

Strategic partners against terrorism 2.0? Collaborating with adversaries

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In October 2016, international media reported that the Russia–US diplomatic dialogue over Syria had collapsed, with both sides holding the other party to blame. While the US State Department observed that ‘everybody’s patience with Russia has run out’, Russia’s Foreign Minister criticized the United States for using ‘a language of sanctions and ultimatums while continuing selective cooperation with our country’ (CNN 2016). The breakdown and the statements that ensued marked the endpoint of a turbulent diplomatic year, which had begun with a brief handshake between presidents Obama and Putin at the UN General Assembly late in September 2015. In the months following that handshake, Russia and the US-led coalition participated in talks and activities aimed at finding a negotiated solution to the civil war in Syria as well as to defeat international terrorism there.

In this policy brief, we explore why it proved so difficult to shift the Russia–Western relationship from ‘conflict’ to ‘practical cooperation’ mode – given that officials on both sides had signalled their readiness to work together to defeat the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Our analytical starting point is that states’ room for manoeuvre in foreign policy is restricted both by their relational dynamics with other states and by movements in their domestic foreign policy debate. In the case of the Syria crisis, we argue that Russia’s longstanding rejection of a ‘Western world order’, accompanied by repeated depictions of Russia as a ‘rule-breaker’ in the US and British domestic debate, have made the efforts to find common ground in Syria less likely to succeed.

Collaboration and relational shifts

Is it possible to collaborate with an adversary state, when a given situation indicates that such collaboration is needed? At the outset, we would hold that it is – and that strategic collaboration may even serve as vehicle for shifting a relationship from ‘adversary mode’ to ‘cooperation mode’. However, we make this assumption with certain reservations. If attempts at practical cooperation are to succeed, they must

be accompanied by representations of the other party that are, if not positive, then at least *non-hostile*. If, in the course of efforts to re-establish dialogue and trust, the counterpart in other contexts is represented as an adversary, even a foe, then upholding collaboration will be difficult when developments on the ground cause relational storms. In the case of Syria, we see how, when Russia–Western attempts to find common ground were supplemented by more favourable representations of the other, diplomatic progress followed. Conversely, when long-standing negative representations of the other resurfaced in the broader foreign policy debate, it became difficult to patch up the collaboration efforts in Syria.

US, UK and Russian views of the other

During the autumn of 2015, on the US side, both Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry took a pragmatic position as regards collaboration with Russia on Syria. Kerry, who often represented the US administration in diplomatic talks on Syria, held that it was possible to uphold the criticism of and sanctions against Russia in response to the Ukraine crisis in 2014, while at the same time working with Russia to find a solution in Syria. However, Obama and Kerry had to manoeuvre within a demanding political landscape in Washington. The Pentagon and Defence Secretary Ashton Carter were advocating a tougher stance on Russia; and in Congress, influential figures like Senator John McCain (R), Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, were questioning the Obama administration’s approach, warning that Russia could not be trusted. The policy advice following from this confrontational position was that the United States should not limit its military efforts in Syria to fighting IS, but should also support and arm the ‘moderate opposition’ in its fight against the Assad regime. In the US domestic debate, voices calling for an overall more pragmatic and friendly approach to Russia have been few and far between. Notably, however, president-elect Donald Trump has depicted Putin and Russia rather favourably, signalling during his campaign that he would seek ‘an easing of tensions and improved rela-

tions with Russia' (Trump 2016). In Britain, the government has been among the harshest critics of Russian activities alongside NATO's borders, and an advocate of upholding sanctions against Russia in response to the Ukraine crisis. However, also British officials have recognized the need for a certain 'normalization' of Russia–Western relations, for the purpose of resolving the Syrian crisis.

On the Russian side, a recurring image of the West, and the United States in particular, has been that of a self-righteous actor that has put itself on a moral pedestal, denying Russia its rightful place on the international stage. The West, it is often argued, practises double standards, as seen in how it condemns human rights violations selectively and portrays its actions in a favourable light while ascribing negative intentions to Russia. While the Kremlin more recently has argued that Russia and the West have a shared interest in fighting international terrorism in Syria, the image of the West as biased against Russia has continued to loom in the background. It is against this backdrop of deep-seated mutual suspicion on both sides that the last year's attempts at Russia–Western strategic collaboration in Syria must be analysed.

Russia–Western collaboration in three phases

In the twelve months that followed after Obama and Putin shook hands at the UN in September 2015, there were continuing efforts of Russia–Western dialogue and practical coordination and collaboration in response to developments on the ground in Syria. In the following, we view these efforts in terms of three phases: 'cautious collaboration', 'impetus lost?' and 'from renewed optimism to full collapse'.

Phase one: Cautious collaboration

While Putin's initial invitation to the West to join forces against IS in Syria in September 2015 was cautiously welcomed by Western leaders, Russia's initiation of an air campaign at the invitation of Assad shortly thereafter was met with suspicion and criticism. Along with other allies, the United States and Britain issued a press release expressing deep concern over Russia's entry into the operational theatre (State Department/FCO 2015). On the US side, influential critics urged the Obama administration to stand up to Russia. Senator McCain, for instance, described Putin as 'a thug and a bully', and called for 'a steadfast and strong' US response to Russia's intervention (McCain 2015). Leading newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* also questioned Russia's motives for intervening, and called for a tough response from the Obama administration. Pointing to Russia's lack of respect for civilian lives, and to the bonds between Putin and Assad, the newspapers argued that Russia's intervention was driven by great-power ambitions and the desire to protect its friend, the despot Assad. The fight against international terrorism, which Russia itself presented as its primary concern, was seen as a lesser objective (Ignatius 2015; *New York Times* 2015). On the Russian side, the response to these accusations was that such 'information attacks' were only to be expected, and illustrative of standard Western conspiracies about Russia's motives and actions (*RT* 2015).

Despite such mutual reproaches, there was during this initial

period an observable willingness at the top political level to look for compromises, and put aside some differences in order to achieve an end to the Syrian crisis. This is reflected in statements by Obama and Kerry on the US side, Putin and Foreign Secretary Lavrov on the Russian side, and Cameron and Foreign Secretary Hammond on the UK side. 'The gap between us has narrowed', observed Cameron with reference to Russia in a parliamentary debate just before Christmas 2015, when he sought parliamentary support for British participation in the US-led bombing campaign against IS (*Hansard* 2015).

The initiation of the Vienna peace talks for Syria marked a diplomatic breakthrough in autumn 2015, in turn leading to the establishment of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), with Russia and the USA as co-chairs. The process also led to the formulation of a peace plan for Syria. The twenty co-signers agreed to set a deadline for starting negotiations between the Syrian regime and opposition groups under UN auspices; further, they agreed to support and work to implement a nationwide ceasefire, and to defeat IS, the al-Nusra Front and 'other terrorist groups'. They also agreed to support 'free and fair elections' in Syria. As Kerry and Lavrov's statements at a joint press conference made clear, disagreement remained about the future of the Assad regime. However, both statements underscored that any political transition must be Syrian-led (Kerry et al. 2015). In December, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2254, approving the peace plan. This would indicate that, by the end of the year 2015, there was political will on both sides to collaborate, with the aim of putting an end to the crisis in Syria. Even NATO-ally Turkey's shooting down of a Russian military plane in November, a plane that had allegedly crossed the border from Syria, did not stop the negotiations from moving forward.

Phase two: Impetus lost?

If 2015 ended on a cautiously optimistic note as far as Russia–Western collaboration on Syria was concerned, then 2016 got off to a rougher start. As the new year began, US Secretary of State Kerry expressed optimism concerning the impending peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition in Geneva. However, the negotiations were delayed, due largely to disagreement as to which Syrian opposition groups should be represented, and by whom. Meanwhile, the Assad regime was gaining strength on the ground, assisted by Russian air support. The peace talks formally began on 1 February, but were suspended only two days later. In Kerry's interpretation, the Syrian regime's attack on 'opposition-held areas', aided by Russia, had laid bare the intentions of these actors 'to seek a military solution rather than enable a political one' (*FT* 2016). Lavrov, by contrast, blamed 'part of the opposition', saying that they had taken 'a completely unconstructive position' even before the talks had begun (*RT* 2016).

In February, following a new round of talks in Munich, Russia and the United States issued a new statement in their capacity as ISSG co-chairs, proposing terms for cessation of hostilities in Syria, although the terms were not to apply to UN-designated terrorist groups. In line with the agreement, Russia subsequently set up a coordination centre to monitor the truce. Then, in early March, Putin somewhat unexpectedly announced that Russia would pull out 'the main part' of its military from Syria.

Still, Russian air support to Assad continued.

Both sides seemed to agree that the truce was partially successful during the spring of 2016. However, by July, it seemed clear that it was falling apart. Assad's forces were regaining control over important territory, making the outcome preferred by the USA and the UK – to have Assad removed from power – appear increasingly unlikely. During the same period, general political relations between Russia and the West had soured once again. Negative depictions of the other party featured in the media on both sides, as well as in the official political debate. For instance, in December 2015, the new Russian security strategy identified NATO as a source of threat to Russian security four times, and in February 2016 the US Defence Secretary declared that Russia was the greatest security threat against the United States. Meanwhile, in Britain, the inquiry into the 2006 poisoning of former KGB agent Alexander Litvinenko in London concluded that the Russian state and Putin himself had 'probably' been involved, causing further tension in already strained Anglo-Russian relations. Despite this, both sides noted the importance of keeping communication channels open.

What we see throughout the spring and early summer of 2016, then, is that the fragile impetus for collaboration, established in late 2015, was gradually fading. As the negotiations failed and the Assad regime regained strength on the ground, the Syria priorities of Russia and the US-led coalition seemed increasingly mismatched. When negative depictions of the other party resurfaced in the broader foreign policy debate on both sides, it also became more difficult to patch up relations when conflicts arose over developments on the ground.

Phase three: From renewed optimism to full collapse

In June 2016, top-level diplomatic activity between Russia and the United States intensified, aimed at securing cooperation on political negotiations in Syria as well as on joint military efforts against IS. Russian expert commentary stressed how events in Syria had again made Russia a 'player'. This was also the month that saw the least US-sceptical public opinion in Russia since the intervention in Syria. These efforts took place against the backdrop of continuing tensions between Russia and NATO in Europe. These were driven by Russian military posturing and exercises, and by the largest NATO military exercise since the end of the Cold War (Anakonda) and decisions to expand NATO military presence in the Baltic states and Poland.

In early September, Obama and Putin met for ninety minutes at the G20 meeting in China. After the meeting, Obama said that while 'gaps of trust' remained, the talks had been 'productive'. A real truce in Syria, he said, would allow Russia and the United States 'to focus our attention on common enemies' (Obama 2016). Putin assessed the meeting even more favourably, telling reporters that he thought the two had 'reached mutual understanding'. He also said that Moscow would welcome the restitution of full-scale relations with Washington, if only the United States would lift its Ukraine-related sanctions (RT 2016b).

Shortly after, as the peace negotiations in Geneva came to an end, a US–Russia negotiated truce was effectuated in Syria. The United States and Russia had agreed to establish a 'joint

integration centre' in Vienna, where the parties for the first time since the Second World War would consult on common military targets, and would coordinate bombings against terrorist groups in Syria. The centre would also have joint personnel. The prerequisite was that the truce would have to endure for a full week. However, only five days after the agreement was signed, planes operating under the US-led coalition bombed Syrian Army positions, killing government troops. While the coalition explained the incident as an accident, the Russian MFA called it either 'criminal negligence' or 'directly pandering to IS terrorists'. Russia also expressed concern over the activities of 'US-patronized illegal paramilitary units' on the ground, warning that if the United States failed to deal with these issues, 'the entire range of Russian–US agreements' from Geneva would be on the line (Russian MFA 2016a).

On 20 September, a UN aid convoy on its way to the besieged city of Aleppo was bombed. British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson was among the first Western top figures to conclude that there was 'pretty strong' evidence to indicate Russia was responsible. However, Lavrov denied Russian involvement, adding that his country would welcome an 'impartial and thorough' investigation (*Guardian* 2016). In the period that followed, both Russia and the United States accused groups supported by the other party of failing to respect the truce. Although some further attempts were made at restoring dialogue, on both sides domestic pressure was building up not to trust the other party.

In early October, the United States announced that it was suspending all diplomatic contact with Russia on Syria, because of Russia's assistance to the Syrian regime in its efforts to regain control over the besieged city of Aleppo. In a debate in the British Parliament, a majority of those who took the floor called for tough reactions against Russia. The Shadow Foreign Secretary's call for continuing to work with Russia 'to restore the Kerry-Lavrov peace process' was criticized (*Hansard* 2016). From Moscow, the Russian MFA questioned whether Washington's efforts to cooperate with Russia in Syria had ever been sincere, charging the Obama administration with being so eager to 'bring about a power change in Damascus' that it was willing 'to join forces with outright terrorists' (Russian MFA 2016b).

In sum, while there in the summer of 2016 had been a revitalization of Russia–Western attempts to collaborate in putting an end to the crisis in Syria, these efforts fell through: the latest US–Russian-negotiated truce failed, each party blamed the other, and negative depictions of the other grew stronger on the domestic scenes on both sides.

Conclusion

In this policy brief, we have analysed Russia–Western attempts to work together on shared interests in Syria in the twelve months following September 2015. After Putin and Obama briefly shook hands at the UN, several efforts were undertaken to collaborate in order to defeat international terrorism in Syria and to get the parties – the Assad government and designated opposition groups – to the negotiation table. Despite Western leaders' scepticism of the Russian intervention in Syria, optimism was evident during the autumn of 2015 that a solution could be found – and with this, the hope that practical cooperation in Syria could serve as a means for improving post-

Ukraine Russia–Western political relations more generally.

Some compromises were reached, and leaders on both sides could occasionally report of constructive talks and narrowing gaps. However, *de facto* collaboration efforts broke down time and again. The parties tended to blame each other, and again began representing the other party as a counterpart that could ultimately not be trusted. Although the Western approach to Russia might change once the new Trump administration takes office in Washington, recent developments in Aleppo show that twelve months of failed negotiations with the West have resulted in even stronger rejection of the West in the Russian domestic debate. After US efforts to negotiate a truce in Aleppo in December failed, Lavrov intimated that the United States was trying to delay Russia and Assad in Aleppo order to save the terrorists: in the future, Moscow would be working with Turkey and Iran instead. On the Western side, Russia's support to the Assad regime in Aleppo has been widely criticised. The period that started in autumn 2015 with cautious optimism as regards Russia–Western practical collaboration with Syria, has ended with overall political relations going from bad to worse.

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The work underlying this brief has been financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Defence, through the project 'Russia–West in Syria', project number: 2015/3469-16/FD II 1/IK. All views are those of the authors.



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