

US Gambling on War with Russia in Syria

by Finian Cunningham via chad - SCF *Saturday, Nov 14 2015, 2:09am*

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As US Secretary of State John Kerry convenes with diplomats from Russia and other nations for a second round of political talks on the Syrian conflict in Vienna this weekend, it is becoming clear that Washington is gambling on a two-prong strategy. But the US gamble carries a grave risk of blowing up into a war with Russia.



The New York Times [reported](#) this week: "For the first time in the four-year Syrian civil war, President Obama is beginning to execute a combined diplomatic and military approach to force President Bashar al-Assad to leave office and end the carnage".

Forcing Syria's leader Assad "to leave office" is the key objective. That is, regime change. While «ending the carnage» is only a bit of public relations window-dressing.

The NY Times explains further what this combined diplomatic and military approach entails. "As 50 Special Operations [American] troops arrive in Syria to bolster the most effective opposition groups, the [Obama] administration is gambling that Secretary of State John Kerry will have more leverage to push Russia, Iran and other players toward two objectives: a cease-fire to limit the cycle of killing and the establishment of a timeline for a transition of power".

When Kerry met his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Vienna two weeks ago, along with diplomats from 18 other states, that summit came with the surprise announcement by Washington that it was planning to send 50 special forces troops into Syria. Kerry said then that the move was merely «a coincidence». We know now, from the above NY Times report this week, that Kerry was either dissembling or out of the loop, because the military decision is reportedly part of a «combined approach».

Furthermore, Ashton Carter, the US Secretary of Defence, [said last weekend](#) that it was likely that more American troops would be sent into Syria.

What other military leverage is being contemplated? This week, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan [said](#) that a joint ground force was being prepared to set up «safe zones» within Syria. Erdogan said he had discussed this contingency with Obama in a phone call. Of course, Erdogan couched the planned invasion of Syria as a measure to counter the extremist Islamic State group

(also known as ISIS, ISIL).

Again, that is just public relations window-dressing since Erdogan's Turkey has been a main sponsor and facilitator of extremist groups infiltrating Syria from Turk territory.

Erdogan said: "We are insisting on a no-fly zone in Syria as a safe zone. Our allies are getting closer to the idea. Some progress has also been made on conducting a ground operation against ISIL... Yesterday [Monday], I had a phone conversation with US President Barack Obama on the issue".

The idea of annexing Syrian territory has long been pushed by Turkey since the beginning of the Syrian conflict more than four years ago. Hawkish pundits and politicians in Washington have also been advocating safe zones or no-fly zones in Syria. But up to now, the Obama administration has balked at that intervention owing to perceived military risks of large-scale commitment.

According to Erdogan, the White House seems to be finally warming to the idea of annexing Syrian territory. That concurs with the apparent U-turn by the Obama administration to put boots on the ground with the dispatch of special forces and the promise of more troops, as indicated by Carter. The stated purpose of these troops being sent to organise anti-IS local forces among Kurdish and Syrian Arab does not hold water. A recent report by the New York Times admitted that this local Kurd-Arab coalition was an American «invention» that «existed in name only».

Besides, such a US-supported ground coalition that bolstered Kurdish militia and their aspirations for a separatist state on the southern Turkish border would be anathema to the Erdogan regime in Ankara.

That Washington is now calculating on throwing its weight behind the Turkish plan to carve out Syrian territory may also account for the recent assignment of US F-15 fighter jets to Turkey's southwest Incirlik NATO base. As other observers have noted, the F-15s are air-to-air combat planes. They would have no role in launching ground attacks supposedly against Islamic State militants. But the fighter jets would have a role in patrolling the skies over the would-be safe zones annexed by Turk and US ground forces. That would inevitably pit these US warplanes against Syrian and Russian aircraft.

Meanwhile, in southern Syria the Israelis appear to be consulting with the Obama administration over their own annexation plans. The Times of Israel [reported](#) that during his White House meeting with Obama this week, Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu raised the issue of formally annexing the Golan Heights. The territory has been held by Israel since the 1967 war. Obama reportedly did not mention the matter publicly, but Netanyahu made it clear that he is looking for formal US recognition of Israel's annexation, according to the Times of Israel.

Note that this de facto break-up of Syrian territory, in the north and south, is officially contrary to what US Secretary of State John Kerry said at the first Vienna summit two weeks ago. Kerry appeared then to agree with Russia's position that Syria should remain a unified state. However, as argued here, the erosion of Syrian sovereign territory by Turkey and Israel, with US support, appears to be part of the military leverage that Washington is seeking to exert on Russia in order for Moscow to accede to American demands for political transition in Damascus.

Washington's plans for increasing military leverage in Syria does not end there. There are credible reports that the US is stepping up its supply of greater fire power to the various militant networks. In addition to anti-tank TOW missiles, Washington appears to be moving towards giving the go-ahead for the supply of surface-to-air missiles (SAMS). This has long been a request from Saudi

Arabia and Turkey, but as with the idea of no-fly zones the Obama administration has reportedly up to now held back on SAMs. The Saudis have been threatening, according to the [BBC](#), to unleash their US stocks to the mercenaries in Syria ever since Russia embarked on its military air campaign to support the Assad government.

The Wall Street Journal, quoting US officials, reports: "In the past month of intensifying Russian airstrikes, the CIA and its partners have increased the flow of military supplies to rebels in northern Syria, including of US-made TOW anti-tank missiles... In addition to the arms the US has agreed to provide, Saudi and Turkish officials have renewed talks with their American counterparts about allowing limited supplies of shoulder-fire man-portable air-defence systems, or Manpads, to select rebels. Those weapons could help target regime aircraft, in particular those responsible for dropping barrel bombs, and could also help keep Russian air power at bay, the [US] officials said".

The WSJ quotes its US official source further: "Assad is not going to feel any pressure to make concessions if there is no viable opposition that has the capacity, through the support of its partners, to put pressure on his regime".

Obama has said, publicly at least, that he has no intention for the US to become embroiled in a proxy war with Russia in Syria. But Obama's words on other issues do not carry much credibility. He is putting American boots on the ground after vowing not to do so previously. And his avowed commitments to maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria also appears now to be unwinding, as Turk and Israeli moves to annex northern and southern areas suggests.

The two-prong US strategy of combining diplomatic and military levers to effect its objective of regime change in Syria may not be contemplating a proxy war with Russia – at least as far as Obama and Kerry are concerned. But the hawks in the Pentagon and the CIA, along with the Saudi and Turk client regimes, seem to be willing to push the risk of a two-prong vice to its logical conclusion – a war with Russia in Syria.

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