Russia and the U.S. have common interests in Syria. But it may not matter.

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FULL TEXT

All eyes are on Russia as President Trump prepares to meet with Vladimir Putin in Helsinki next week. But the real geopolitical focus of the meeting might well be a few thousand miles away in Syria. Last week, national security adviser John Bolton said that the meeting could offer a "larger negotiation on helping to get Iranian forces out of Syria" and that an agreement could be "a significant step forward" for U.S. interests in the Middle East.

But Bolton is engaging in wishful thinking, if not outright delusion. That's not just because the United States and Russia, despite sharing the goal of stability in Syria, fundamentally diverge on how to achieve it. The administration is also vastly overestimating how much sway Russia actually has in Syria. While Syria has been Moscow's closest Arab ally —and the largest recipient of its economic and military aid —since 1972, Russia's influence on Syrian policy has been limited. Even as Russia's military presence in Syria since 2015 has granted it greater leverage over the country's future, historical precedents suggest that the relationship will continue to be one of constant disappointment and frustration.

Syria has been a natural Russian ally since the 1950s, when both countries came together over the shared goal of blocking U.S. efforts to conclude separate peace treaties between Israel and the Arab states. Moscow viewed Damascus as a potential foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean with its warm-water ports at Tartus and Latakia. In exchange, the Syrians received Russian military equipment, which allowed them to pursue strategic parity with Israel.

Traditionally, Moscow perceived Syria and the Middle East as part of its extended neighborhood, similar to how Washington perceived Latin America and the Caribbean. But if the Russians thought they could genuinely influence Syria, they were terribly mistaken. U.S. intelligence memos observed that Moscow, despite its intimate relationship with Damascus and the extensive financial and military aid it supplied, enjoyed a limited bilateral working relationship. The Russians acknowledged this privately but said that a limited relationship was preferable to no relationship at all.

For instance, Moscow could not prevent the ruling Baath Party from persecuting Syrian Communists. Despite their lip service to socialism, the Baathist leadership had no intention of embracing Marxism. According to one U.S. intelligence memo drafted on June 27, 1969, "Moscow's virtual inability to moderate Damascus' hard-line posture has been, in fact, the only constant factor in the shifting Soviet-Syrian relationship."

The Syrians frequently kept their Russian allies in the dark about their diplomatic efforts and military operations, much to Moscow's irritation. In one stunning example, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described in his memoirs how Syria intentionally left the Soviets out of the disengagement talks between Syria and Israel in 1974. According to Kissinger, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad wanted only Washington to facilitate the negotiations, demonstrating, in Kissinger's mind, "the weakness of the Soviet position." "The President of Syria, remarkably, preferred to negotiate without his principal ally," Kissinger wrote.

Syria also failed to inform its principal benefactor of its intention to invade Lebanon in 1976 in support of Christian militias, much to the embarrassment of Premier Alexei Kosygin. As the CIA noted in another intelligence memo, it

was during the Lebanese Civil War that the Russian leadership considered Syria to be straying from its orbit. "The USSR has been increasingly dissatisfied that its substantial economic and military aid investment has not been paying dividends in the form of greater Soviet influence on Syrian policy," said the memo.

Syria's unwillingness to follow Moscow's direction prompted concern that Damascus wanted to lessen its dependence on Moscow in favor of mending ties with Egypt and the other pro-Western Arab states and aligning with Washington. A CIA research paper published in December 1986 commented yet again that "despite the wide scope of their presence in Syria, the Soviets have little sway over important decisions made by the Assad regime."

In December 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. With only one superpower remaining, it seemed almost certain that Damascus would have little choice but to moderate its policies and turn to the United States for support.

But just as the Soviets had failed to influence the internal politics of Syria, so too did the United States. Syria demonstrated that it was more interested in a peace process than actual peace. Syrian support for terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad hindered the improvement of relations throughout the 1990s. Assad also would not surrender his core Pan-Arab principles, which rejected Western influence and advocated the liberation of Palestine, a euphemism for the end of Israel. Although a Syrian-Israeli peace deal was a priority during the Clinton administration, Syria refused to compromise.

After Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, he continued to pursue policies inspired by Arab nationalism —and close ties with Moscow. Even as Russia fell from the ranks of the superpowers, it remained a source of economic and military aid for Damascus.

Yet Bashar also explored what concessions he could obtain from Washington after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Syria provided Washington with what was believed to be valuable intelligence about al-Qaeda in exchange for relative immunity in the war on terror. If this deal had not been struck, Syria probably would have been included in George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil."

Since then, Syria's role in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and growing ties with Iran and Hezbollah have eroded American goodwill. Damascus's support for the Iraqi insurgency, in which thousands of U.S. soldiers have been killed or injured, coupled with its warm alliance with Tehran, a regime determined to acquire nuclear weapons for regional domination, have further derailed realistic chances of mending U.S.-Syria ties.

The inability of either the Soviet Union or the United States to influence Syrian policy should be a sober warning to Washington that it has very limited policy options in Syria. This truth should be the basis of any new policy the two nations discuss in Helsinki.

One area where American and Russian interests converge is maintaining a de-escalation zone in southern Syria. In 2017, the United States, Russia and Jordan entered a pact that established de-escalation zones on the Syrian-Israeli border and on the Syrian-Jordanian border. These buffer zones aim to save lives by preventing Iranian-backed militias from conducting operations in the area.

Washington and Moscow also have a strategic interest in preventing additional refugees from entering Jordan, a country with scarce resources, a depressed economy and a population of about 10 million. As of April 2018, 744,865 people living in Jordan are refugees, the vast majority of whom are Syrian, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency. A new influx of Syrian refugees could destabilize the Hashemite kingdom by placing additional burdens on Jordan's fragile economy.

Additionally, Russia and the United States want to prevent another Israeli-Hezbollah war, which could cause greater regional instability. Securing a buffer zone with clear and narrowly defined objectives that prevent the Iranians from establishing a base in southern Syria satisfies U.S. and Russian interests.

However, there should be no illusions that the implementation of a buffer zone can be guaranteed. Syria's leadership will do what suits it, not what the United States —or Russia —demands. Success may be possible as long as U.S. policymakers have clear expectations of the limited parameters involved in achieving this goal. But setting their sights any higher will probably ensure that the United States will meet with failure in the region.

DETAILS

Subject:	Government agencies; Refugees; Military aid; Militia groups
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People:	Trump, Donald J Kissinger, Henry A Assad, Bashar Al Bush, George W Putin, Vladimir
Company / organization:	Name: Hezbollah-Party of God; NAICS: 813940; Name: Islamic Jihad; NAICS: 813940; Name: Central Intelligence Agency--CIA; NAICS: 928110, 928120; Name: Hamas; NAICS: 813940
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