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After Tillerson's talks in Moscow. The prospects of Russia's policy in Syria

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The visit and its outcome

On 11-12 April, the US secretary of state Rex Tillerson made his first state visit to Moscow. On 12 April, he held five-hour talks with the Russian diplomacy chief Sergei Lavrov and two-hour talks with the Russian president Vladimir Putin. So far, the joint press conference of Tillerson and Lavrov (dominated by the message of the latter) is the only public source of information on the visit and its outcome.

The main topics concerned Syria, Ukraine (Donbas) and North Korea. Statements made by both sides after the meeting revealed a willingness to improve mutual relations and intensify high-level diplomatic and military contacts. However, no noticeable rapprochement took place between the two sides on any of the issues discussed (especially Syria and Ukraine), and Tillerson and Lavrov both stuck to their previous positions.

The two sides agreed to establish a working group tasked with sorting out smaller differences between Russia and the US to prepare ground for work on more fundamental issues. Concerning Syria, the parties recognised destroying the terror groups as their shared priority and agreed to open negotiations with a view to finding a political solution to the conflict. The Russian side declared that it was ready to resume the suspended memorandum on the prevention of incidents between the two countries' air forces in Syria, on the condition that the memorandum would only apply to the joint fight against terrorism (i.e. would not apply to possible US operations against Assad forces). On Ukraine, the parties declared their support for the Minsk accords and pledged to reinstate the bilateral consultation mechanism between the special representative of the president of Russia (Vladislav Surkov) and a representative of the US Department of State. On North Korea, the two sides said their shared objective was to de-nuclearize the country. Lavrov emphasised that during the meeting, Tillerson had "not threatened Russia" in relation to any matter, and Tillerson admitted that the question of sanctions against Russia had not been discussed.

On the other hand, Tillerson and Lavrov publicly presented divergent positions on the future fate of the Assad regime in Syria: Tillerson emphasised that Assad's time was over, while Lavrov implied that Russia did not back Assad unconditionally and its future fate should be the Syrian people's decision, while at the same time emphasising that Russia's was supporting the legal government of Syria, and Assad's departure would be a success of the Islamic State. The two politicians also presented different assessments of the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun. Tillerson accused the Assad regime of the attack while admitting

the US had no evidence of any Russian involvement; meanwhile Lavrov said it was not entirely clear if the attack had taken place, stressed the need for an investigation and called for the Assad forces to be presumed innocent until proven guilty. Tillerson and Lavrov also expressed divergent opinions concerning, for instance, the alleged Russian influence on the US presidential elections (Tillerson restated the allegation that Russia had interfered, which Lavrov rejected claiming that the allegations were not backed by any evidence. Tillerson also admitted that Russian-American relations were at the lowest point in years and that trust between the two sides was low.

The way the meeting unfolded clearly indicates that by softening its original assertive line on Russia, the United States lost its psychological advantage gained after the US missile strike on the Shayrat air base. Moscow now feels much more confident and has adopted a more rigid line in the relations with Washington. This new posture is also visible in the fact that as the talks were taking place, Russia vetoed the UN Security Council's draft resolution condemning the chemical attack in Syria and calling on the Assad regime to co-operate with an international inquiry.

Political context

The US missile strike on Syria's airbase in Shayrat on 6/7 April apparently took the Russian leadership by surprise, leaving them outraged and initially also unsettled. The operation demonstrated the United States' considerable military capacity in Syria and, by attacking Russia's 'ally' delivered a blow to Moscow's image as the dominant actor in the Syrian conflict.

Reacting to the attack, Russia made some demonstrative gestures, e.g. it announced that it was suspending the Russian-American memorandum on the prevention of air incidents in Syria and that the programme of the visit to Moscow by the US Secretary of State would not include (the usual) meeting with president Putin, thus affronting and pressuring Tillerson. Moscow also announced that it would provide extra support to the Syrian air defence and step up its air strikes on the armed forces of Syria's moderate armed opposition.

Russia also took political and media measures aimed at three objectives:

- Firstly, it launched a psychological operation to frighten the Western leaders and public opinion with a prospect of an escalation of the Russian-US confrontation, with potentially very serious consequences (by making allusions in official statements, leaking fake documents and mediatising opinions of Russian experts loyal to the Kremlin). For example, comparisons were made to the 1962 US-Soviet crisis in the Caribbean, implying that there was an imminent threat of a World War III breaking out.
- Secondly, it gradually toned down its critical stance towards the United States and declared willingness to pursue dialogue on Syria with Washington, while at the same time suggesting that such dialogue should be comprehensive, i.e. include other issues important for Russia (its grieviances and expectations). Even before the US strikes Russia (specifically, president Putin's spokesman Peskov) implied that Russian support for Assad was not unconditional, creating the impression that Moscow could indeed make some concessions in a diplomatic process; and furthermore Moscow also backed

the calls for an international inquiry into the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April.

- Finally, it tried to deepen the distrust of the Trump administration in some important EU member states by suggesting that the information on the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack disclosed by the United States (indicating that the attack had been perpetrated by the Assad forces, possibly in co-operation with Russian forces) was untrue and amounted to political provocation designed to justify a US military intervention in Syria (Russia drew parallels between those statements and the false information presented by the US to the United Nations in 2003 to justify its armed intervention in Iraq).

There are many indications that the Kremlin quickly came to the conclusion that the US strikes did not mean a significant change in Washington's approach to the Syrian conflict (i.e. its unwillingness to go for any significant direct military involvement) and had been a political demonstration designed to improve the image and poll showings of president Donald Trump in the US and strengthen Washington's position in the political dialogue with Russia (in the context of the planned visit by secretary of state Tillerson to Moscow on 11-12 April).

Such perceptions in Russia were strengthened by the inconsistent and in some cases mutually contradictory messages coming from members of the Trump administration (including Tillerson himself). While some officials said that it was necessary to oust the Assad regime and that the US wanted the regime removed, called on Russia to stop supporting Assad and alluded to expanding the criteria for US military action in Syria, others declared that the US strategy on Syria remained unchanged, the missile attack had been a one-off event and the fate of the Assad regime would be decided in negotiations, while insisting that the US was willing to pursue constructive dialogue with Russia.

Another important factor which prompted Russia to adopt a more rigid position on Syria concerned the lack of credibility of the British (and *de facto* also American) threats to impose new sanctions if Moscow failed to change its policy in Syria, which became evident after the meeting of the G7 diplomacy chiefs in Lucca on 11 April. In the communique released after the meeting, the G7 foreign ministers condemned Assad's forces (and the opposition armed forces) for war crimes. On the other hand, however, they refrained from blaming the Assad regime for the chemical attack in Khan Shaykhun and failed to threaten Russian with new sanctions or even express any criticism of Russia's policy in Syria (while praising Russia's peace efforts and calling on Moscow to continue making them). The communique and the statements by German, Italian and French officials quoted in the media (who said that the Syrian conflict cannot be resolved without or against Russia, that escalation of tensions with Russia should be avoided and that efforts should be made to persuade Moscow to change its policy) implied that some of the G7 countries were distancing themselves from any tougher stance on Russia. This strengthened Russia's perceptions of discord and distrust between the United States and the leading EU member states (including Germany) with regard to the tactics of dealing with Moscow, as well as divergences in their respective assessments of the developments in Syria (including the chemical attack).

Objectives and prospects of Russia's policy in Syria

There are no reasons to believe that Russia might make serious political concessions and revise its policy towards Syria. Moscow's aim is to keep the Assad regime in place in Syria, as a symbol of the fiasco of the US policy of regime change, and as a guarantee that Russia keeps its influence in Syria. Another objective is to preserve the appearance (or, in the optimum variant, to get everybody to genuinely recognise) that Russia is a key actor shaping the situation in Syria and an indispensable partner in any dialogue about ways to resolve the conflict and combat Islamic radicalism. To this end, Russia is interested in keeping the appearance that political negotiations have some prospects of success and that it is actively committed to fighting the Islamic State. It is therefore to be expected that Moscow will step up its military support to Assad's forces, including air defence (to psychologically deter the US from possible new attacks). On the other hand, Moscow will also continue participating in bilateral and multilateral dialogue on Syria, without revising its position.

Moscow could genuinely support a peace accord in Syria, on the condition that it would be in keeping with its political interests, i.e. if it allowed the Assad regime to stay in power (and keep control of large parts of the country, especially in western Syria), granted the 'moderate' opposition only a nominal share in power, respected the military and economic agreements concluded by Moscow with the Assad regime, and provided for the creation of such a formal 'anti-terror coalition' which would give Russia ability to influence US policy.

Russia could stop supporting Assad politically and militarily only in two situations, which currently seem very unlikely to materialise:

1. If the Assad forces found themselves in a critical military situation as a result of direct US military involvement supported by Turkey and the armed opposition groups (despite Russian and Iranian support), and if Russia therefore faced the prospect of blow to its international prestige.
2. If, as a result of political bargaining with the United States, Russia made major geopolitical gains compensating it for the losses in Syria, e.g. if the post-Soviet area was recognised as Russia's sphere of influence (with legal and political guarantees that Ukraine will be 'neutralised' and the annexation of Crimea recognised) and/or if Central Europe was recognised as a *de facto* security buffer zone (i.e. if the US and NATO withdrew from their decision to strengthen the Alliance's eastern flank and scrapped the project to build the missile shield in Central Europe).

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