

Russia's offer for the West: an anti-terrorist coalition on Russian terms

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On 17th November the Russian government revealed that the Russian passenger jet which came down over the Sinai peninsula on 31st October fell victim to a terrorist attack perpetrated by militants affiliated with Islamic State (IS) and announced that it would step up air strikes in Syria. Russian air forces in Syria, which for the first time received support from strategic bombers stationed in Russia, launched a series of air strikes targeting Raqqa, an IS stronghold. Vladimir Putin reiterated his call to form a common front in order to combat terrorism and ordered the Russian military to treat French military forces as allies and to coordinate their operations in Syria with them. Putin's participation in the G20 summit, which was held on 15th and 16th November in Antalya in Turkey, was also meant to bring round Russia's Western partners to its concept of ending the Syrian crisis. The Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov took a similar course during a meeting of a 'group of Syria's friends' in Vienna on 14th November.

Commentary

- The Kremlin has been using the attacks in Paris to persuade the West to fundamentally shift its policy towards Syria – and also towards Russia. It is also enticing Western leaders to accept a political formula of a common front for fighting Islamist terrorism which presents the illusion of Russian help in solving problems generated by a protracted civil war in Syria. Russia's objectives regarding Syria are still in stark contrast to those of its Western 'allies': it wants Assad to remain in power and to use the conflict instrumentally in order to improve the Kremlin's bargaining position in its relations with the West. Russia's diplomatic measures are meant to provide a convenient excuse for a possible shift in the West's policy towards Moscow. The change would consist in Western capitals accepting the Russian diagnosis of the causes of the Syrian conflict and the Kremlin's formula for ending the civil war (leaving Assad in power). This solution is unacceptable for the majority of the anti-Assad armed opposition and may rally popular support for the radical Islamist opposition. This would be more likely to bring about an escalation of the conflict than an end to it.
- If the West were to agree to take part in the anti-terrorist alliance Moscow is putting forward, this would imply that it recognises Russia's privileged position in the post-Soviet area. This area would thus be shifted to the margins of mutual relations. It was no

coincidence that President Putin raised the issue of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between Ukraine and the EU during his talks in Antalya, most likely in order to insist that its implementation be further postponed beyond January 1, 2016. The chairwoman of the Federation Council, Valentina Matviyenko, while talking with Gerard Larcher, the president of the French senate on 18th November, made the improvement in relations between Moscow and Europe dependent on the sanctions being lifted.

- Moscow is hoping that in the aftermath of the attacks in Paris the balance of power on the Western European political scene will change. Conservative, nationalist, anti-immigration and anti-US ideas will gain popularity and this will strengthen those parties and groupings (and perhaps even help them ascend to power) that seem ready to take into account Russian interests and are inclined to adopt slogans calling for Europe's 'emancipation' from the American domination (the Front National in France, the AfD in Germany and Lega Nord in Italy).