

# Between Syria and Afghanistan, crisis management becomes too onerous for Russia- Pavel K. Baev



The serious escalation of violent clashes in Syria in recent weeks is hardly surprising, given the extreme intensity of internal strife, but it makes Russian conflict managers very nervous. The Kremlin has repeatedly proclaimed its military intervention victorious. Moscow experts elaborate on the [striking difference](#) between the US debacle in Afghanistan and Russia's success in ensuring the survival of al-Assad's regime, but the reality is somewhat more complicated. The security chaos in Afghanistan resulting from the Taliban's shocking capture of Kabul last August demands priority attention in Moscow. The acute need to allocate resources toward countering this new grave security challenge aggravates the shortage of resources for stabilizing the situation in Syria. The shortcomings of the Russian "smart" policy of getting high returns on

low investments are exposed – and its leadership is irked with the imperative to make hard choices.

## **Three tracks of conflict manipulation**

The environment of protracted regional conflicts is generally and traditionally quite comfortable for Moscow, which excels at manipulating clashing interests of warring parties, but typically finds itself out of its element when it comes to post-war reconstruction. The problem with Syria as far as Russian conflict management is concerned is that it is neither here nor there. The war cannot be brought to a conclusive outcome as long as Idlib remains under the control of Turkey-backed rebels and US troops are still present, and nothing resembling rehabilitation (including the return of refugees) can be started. Afghanistan is an even deeper mess: Moscow may be [entertaining the proposition](#) of recognizing the Taliban as a legitimate government, but Russian experts also express doubts in its ability to establish firm control over the devastated country. At the same time, the Defense Ministry [is busy preparing](#) to repel new security threats emanating from this seat of terrorism.

Ambivalence can often help ensure flexibility of political maneuvering. Still, in these two cases, dissimilar as they are, Moscow attempts to move simultaneously in different directions, which is never a recipe for success. The primary source of this confusion is the disconnect in Russian policy-making between the three key actors – the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defense, and the Kremlin – which pursue particular goals and ambitions that often go cross-purpose. The divergence between courses drawn by professional diplomats and the top brass is entirely natural. Still, the presidential administration (and the Security Council) is supposed to be the supreme authority that overrules bureaucratic competition and enforces coordination. Instead, President Vladimir Putin conducts his top-level relations, often cut across the sophisticated diplomatic dances and not always answer the military-strategic guidelines. His deal-making with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, for that matter, is unique in complexity and intensity in the last 12 years, with bitter quarrels and reconciliations, and the net outcome has been the mitigation of tensions in conflicts that involve the risk of a

direct clash.

Syria is a major focal point of this very personal bargaining, which has yielded many compromises, but the latest summit in Sochi was [apparently fruitless](#). Russian [experts expect](#) Turkey to launch yet another limited military offensive in northern Syria, perhaps targeting Kobani, which would bridge the gap between two existing “security zones” along the border. Moscow is not content with this looming prospect, which could diminish the “sovereignty” claimed by the al-Assad regime yet further. Still, it cannot prevent it either by political messaging or by military deployments. Russian command signals its disapproval in the usual way – by [delivering airstrikes](#) close to Turkish observations posts in the Idlib province. Still, nothing resembling preparations for an offensive to the north of the M4 highway seems to be happening. This restraint is quite probably caused by the shift of strategic attention to Afghanistan.

## **Economic parsimony and military overstretch**

The full extent of geopolitical consequences from the shocking Taliban victory in August might remain obscure for months to come, but the imperative to respond to acute and potential security challenges to Central Asia has dawned on Moscow. It was very convenient to criticize the US military presence in Afghanistan while observing how various terrorist groups concentrated their efforts on fighting against it. Still, presently it is necessary to allocate own resources toward this familiar but challenging theatre. Diplomatic connections with the Taliban were established several years ago, but the [recent meeting](#) in the so-called Moscow format produced scant results, not least because Putin remains reluctant to proceed with acknowledging this channel. His stance is influenced by Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon, who was the [only foreign guest](#) at the traditional Victory Day military parade in Moscow this year. For various [domestic reasons](#), Rahmon finds it helpful to take a rigid confrontational stance against the Taliban, so the recent summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Dushanbe was [rather disagreeable](#).

Putin could have disciplined his ally, but Russian top brass hold opinions regarding the threats emanating from Afghanistan that are pretty similar to those of Rahmon – and differ significantly from hopes expressed by diplomats. The series of Russia-led [military exercises](#) in Tajikistan has continued nearly non-stop since August, but no new permanent deployment has occurred. What the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> military base in Tajikistan needs in terms of reinforcements is airpower, but there is very little in terms of free capacity that the command in Moscow can spare for demanding missions in Central Asia. The [chain of accidents](#) with combat and transport planes during this summer/autumn proves that many key capabilities in Russian AirSpace forces are stretched to the limit. Such impactful new developments as the first use by Ukrainian forces of the *Bayraktar* drone (imported from Turkey) for a [precision strike](#) on the rebel artillery position in the Donbas region get utmost attention in Moscow.

In the light of these new demands for performing crucial missions, there is no way for the Russian command to build up the grouping of forces in Syria for staging a new offensive operation. The problem is that in the absence of a decisive military victory, the credibility of the al-Assad regime erodes steadily and irreversibly. Even in the best circumstances, Russia would not have been able to provide sufficient funds for post-war reconstruction. Its capacity for supporting the corrupt Syrian ally is reduced even further in the economic stagnation aggravated by the severe autumnal wave of the COVID-19 epidemic. In July, Moscow had to vote for the UN Security Council resolution that authorized cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid from Turkey to Idlib because Damascus is [critically dependent](#) on receiving its share of this aid.

## Conclusion

Elaborating at great length on the crisis of the Western model of capitalism at the recent gathering of the [Valdai Club](#), Putin attempted to downplay, if not deny, the situation that Russian foreign policy was spiraling into. Positioning itself as a dominant security provider in its many neighborhoods, Moscow finds itself entangled in one complex emergency after another. Ukraine has been its top



priority contestation since spring 2014, and since summer 2020, Belarus has become a problem that consumes enormous economic and political resources. The explosion of an old conflict in the South Caucasus in autumn 2020 necessitated greater attention to this troubled region, and the new threat emanating from Afghanistan could become a demand for too many. Given Moscow's desire to strengthen the position of power in the Arctic and the urge to show military muscle in the Far East, it is only possible to invest in meeting the severe security challenges in Central Asia by disinvesting in some other theatre. Realistically, the only feasible place for such disinvestment is Syria. Russia has no critical national interests in this war zone. Much the same way as the USA in Afghanistan, it can wrap up its deployment without exposing itself to acute security risks. The al-Assad regime would probably collapse into a violent mess far more profound than the present-day disaster in Lebanon. Still, it will be the neighbors who will suffer the consequences. The Kremlin refuses to contemplate such rational choice, but each new spasm in the crisis dynamics engulfing Russia's borders finds it unprepared and underequipped.

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