



Artículos y entrevistas

Looking At Russia And The US In Syria

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Just like the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the Russian intervention in Syria that began in September 2015 has opened a new debate looking at the possibility of a new Cold War between Obama's US and Putin's Russia. However, it is worth making a few clarifications to demystify this argument.

Firstly, it isn't accurate to talk about new Cold War because there are two essential components missing: the ideological factor and the nuclear arms race. The tensions we're seeing now are instead the result of a civil war unleashed in Syria. The so-called Arab Spring began in 2011 and was backed by Washington and the EU, under the false assumption that the toppled authoritarian regimes would be replaced by blooming democracies. Far from it: having learned nothing from the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan ten years before, and after paying no attention to advice from the Russian government urging the West to avoid meddling, the bombings in Syria were followed by chaos, civil war, slaughters and more terrorism on the part of ISIS. The terrorist attacks in Europe since 2015 and the humanitarian crisis caused by the Syrian, Afghan and Libyan refugee exodus are some of the unwanted effects that Russia predicted, but which was ignored by everyone, including those in Brussels, Berlin and Washington.

Secondly, the Russian intervention didn't take place based on imperialist whims, like when the USSR made its way into Afghanistan in 1979. This time, Russia was guided by two fundamental motivations. One was strictly geopolitical: just like its defensive and reactive maneuver in Crimea and the naval base in Sevastopol a year and a half earlier, Russia had to ensure the survival of Tartus, the naval base on warm Mediterranean waters that was handed over to the Soviets in the 60s by Bashir's father, Hafez al-Assad. The other motivation can be described as sheer opportunism, typical of a tactical leadership like Putin's: he tried to intervene in Syria with air raids, without mobilization and with the lowest possible cost of Russian lives, in order to break the isolation that the Western World imposed on him with the commercial and economic sanctions that came as a result of Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

There were two other secondary background factors. There are 9,000 Russian and Caucasian Jihadists fighting in Syria: terrorists who were ready to commit terrorist attacks in Russian territory but were expelled or moved of their own accord to Syrian territory. Russia's involvement in Syria, therefore, is not only in order to defend Assad's autocratic political regime, but also to protect Russia's own territorial security. They prefer to deal with these Russian terrorists outside of Russia and not be forced to risk their citizens' lives in terrorist attacks perpetrated by these Chechen, Ingush or Dagestani offenders. As global Islamic terrorism is a hydra with a thousand heads, now citizens of Central Asia, like Kyrgyzs, Turkmen or Uzbeks are the ones carrying out attacks in Russia, as was demonstrated in the tragic Saint Petersburg subway attack in April.

The other factor is loyalty to Assad. Russia has a pragmatic foreign policy but one which contains the element of honorability, something strange in the postmodern world. Unlike other great powers that quit supporting certain dictators as soon as things get ugly – for example, half of Europe with Gaddafi or the US with Iran's Shah – Russia hangs onto its allies until the end, when necessary. This can be seen in Moscow's unconditional support of Damascus even in the worst of times.

Regarding the US, Putin assumed the new President Trump would accept Russia's involvement in Syria and would let him "finish the job," respecting its balancing role in the situation. This would enable Bashar Al Assad's government to remain in power and Putin would be able to convert defeats into triumphs over the Jihadists, as he has before. Russia wishes to cooperate in war against terrorism and believes it possible: this was demonstrated between 2001 and 2003, when they provided the West with active and military collaboration after 9/11. However, Putin was once again disappointed with Trump's attitude, which resembled Obama's.

With the bombing of Syria on April 6, due to Assad's alleged use of sarin gas against civilians, Trump broke his campaign promise of cooperation with Russia. Moscow saw this as the US President once again being held hostage by Washington's militarist establishment – determined to maintain sanctions over Russia and add some against Syria – and by the Pro-Israel, neoconservative and Saudi Arabian lobbies, that see present-day Russia as a natural extension and heir of Tsarist Russia, the Bolshevik Empire and a historical ally to Shiite Muslims, respectively. These perceptions only serve to keep Russia away from Washington, although (due to the Russian honorability) Putin has restored formal contact networks of joint military cooperation with the US to coordinate flights over Syrian skies and bombings against ISIS positions.

Russia's aspiration is to be recognized as a great power that must be heard in the debate to decide the future of the Middle East and stabilize it, around a "big table" together with Iran, Turkey (which has imperial aspirations towards Syria), Saudi Arabia, Israel, the EU and the US. This hope is still standing, but it depends largely on the will of the West.