example, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service this summer organized a visit of Ali Mamluk, director of Syria's General Directorate of Security to Saudi Arabia to hold talks with the Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammad bin Salman and the head of the General Intelligence Service Khalid bin Ali al-Humaydan. It is noteworthy that earlier, Ali Mamluk was seen not only establishing contacts with some moderate and radical factions of the Syrian opposition, but also negotiating with emissaries from ISIS joint military operations against common enemies, including the Syrian Free Army, as well as production-sharing with ISIS-controlled oil and gas fields and the opportunity to use government-owned transport and logistics infrastructure for trading oil and gas produced there. This person is also known for his harsh assessments of Iran's growing influence on Syria's internal affairs and the region as a whole. At the end of the 2000s he was in charge of contacts with the Syrian and Iraqi jihadists, who were engaged in subversive activities against US troops and government forces in Iraq.

SYRIA FOR THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA – A SUITCASE WITHOUT A HANDLE

The US main priorities in the Middle East have been and still are, first, preservation of good relations with traditional allies (Israel and Saudi Arabia), second, development of relations with Iran, and third, the Israeli-Palestinian settlement.

The Syrian crisis, as well as the Libyan crisis, is a product of party politics in the United States. In 2010-2011, the “team of rivals” in the US administration – which included those close to the neoconservative policy circles – in alliance with European (primarily French and Italian) and Turkish neoconservative leaders initiated a “regime change” in Syria and Libya, for the pursuit of their own very specific purposes. And those purposes, as far as it can be judged, were and are incompatible with the objectives set by the administration of Barack Obama.

Thus, the current team from the US State Department and Department of Defence “inherited” the Syrian and Libyan crises without a clear strategy and objectives. The emergence of new threats to the region such as the “Islamic State”, gave some clarity to the evolving situation: at least, while maintaining all the uncertainty in relation to Syria, Washington is definitely aimed at deterring, degrading and eliminating the terrorist groups. However, this clarity is deeply illusory, since many aspects of the IS remained poorly understood, and the degree of its rootedness with Iraqi, Syrian, Turkish and other elites, as well as its extensive international contacts, are still the subject of study.

The main problem for the US policy in Syria is that the Washington's legitimate purpose in Syria *a priori* cannot be stated. Syria is important from the viewpoint of ensuring the success of US actions in other priority areas in the region, but not inside the Syrian crisis. The current formula of liquidating the “Islamic state” plus transferring power from al-Assad to a coalition

government is centered on the elimination of the negative consequences of past developments rather than reaching any future positive aim. In addition, the aim of reaching a political settlement in Syria makes Washington dependent on the actions of the third party states in the country. This rather awkward situation is well understood and exploited by Moscow.

TEHRAN, TEL AVIV, RIYADH, ANKARA: SYRIA IN THE REGIONAL COMPETITION

Regional powers have their interests and strategies in relation to Syria. The interaction of those determines the key priorities for Moscow and key threats for Washington.

Turkey, one of the “starters” and vigorous supporter of “regime change” in Syria and Libya, has largely lost interest for determining Damascus' political future. It is more concerned with preserving its own “assets” among the radical Islamist opposition, preventing the amplification of Syrian Kurdish military units in the fight against the “Islamic state” and preservation of the IS as a counterweight to Iran, as well as an important source of revenue (related to the smuggling of oil and other goods from the Islamic State predominantly to Western Europe). Turkey still views al-Assad as unacceptable, but does not have momentum for playing a leading role in the region.

Israel sees Syria, first of all, as an important stronghold for its own national security, a territory that must not be overtaken by Iran or other opponents of Tel-Aviv. Besides, the Syrian crisis is regarded by Israel as only one part of the wider situation in the Middle East (this resembles Moscow's view of the situation). Tel-Aviv's main objective in the broader context also fits into Moscow's strategic priorities: preventing further Iran-US normalization and the formation of a strategic partnership between the two countries. The threat from the Islamic state is not a priority for Israel. Moreover, the existence and functioning of Daesh in the medium and long term is an acceptable and even favourable prospect for Tel Aviv given that it will eliminate Iranian forces from Syria.

The “hot line” between the Russian General Staff and the Israel Defense Forces is used for exchanging intelligence information and coordinating actions to prevent armed incidents between the Russian and Israeli militaries. Israel feels quite confident in conducting military air operations against units of the Syrian armed forces, the Revolutionary Guards and “Hezbollah” in Southern Syria, relying on Moscow's guarantees for non-interference. One of such operation was carried out by Israel's Air Force on November 11 and was aimed at the destruction of weapons and military equipment destined for the Syrian Army, IRGC and “Hezbollah” units which were stored at bases at an airport near Damascus.

The interests of **Riyadh** in the current situation remain poorly accented in view of the turmoil that befell Saudi Arabia's royal house in recent months (the change of monarch, the dubious capacity of the new monarch, palace intrigues, and others.). However, they include some invariables like containing Iran, preventing the victory of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and safeguarding Saudi “assets” fighting in Syria. Given the commodities-based economy of the Kingdom, its interests in the region largely coincide with the interests of the Russian Federation. Though Riyadh is reluctant to enter a direct military confrontation with Iran, the Kingdom's military strategists do acknowledge that Saudi Arabia, having such a potential ally as Pakistan, and enjoying at least the friendly neutrality of Israel and Russia, has an overwhelming military advantage over Iran right now. They also acknowledge that over time this balance of power may change in favour of Tehran. Therefore, Saudi Arabia can become the initiator of or a participant in a military confrontation with Iran¹. Besides it will invariably support any counterweight to Iran in the region, including the “Islamic state”.

Russia skillfully exploits the anti-Iranian phobia in Saudi Arabia, offering Riyadh a supply of offensive weapons (including warships and the tactical missile system “Iskander”) in the amount of \$ 10 billion and the construction of sixteen nuclear power units in the amount of \$ 100 billion. This might significantly boost the Kingdom's military power as well as create conditions to ensure its self-sufficiency in terms of the nuclear fuel cycle (which is especially important in the context of a possible renunciation of the country's nuclear-free status). In addition, most of the leaders of the opposition, with which Moscow maintains active contacts, are more inclined to cooperate with Saudi Arabia than with Iran in the post-Assad period.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is on the brink of a profound change of its regional role, due to the removal of international sanctions and a sharp increase in the economic capabilities of the state and business elites. These future events may bring different benefits to different groups of the Iranian elite, which leads to increased uncertainty of the situation inside the Islamic Republic and corresponding uncertainty of its foreign policy. The normalization of relations with the USA does not favour the “hawks” in the leadership of the country from a political point of view, but it promises huge financial benefits from the “unfreezing” of their assets. A military confrontation with Saudi Arabia and Israel is in the interests of the “hardliners.” Moreover, it can be viewed (erroneously) as the basis for further rapprochement between Iran and Russia. However, this scenario does not work well for the country on the whole, militarily, politically and economically. Besides Tehran cannot rely on Moscow's effective assistance in a possible conflict.

In this situation, Iran is forced to conduct its own game, which aims to maximize gains and minimize costs in potential developments. Holding or strengthening its positions in Lebanon

¹ It is therefore logical to see the recently announced Saudi “anti-terrorist” coalition as a predominantly anti-Iran and anti-Shia initiative.

and Syria, expanding its influence in Iraq, saving the Yemeni “bridgehead” to put pressure on Saudi Arabia are key to Tehran.

Unlike all other regional powers, the Islamic Republic of Iran sees the “Islamic State” as a major threat not only in the Middle East, but also on its Eastern borders – in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Moreover, Iran appears to be the only Middle East state that is crucially interested both in the elimination of the Daesh and the preservation of Bashar al-Assad as a Syrian leader as Tehran has no viable alternative political assets in Damascus.

The regional interests of Iran, like those of the United States, are opposite to the interests of the Russian Federation. However, unlike the USA, Iran has everything to lose in Syria in terms of its struggle with the “Islamic State.” That is why Russian anti-terrorist rhetoric has made a strong impression on Tehran, despite Moscow's questionable practices. Although Russia's interference in the Syrian civil war has already resulted in Iran's military defeats and contraction of political influence in the country. And it seems that Iranian officials have already begun to consider the loss of their positions in Syria and Iraq to Russia as a realistic threat, given Moscow's acceptance of the potential of al-Assad's ouster under certain conditions.

MOSCOW'S MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY: THE “ISLAMIC STATE” AND THE SHIA-SUNNI CONFRONTATION

In this situation Moscow has received a unique opportunity to capitalize on the mutual contradictions of the key players in order to promote its view of the region's future, but also to create confusion among Western countries which could ease the implementation of Russia's plans in another strategically more important region – Central Asia.

In the Middle East, Moscow will continue to make diplomatic, military and intelligence maneuvers, aimed at structuring the region along conflict lines favouring Russian interests in the region. Moscow's efforts to further enhance conflict dynamics in the region will be based on two major factors: the Sunni-Shiite confrontation and further growth of the Islamic state. A particular factor will be given priority depending on the development of the situation. From this point of view we can outline two of Moscow's major scenarios for the region.

First, direct Sunni-Shia confrontation in the form of a full-scale war or high intensity irregular conflict between Iran, Syria, Iraq and Yemeni Houthis on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the “Islamic state” on the other hand. The obvious imbalance of power in the framework of such a confrontation, according to the Russian side, will be compensated by Washington's necessitated support to Tehran. At the same time Moscow itself will not provide effective support to any of the parties. It will skillfully use the standoff to escalate military-political tensions and supply arms to both sides. An important

step towards the realization of this scenario was the creation of Russia's own anti-terrorist coalition and Information Centre in Baghdad, bringing together the region's Shiite states².

The second scenario is a further increase of “Islamic state” capabilities and its transformation into a legitimate factor of regional dynamics in the medium and long term. The scenario of undermining the US-led anti-terrorist cooperation in Syria could be repeated in Iraq, whose leadership has already been put in the position of the hard choice of partners between Russia and the United States. The destruction of the American-Iraqi military partnership would lead to the collapse of the regime in Baghdad and a dramatic expansion of IS control in the country. Iran's desire to strengthen its positions in the Shia regions of Iraq in response to this development could become a major factor in the escalation of regional tensions and undermine trust and cooperation between the USA and Iran.

It is obvious that after the recent series of terrorist attacks undertaken by ISIS in Paris, Moscow is once again reviving its initiative of building a global anti-terrorist coalition. This might put under threat the intelligence cooperation between the United States and Europe, where, after Edward Snowden's revelations there are a growing number of supporters of such cooperation with Russia in opposition to the United States.

MOSCOW CITY SHUFFLE:

WHEREAS YOU LOOK LEFT, THEY FALL RIGHT

Against the backdrop of an imminent increase in violence in the Middle East, which will absorb more and more attention and resources from the United States and its allies, the Russian Federation is preparing for decisive actions in Central Asia and Central Europe. It is here, according to our estimates that the main events will unfold in the next 6-12 months.

The essence of Moscow's strategy in Central Asia is to organize destabilization of the region in order to undermine Chinese influence. This will strengthen Moscow's positions and provoke a more active and assertive Beijing regional policy that will undermine mutual trust between the USA and China. To prepare this scenario, the Russian side has taken or is taking actions in the following directions.

First, in 2015, Moscow's influence was used in order to boost authorities' pressure on moderate Islamists in Central Asia. Russian secret services' support for by the Tajik opposition including Umarali Kuvvatov (“Group 24”, killed in Turkey in March 2015) and Muhiddin Kabiri (leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, currently under investigation and in exile), provoked the Tajik leadership to unleash repression against moderate Islamists, forced

² This was further complemented by a mirroring Saudi move to create its “anti-terrorist” Sunni coalition (although, including Lebanon, which is a clear sign of Iran's diminishing influence in the subregion).

the Tajik leadership to start repression against the moderate Islamists, virtually exclude Tajik migrants in Russia from the political process in the country, as well as make a number of other significant errors. All this lead to a strengthening of radical Islamist forces in the region which is an important prerequisite for its destabilization.

Second, in 2015, Moscow has clearly changed its preferred partners in Central and South Asia. In particular, the military-political alliance of Russia and Pakistan became a leading factor determining international dynamics in the region. Moscow sees Pakistan as a leading military power in the region of Greater Central Asia and thus a very convenient and valuable ally. This situational alliance involves not only the implementation of measures of economic cooperation (including pipeline projects), but also a vast military-technical cooperation and intelligence partnership. In particular, Islamabad's influence and its Inter-Services Intelligence's assets are used by Russia to destabilize Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Third, in 2015, acting in the framework of its new geostrategy Moscow has become one of the most important masterminds behind the destabilization of Afghanistan. This process is carried out through fostering a situational alliance between several branches of "Taliban" and the "Islamic state" (with the active support from Pakistan), as well as through the saturation of radical and terrorist movements in Afghanistan and Central Asia with new fighters recruited to a large extent among Central Asian migrants in Russia. Moscow needs the destabilization of Afghanistan as part of the effort to foster a generally unstable environment in the wider region and to undertake a more concerted action against Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which will become the main victims of Russia's new geostrategy in Central and South Asia.

Fourth, in the second half of 2015, Moscow drastically increased its media and information operations in Central Asia. On the one hand, during 2014 and nine months of 2015 Moscow's crucial priority in perception management was an intentional understatement of the terrorist threat posed by the "Islamic state" in the region. On the other hand, in recent weeks (since early October, 2015), Moscow has moved to recognize and exaggerate the seriousness of this threat and accused the USA and its allies of favouring terrorists. In other words, as in the case of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's destabilizing actions are covered up with rhetoric exposing alleged destabilizing actions of the West. This relatively new information line has become an important complement to Moscow's traditional rhetoric accusing the USA and its allies of promoting the growth of drug production in Afghanistan. The mentioned new priority in perception management went public at the international conference on Afghanistan in Moscow in early October, 2015 which marks Russia's transition to a more active policy in the region.

Thus, while the US is trying to win a hopeless war in Syria, seeking to degrade the "Islamic state", but being unable to put an end to the civil war in the country, Russia is taking the next step by initiating a large-scale destabilization of Central Asia. There are signs that this threat will become looming in December 2015 and the crisis will last throughout 2016.

At the same time, Moscow maintains an “armed cock” situation in Central Europe, where it exerts strong pressure on Minsk aimed at forcing the Belarusian leadership to give consent to hosting a Russian military base. That step would entail destruction of the “Minsk process” and could become an important prerequisite for a new escalation in the region. Against the backdrop of sputtering US attention and resources to monitor the situation in the Middle East and Central Asia, this seems to be optimal timing for initiating destabilization in the Ukraine and Belarus.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the beginning of Russia's military campaign in Syria the crisis in the country has received a new impetus. In the current complex international context the key stakeholders seemed to be caught by surprise by the new developments, but later swiftly moved to taking full account of them and acting respectively.

The United States' strife to strengthen military cooperation with Iraq and moderate opposition in Syria for the sake of degrading the “Islamic state”, as well as to directly involve Iran in discussing the future of the Syrian state, will certainly contribute to a more constructive scenario in the region. However, today there is an urgent need for a clear emphasis on a number of individual aspects of the regional situation to develop more effective measures aimed at preserving the current system of international security in the South-Western, Central and Southern parts of Eurasia. The key priority should be given to the following:

First of all, the Syrian crisis is an important ground for Russia's broader geostrategy, whose main priority in the coming months will be the destabilization of Central Asia. A potential crisis in that region could create a direct threat to the People's Republic of China and dramatically transform Beijing's calculus, weakening the positions of Xi Jinping's supporters and bringing “hardliners” to the forefront. At the same time Central Asia is the region where Moscow has both an extensive toolkit for exerting influence, and strategic interests. The Kremlin regards the former Soviet republics of Central Asia as an integral part of its exclusive “sphere of influence”. That is why the Russian-Pakistani alliance is to destabilize northern Afghanistan and the radicalization of Islamist opposition under pressure from the repressive policy of the authorities of Central Asian countries should be seen as the really important aspects of the strategic situation in Eurasia, despite the enormous attention specifically to Syria and the Middle East.

On the other hand, it should be understood that neither the victory over the “Islamic state”, nor preservation of the regime of Bashar al-Assad are among Russia's top priorities in the Middle East. Moscow plans to accomplish the “regime change” in Damascus, bringing to power a person who has established contacts with the leadership of the “Islamic state”, who is oriented towards Saudi Arabia and independent of Tehran. This manoeuvre is necessary in

order to pull the Middle East into a major military confrontation that is among Kremlin's strategic priorities.

Is Washington ready for an escalation in Central Asia? Do the United States and China share a level of mutual trust high enough to continue a constructive dialogue in Asia-Pacific (and China's involvement in Trans-Pacific Partnership) even despite a possible destabilization of Central Asia? Do all the regional stakeholders take full account of their partners' and rivals' goals and strategies so that they could avoid the worst scenarios in the Middle East and Central Asia? These and other issues require an intensive and open discussion in order to prevent the destruction of the already fragile international security architecture in South and Central Eurasia.

The opportunity of cooperation with Russia on the anti-terrorist track, as well as in all other areas, must be kept open. However, the international community should make clear to Moscow that any such cooperation is possible only after it abandons its aspirations to create zones of instability in Eurasia and confirm in practice their real efforts to strengthen peace and security. The easiest and fastest way to demonstrate this is to fulfil their part of the Minsk agreement before the deadline of early 2016, rather than trying to postpone it for the next year and freeze the conflict in Eastern Ukraine on its own terms.

INSTEAD OF AN EPILOGUE: THE SU-24, TURKEY, AND THE SYRIA EXCHANGE DEAL

On November 24, a Russian Su-24 bomber that according to Turkish and NATO data had violated Turkish airspace was shot down over the territory of Syria. Subsequent events outlined a couple of new developments in the situation, especially in the Middle East. However, they also confirmed the validity of key assumptions made above.

After a terrorist attack in San Bernardino, United States, the US President Barack Obama addressed the nation, outlining the main directions of the struggle against the terrorist threat. These areas include two key priorities – the fight against the “Islamic state” and the strengthening national security, including through introduction of certain restrictions on circulation of small arms. The fight against the “IS” and other terrorists would be taken the following measures:

continuation of military strikes against “IS” and other terrorist organizations;

providing military support to Iraqi armed forces and rebel groups fighting “IS” in Syria, including positioning of American special forces on the ground to conduct combat operations;

strengthening the international coalition fighting “IS”, including the exchange of intelligence information, strengthening anti-Daesh propaganda among Muslim communities and putting the Syrian-Turkish border under seal;

ensuring a ceasefire and a political solution to the conflict in Syria, in cooperation with “such countries as Russia, in order to allow them to concentrate on the fight against “IS”.

Thus, the United States has implicitly recognized the possibility of a compromise on Syria, which could mean, on the one hand, that Bashar al-Assad, or people close to him will remain in power at least during the transition period, and on the other hand, a significant part of the Syrian opposition will be recognized and will enter a coalition government that will ensure a united front against “IS”.

Achieving such a compromise, however, will not be easy. The next round of talks on Syria is expected on December 18. And before that, on December 11-12, opposition factions of the Syrian National Coalition, will meet in Saudi Arabia to work out a common position for the forthcoming negotiations. One can hardly imagine that the participants of this meeting would arrive at an agreement presuming the possibility al-Assad staying in power during the transition period.

Against this backdrop, an interesting statement was made by the Iranian side. The adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Akbar Velayati said on December 6 that the removal of Assad from power is one of the “red lines” that the international community should not cross in regard to the Syrian crisis. It would seem a rather illogical statement in the context of an increasing Russian military presence in Syria. However, the reality is that with the strengthening of Moscow's positions in Syria, Tehran's forces are losing their positions. Iranian volunteers suffered a series of defeats in Syria, one of which allegedly led to an injury or even death of Al-Qods unit commander Qassem Soleimani.

We cannot rule out that the Russian side, during the consultations on the Syrian crisis hinted that it is ready to withdraw its demand of preserving Bashar al-Assad at power and agree to his replacement with a figure convenient for Moscow. The most viable candidate for this role as has already been mentioned is Ali Mamluk, director of the General Security Directorate in Syria. However, there are other alternative candidates.

Iran does not have any alternative political assets in Damascus and insists on Bashar al-Assad's leadership remaining intact. This explains the concern of the Iranian side about the fate of the Syrian President against the backdrop of Russia's military build-up in the country.

Following the statement by the Iranian side a telephone conversation took place on December 7 between the leaders of the Iranian and Russian Foreign Ministers. The official report says that the talks focused on drafting the joint list of terrorist organizations in Syria. Clearly, this issue will be one of the central points in negotiations in New York and afterwards and could be turned into an important bargaining point.

Thus Russia's strategy in Syria seems rather easy:

to bargain around the figure of Bashar al-Assad and the list of organizations to be included in the coalition government;

at a critical moment to accept the departure of Bashar al-Assad and his replacement by Ali Mamluk (or other figure), in exchange for exclusion from the coalition of those organizations, that are at odds with Saudi Arabia and Russia;

ensure the transition of Syria under the influence of Saudi Arabia and thus create a pretext for a drastic retaliation of the Iranian side, which will lead to the breakdown of the nuclear deal reached in July 2015.

The activities of the Turkish side seem to be directed at achieving the same result. By building up its own military presence in northern Iraq, Turkey puts under threat Iran's major influence in the country and thus creates a *casus belli* for Tehran.

For that reason, the escalation of tensions between Russia and Turkey seems to be rather fictitious than real. Its only real impact is reducing the institutional discipline among NATO members. Clearly, European countries such as France and Germany are not ready to bear the burden of what looks like a deeper confrontation with the Russian Federation. Moreover, in the framework of the fight against the terrorist threat, which has become urgent for Europe after the terrorist attacks of November 13 France and Germany are more and more inclined to cooperate with Russia, rather than with the United States. This trend is complemented by a rising wave of populist politicians in Europe (both leftist and nationalist) which all seem to be very sympathetic of Moscow.

Thus, the course of events in the Middle East, Central Asia and Eastern Europe are increasingly threatening the existence of the modern architecture of international security, contributing to emergence of a "multi-polar cold war".

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