

Chapter 18: Chapter exercises

Russia's intervention in Syria

As Roland Dannreuther notes in his chapter, the 2015 military intervention in Syria marked a return to a position of major power and influence for Russia in the Middle East. While the Obama administration struggled to balance the humanitarian impulse to affect the course of the civil war with the desire to continue with an overall strategy of retrenchment in the Middle East, Putin's assertive foray into Syria caught the West off guard. The long-term effects on the regional balance of power are still very much in the air, as the conflict enters into its final phases.

Putin's stated objectives when the military intervention began in September 2015 were relatively simple. Russian troops were in Syria, it was claimed, to fight the growing threat of Islamist terrorism, in the form of IS and other jihadist militant groups. This, of course, was the same mission which the American president had given thousands of his own forces in neighbouring Iraq over the past year. Yet in order to achieve a lasting solution, the Russian president foresaw a need to bolster the existing Asad regime. On 11 October 2015, he thus stated Russian objectives as 'stabilising the legitimate power in Syria and creating the conditions for political compromise'. For the Americans, however, Asad was part of the problem, not the solution; Obama had been calling for Asad to resign ever since the 'red line' over the use of chemical weapons had been crossed back in 2011.

It seems fair to conclude that early commentators were correct to identify the Russian intervention as a game changer, which swung the course of the conflict in Asad's favour. Fawaz Gerges wrote in 2016, 'Mr Putin's decision to intervene in Syria and shore up Mr Assad with new fighter jets, military advisers and advanced weapons stopped the bleeding of the Syrian army and allowed it to shift from defence to offence.' By December 2017, Putin declared Syria to be 'completely liberated' and Russian troop withdrawal plans were announced, though aerial and naval support would continue. While US-led efforts to eradicate IS were also increasingly significant, notably in the liberation of Raqqa, it had been Russia's vision for a post-IS Syrian political regime that had endured.

If Putin helped Asad win the war, his attempts to broker a lasting peace with remaining rebel groups have fared less well, with a series of ceasefires agreed at Astana having failed to bring about a permanent cessation of hostilities. With few exceptions, however, the dialogue between the government-backed forces and rebel groups has been conducted on Russia's terms, with minimal western oversight of the peace process. At the time of writing, a messy conclusion to the conflict does not seem to spell major danger for Asad's proven ability to cling to power.

In the chapter, a number of reasons for Russia's pro-Asad strategy in Syria are offered, including the role of domestic political conditions in Moscow and the significance of events in Libya in 2011. To these, additional geopolitical and geo-economic considerations could be added. First, Russia sees Syria as its strategic outpost in the Mediterranean, home to the Tartus naval base and thus of pivotal importance if Russia wants to maintain a wider politico-military influence in the region. Second, and relatedly, US disengagement in the region and the continued rise of spoilers like Iran have set off a scramble for power in an increasingly multipolar structure; Russia may simply wish to stake its claim

as a major player for the next generation. Third, as one of the largest global arms exporters, Syria serves as something of a marketplace and testing ground for some of its more cutting-edge military products, such as the Su-35 combat jets and Kalibr cruise missiles.

Assess the impact of Russia's intervention in Syria on the balance of power in the region. Do Russia's actions represent a threat to US hegemony, or an opportunity for cooperation?

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