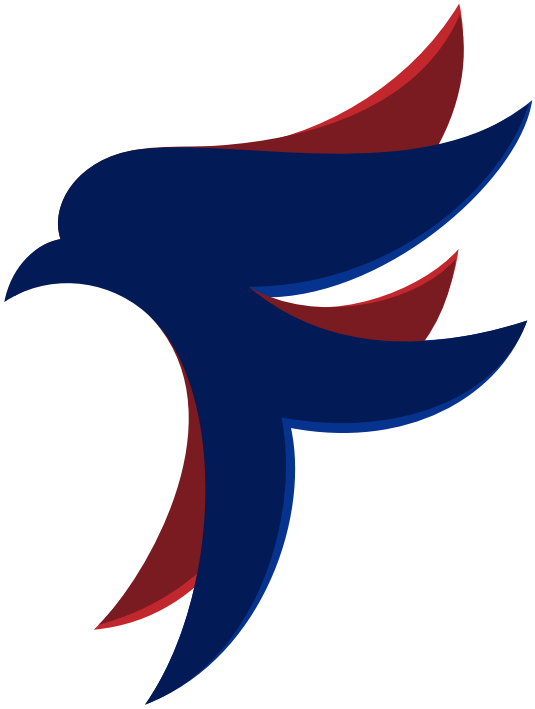
FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE | MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

A PLAN TO END THE WAR IN SYRIA:

COMPETING WITH RUSSIA IN THE LEVANT

Aaron Stein



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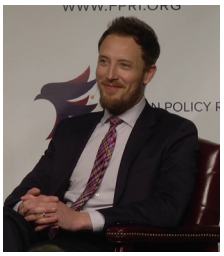
About the Author



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Abstract

The United States has an interest in allowing the Russian Federation to “win” an outright victory in Syria, so long as it secures from Moscow an agreement that is favorable to the Syrian Kurds, builds in negative consequences for an external actor targeting the Syrian Democratic Forces, and establishes a “deconfliction plus”-type mechanism to continue to target Islamic State- and Al Qaeda-linked individuals in Syria. A forward-looking policy that the incoming Biden administration could consider is to deprioritize the nascent threat of the Islamic State as a key factor in driving U.S. national security strategy, and instead focus more intently on long-term competition with great powers. This approach would seek to shape how Moscow spends finite defense dollars—at a time of expected global defense cuts stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic—in ways that are advantageous to the United States. It also would seek to limit the cost of the U.S. presence in Syria—to include secondary and opportunity costs not accounted for in a basic cost breakdown of the U.S. war against the Islamic State. This approach is not without risk, particularly from a nascent Islamic State insurgency in Russian-controlled territory, but seeks to match U.S. strategic priorities with action and to impose upon a long-term competitor the costs of victory for its intervention in Syria.

INTRODUCTION

The United States has an interest in ending its involvement in Syria, following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in March 2019. After nearly two decades of war in the Middle East, the future of American foreign policy in the region is being debated. While ideologically opposed, both the Trump and Obama administrations viewed the rise of the People's Republic of China as a more pressing national security threat and sought to disentangle the United States from conflicts in the Middle East. Neither president succeeded. The Obama administration was drawn to both Syria and Iraq in following the collapse of Mosul in June 2014 and the Islamic State's takeover of large swathes of territory in both countries. The Trump administration finished the war that began under Obama and warped its outcome to fit with a concurrent decision to end American support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The United States has no strategy in Syria, and the ongoing American presence has little connection to future national security interests. In parallel, the United States faces a series of negative outcomes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shuttered economies around the world and has led to a significant rise in unemployment inside the country. To support Americans during the pandemic, Congress passed a $2.2 trillion dollar stimulus package. The economic support for Americans was vital, but it alsoexacerbated the American financial deficit, which has ballooned during the Trump administration and which Republicans are certain to want to address now that a Democrat has been elected president.[1] Funding for the Department of Defense (DoD) peaked in fiscal year 2019,[2] and, thereafter, the DoD was told that defense spending would have to be cut or kept stable.[3] While these figures remain large, in an era of potential austerity to address budget shortfalls, the DoD is going to have to make do with less and better prioritize how to spend finite defense dollars in ways that support the National Security Strategy (NSS).[4] The NSS focuses on the threats posed by the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China and, from a budgetary perspective, is driving the purchase of updated weapons platforms and forcing debates about more rapidly developing hardware to more quickly

THE UNITED STATES HAS NO STRATEGY IN SYRIA, AND THE ONGOING AMERICAN PRESENCE HAS LITTLE CONNECTION TO FUTURE NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS.

1 "The 2020 Long-Term Budget Outlook," Congressional Budget Office, September 21, 2020, https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56516.

2 "DoD Releases Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Proposal," United States Department of Defense, February 12, 2018, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1438798/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2019-budget-proposal/.

3 "DOD Releases Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Proposal," United States Department of Defense, February 10, 2020, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2079489/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2021-budget-proposal/.

4 Ben Werner, "SECDEF Esper Preparing For Future Defense Spending Cuts," *USNI News,* May 4, 2020, https://news.usni.org/2020/05/04/secdef-esper-preparing-for-future-defense-spending-cuts.

Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan giving statements to the press after Russian-Turkish talks. (kremlin.ru)

outfit the armed forces. Terrorism and counterinsurgency remain listed threats to the United States, but they are no longer the driver of national security policy decision-making.

The Biden administration may seek to update the Trump-era NSS, but the general focus on lessening U.S. involvement in smaller wars of choice that dominated the post-9/11 era, and a more narrowly construed focus on the threats that China and Russia pose, is almost certain to remain a core American interest. This change is reminiscent of the Obama administration's determination to focus on Asia and deepen the American presence in the Pacific.[5]

Beginning in October 2019, the American position in Syria became much more tenuous. After close to a year of bureaucratic dysfunction, President Trump ordered the withdrawal of U.S. troops from positions along the Turkish-Syrian border during a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.[6] Ankara had threatened to invade U.S.-controlled areas of Syria for months, and, as tensions increased, President Trump used that phone call with President Erdogan as a mechanism to force his reluctant appointees to carry out a withdrawal. During the debates over U.S. strategy in Syria, the Trump administration sought to use the conflict to advance its broader policy of isolating the Islamic Republic of Iran through the use of coercive economic sanctions in a policy

5 "Factsheet: Advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific," The White House, November 16, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific.

6 Carol E. Lee and Courtney Kube, "Chaos in Syria, Washington after Trump call with Erdogan unleashed Turkish military," *NBC News,* October 7, 2019, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/chaos-syria-washington-after-trump-call-erdogan-unleashed-turkish-military-n1063516.

dubbed "Maximum Pressure."[7] The goal of this policy is purportedly to coerce Iran to make further concessions than those given in the JCPOA around its nuclear program. However, in reality, the intent of Maximum Pressure is to topple the regime without using direct military force, and then hope that the next Iranian government would be more amenable to cooperation with the United States.

THE PAIRING OF U.S. COMBAT OPERATIONS IN SYRIA WITH THE MAXIMUM PRESSURE POLICY AGAINST IRAN IS LEGALLY TENUOUS AND TWISTS THE AUTHORITIES UNDERPINNING THE U.S.-LED WAR AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE.

The pairing of U.S. combat operations in Syria with the Maximum Pressure policy against Iran is legally tenuous and twists the authorities underpinning the U.S.-led war against the Islamic State. The war against ISIS was fought using counter-terrorism authorities passed just after the terror attacks on September 11, 2011. The Authorization to use Military Force (AUMF) approved the use of force against Al Qaeda and its affiliates for the group's role in planning and executing the September 11 terrorist attacks.[8] The authorities that underpin all U.S. military action are linked tightly to the counter-terrorism authorities that Congress has enacted to enable the Global War on Terror. These authorities, most notably, do not include the Islamic Republic of Iran, and, within a subset of the Special Forces community, there is concern that the ongoing efforts to graft an anti-Iran effort on to the counter-ISIS campaign could invite greater congressional scrutiny and upend Al Qaeda-linked efforts around the world.[9]

The other variable that the United States must now grapple with in Syria is the breakdown of the deconfliction mechanism with Russia, established in late 2017 to manage the concurrent air campaigns along the Euphrates River. The U.S.-Russia agreement sought to divide eastern Syria along the Euphrates River and required that any Russian air operation to the north or east of the river would require pre-notification, and vice versa for any U.S. air operation to the south or west of the river.[10] The agreement broke down in October 2019, following the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, the rapid U.S. drawdown of forces, and the movement of Russian forces to positions east of the river, both on the ground and in the air. The current status quo, thus, is that the United States has a small number of forces, mostly based south of the M4 highway in the northeast, enmeshed with elements from Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

7 "Advancing the U.S. Maximum Pressure Campaign On Iran," United State Department of State, April 22, 2019, https://www.state.gov/advancing-the-u-s-maximum-pressure-campaign-on-iran/.

8 Public Law 107–40, 107th Congress, September 18, 2001, https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf.

9 Author Interview, U.S. Special Forces Member, Philadelphia, PA, September 2020.

10 Author Interview, U.S. Official Familiar with the Deconfliction Mechanism, Philadelphia, PA, August 2020.

(U.S. Army/CENTCOM)

These small numbers of troops conduct semi-regular patrols in the northeast, while the JSOC and the CIA hunt for high-value Islamic State leaders, many of whom who have taken refuge in Turkish-controlled Idlib and who the United States retains an interest in killing.

The Russians have sought to pressure the United States to withdraw from Syria, leaning on the main American partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), to ask American forces to leave. Moscow also, at times, tests the U.S. military, either through aggressive action in the air or through tactics, such as ramming U.S. vehicles.[11] Moscow does not rule out narrow cooperation, such as in Idlib where U.S. unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) overfly while hunting for Islamic State targets, but would like a highly circumscribed American role that de facto accepts the Syrian regime as legitimate and that includes a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria's northeast. The United States, meanwhile, has yet to decide how Syria fits into its broader national security strategy. While the NSS seeks to move on from the Global War on Terror, the presence of both Iran and Russia in Syria has given advocates of a continued U.S. presence in the country ammunition to claim that the American presence is necessary to push back against both countries in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. The latter frame suggests that the United States and Russia are engaged in a zero-sum game in Syria, wherein any U.S. withdrawal will lead to a Russian gain that is detrimental to American interests.

This narrow framing of the U.S.-Russian competition is neither strategic, nor reflective of the two countries' broader interests. The story of Syria is that Moscow has proved willing to confront any perceived threat to the Syrian regime, either via the American arming of anti-Assad militias or through an open-ended U.S. military role in the northeast. The U.S. policy in Syria is more confused, with the military focused on the mission to

11 Dan Lamothe, "U.S. troops injured in altercation with Russian military patrol in Syria," *Washington Post,* August 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-troops-injured-russia-syria/2020/08/26/f49c99e4-e7df-11ea-a414-8422fa3e4116_story.html.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad discussing reports on the situation in various regions of Syria. (kremlin.ru)

defeat the Islamic State, the CIA overseeing a large clandestine effort to arm the anti-Assad opposition, and American diplomats moving in parallel to wrest concessions on a transitional government. The U.S. effort, from the outset of the conflict, was more complicated and relied upon working through proxies to, independently, work to topple the regime and to fight ISIS.[12] The Russian war effort was more narrow, focused only on ensuring that Bashar al Assad remained in power by using overwhelming fire power to defeat the armed opposition, and then using gains on the battlefield to lobby for a favorable settlement.[13]

Russian policy has not entirely succeeded, but it has achieved many of its primary aims. The United States, too, has succeeded in achieving its primary goal—the defeat of the Islamic State's territorial caliphate—but has failed to coerce the Assad regime into making serious political concessions. Given the current dynamics, the likelihood of an American intervention to increase military pressure on Assad is quite low. The Russian commitment to the Syrian regime, in turn, remains robust, and there is little reason to believe that Moscow could be convinced to completely abandon its core interests in the country. The question, then, becomes how the two sides should interact in Syria and whether there is an opening for a broader diplomatic settlement, or if Russian and American interests in Syria are irreconcilable. Beyond this, there is the question of strategy and how the United States should think about Syria within its broader national security debate and the renewed focus on preparing for conflict with a large state power, rather than being embroiled in a myriad of low-intensity combat operations.

12 Aaron Stein, "Partner operations in Syria: Lessons learned and the way forward," The Atlantic Council, July 10, 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/partner-operations-in-syria/.

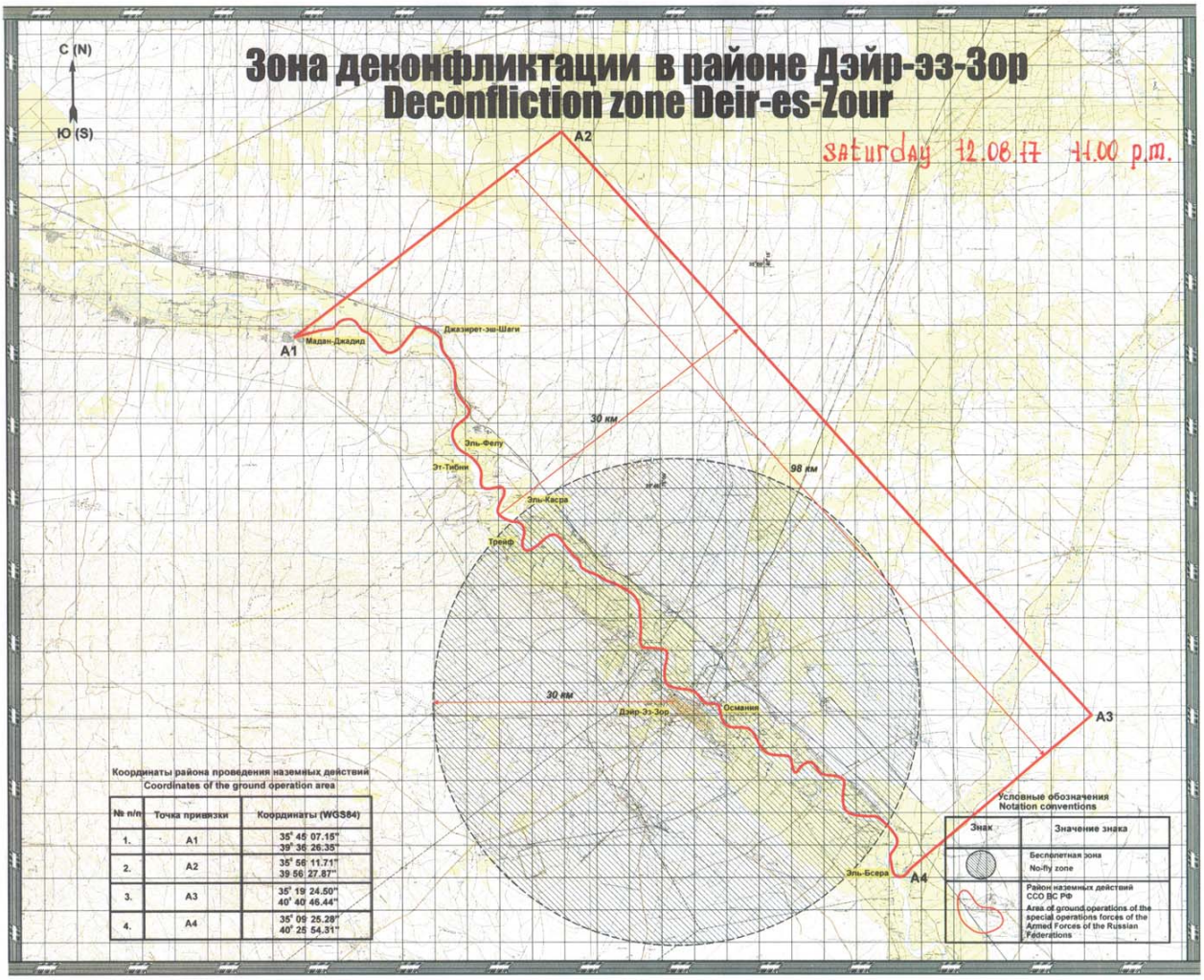
13 *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned,* ed. Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/russias-war-in-syria.pdf.

SYRIA: THE PLACE FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION, OR A STRATEGIC DISTRACTION

The Russian intervention in Syria has prompted debate in the United States about the impact that Moscow's open-ended presence in the Levant could have on American interests in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Mediterranean. The Trump administration has pursued a schizophrenic policy in Syria, divided between the President's repeated insistence that the United States must withdraw from Syria and the actions of his appointed subordinates, who make the case to retain U.S. troops in the country. In the end, the Trump administration has pursued the worst policy choice, leaving behind too few U.S. troops to effectively contain Russian and Turkish expansionism, while ascribing to these soldiers a maximalist mission that ranges from deterring Iranian activity in the east to hedging against Russian expansions north of the Euphrates. With so few troops, the United States can do neither of these tasks effectively, but still shoulders the costs of retaining the infrastructure to support these small numbers of troops. The most effective U.S. troops deployed inside Syria—with the clearest mission—are the Joint Special Operations Forces teams that remain committed to seeking out and eliminating Islamic State leaders in Kurdish-majority areas. However, these troops have expanded their mission set to focus on Idlib, a de facto Turkish-controlled enclave in the northwest of the country, where Islamic State leaders and Al Qaeda-linked individuals have found relative safe haven.

THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA HAS PROMPTED DEBATE IN THE UNITED STATES ABOUT THE IMPACT THAT MOSCOW'S OPEN-ENDED PRESENCE IN THE LEVANT COULD HAVE ON AMERICAN INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, NORTH AFRICA, AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

The Russian presence in the northeast is much more straightforward: Moscow is keen on coercing groups operating outside of central government control to reach a *modus vivendi* with Bashar al Assad. The goal is to return some vestige of central government control over areas that Damascus lost control of during the uprising. This effort had previously been held in check by a deconfliction arrangement that the United States and the Russian Federation had reached in late 2017. This agreement, which replaced a more basic arrangement from 2015, stemmed from tensions over the U.S.-backed effort to push down the Euphrates River following the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa. The Russians had launched a similar offensive from Palmyra, a besieged regime outpost that they broke



The map is a Russian proposal for a regime controlled zone near Deir ez-Zor on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. (Former U.S. Military Official)

out of in 2017.[14] The United States and Russia jousted for influence along the banks of the river, with Moscow pushing Washington to accede to a regime-controlled zone to the north of Euphrates, and a U.S.-SDF zone further north along the Turkish-Syria border.

Washington resisted Russian pressure, and the two sides eventually settled on the Euphrates River as the deconfliction boundary marker, where any Russian operation to the north of the river would require that the Kremlin notify Washington in advance and any such U.S. move south of the river would entail the same such pre-notification. The two sides agreed to three territorial exceptions: The United States had a presence at Tabqa, south of the river, and at Tanf, which sits near the Jordanian-Iraqi-Syrian border. The Russians had a small allocation of land near Deir ez-Zor, where the regime retained a small presence. This mechanism eased tensions, but did not end Russian operations north of the river. However, it was a significant improvement upon the previous agreement, which didn't have the same types of territorial delineation to govern where each side was flying.

14 "Palmyra: Russia-backed Syrian army retakes ancient city," *Al Jazeera,* March 3, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/3/3/palmyra-russia-backed-syrian-army-retakes-ancient-city.

This arrangement collapsed in October 2019 after years of indecision by the Trump administration about the future of U.S. policy in the country. After ordering the U.S. military to leave in December 2018, President Trump gave his commanders four to six months to implement the decision, but a chaotic bureaucratic process extended this period to October 2019. On a phone call with President Erdogan, President Trump hastily acquiesced to Ankara's demand that the United States withdraw.[15] The Turkish military quickly invaded the northeast, which allowed for the Russians to break out of their small box near Deir ez-Zor and to establish a series of small bases along the Turkish-Syrian border. Moscow did so with support from the Syrian Kurds, who felt that the best way to hedge against a Turkish assault was to reach a common agreement with a strong power. The Turkish invasion allowed for a greater Russian presence in Syria's northeast and ensured that the U.S.-Russian deconfliction mechanism broke down, with the introduction of Russian aerial assets (helicopters and jet fighters) now constantly patrolling areas that the United States once effectively controlled.[16]

The United States eventually settled on the notion that American troops should guard Syrian oil facilities. This policy was intended to win President Trump's support by lying to him and suggesting that the United States could "take Syrian oil," a policy outcome he had long favored, despite being illegal.[17] This mission, however, was not covered by the counter-terrorism authorities that the Obama and Trump administration relied upon to deploy combat forces in country without congressional authorization. Thus, the military has signaled that this effort is to deny Islamic State remnants access to a potential source of revenue, rather than framing it as a mission to deny the Syrian regime control over a lucrative natural resource. In reality, the goal of the U.S. deployment, after the Turkish invasion, has been to deny Bashar al Assad total victory and to use the American presence as a means to deny the regime control over Syrian oil fields. Instead, the Trump administration has quietly argued that the United States should independently pump and refine this oil and allow the SDF to export it.[18] This policy would end the black market trade of petroleum products in Syria, some of which the SDF sells to the Syrian regime. It would also create a source of revenue for the SDF, as it seeks to rebuild areas devastated by the war. As part of this effort, the Trump administration has also sought to marginalize the role of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) inside the SDF, so as to assuage Turkish concerns. This policy is designed to win Turkish support of the U.S. policy, creating a Turkish-American control zone that spans from the Euphrates River Valley to Idlib and which could subsist off oil that the SDF exploits with U.S. assistance.

This policy rests on a fundamental flaw: Ankara will never accept the SDF as a legitimate actor in Syria, and the SDF cannot function without the PKK. Further, this effort is illegal. The American troop presence is tied only to the Islamic State, and the subordination of the U.S. mission to what is tantamount to a policy of regime change is not covered by the AUMF. This strategy also hinges on the idea

15 "Donald Trump gives Turkey the green light to invade northern Syria," *Economist,* October 7, 2019, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/10/07/donald-trump-gives-turkey-the-green-light-to-invade-northern-syria.

16 "Russian forces enter Syria's Kobane after deal with Ankara," *France 24,* October 24, 2019, https://www.france24.com/en/20191023-russian-forces-enter-syria-s-kobane-after-deal-with-ankara.

17 Michael Crowley, "'Keep the Oil': Trump Revives Charged Slogan for New Syria Troop Mission," *New York Times,* October 26, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/26/us/politics/trump-syria-oil-fields.html.

18 Lara Seligman and Ben Lefebvre, "Little-known U.S. firm secures deal for Syrian oil," *Politico,* August 6, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/03/delta-crescent-energy-syrian-oil-391033.

that the United States can effectively coerce Moscow to be more sympathetic to American-defined interests in Syria. Washington's interests, however, are incongruous with those of Moscow's precisely because the two sides disagree on one core premise: Russia is wedded to Bashar al Assad and his regime, while the United States has made ousting him a priority. This core disagreement does not necessarily preclude arrangements on counterterrorism or deconfliction, but they have prevented compromise on resolving the conflict.

The Russian strategy in Syria has always been easier to implement than that of the United States. Moscow intervened to prop up a failing government and to defeat of divided and fractured rebel opposition movement. The initial war effort succeeded relatively quickly, but the task of completely defeating the insurgency has proved more difficult. Russia faces two distinct problems: The first is in Idlib, where the presence of Al Qaeda-linked groups remains an irritant and Ankara has signaled that it will protect the enclave with military force. The second problem Moscow faces is in the eastern Syrian desert, where the Islamic State remains active and a threat to the thinly spread Syrian regime forces tasked with holding territory. Moscow has sought to manage the first issue through negotiations with Turkey. As for the second, the Russians have few good options and are likely to be dealing with a sustained Islamic State insurgency, unless they break their deployment patterns and commit to augmenting forces in the country.[19]

Both Ankara and Moscow share an interest in a U.S. withdrawal from Syria, albeit for different reasons. Ankara views the U.S. partnership with the SDF as a long-term threat and views the American presence in the northeast as an enabler of Kurdish military prowess, as well as the group's global legitimization as the vanguard force in the fight against the Islamic State as detrimental to its national security interest. The withdrawal of U.S. forces would allow for Ankara to more aggressively target the Syrian Kurds and upend the group's entente with Washington, which it relies upon to amplify its global standing as a legitimate actor. For Russia, the intervention in Syria stemmed from severe dissatisfaction with the American policy of regime change, which underpinned post-9/11 national security policy in Washington and which Moscow has sought to end through its deployment of troops to Syria in September 2015.[20] Russia, like Turkey, views the American presence in Syria as illegitimate. The Turks see the American partnership with the SDF as illegitimate and has worked to thwart it. Moscow views the entire clandestine American war against Bashar al Assad as evidence of a regime change agenda and views the open-ended deployment of U.S. forces as detrimental to the Syrian regime's overarching effort to reacquire control of the country.[21]

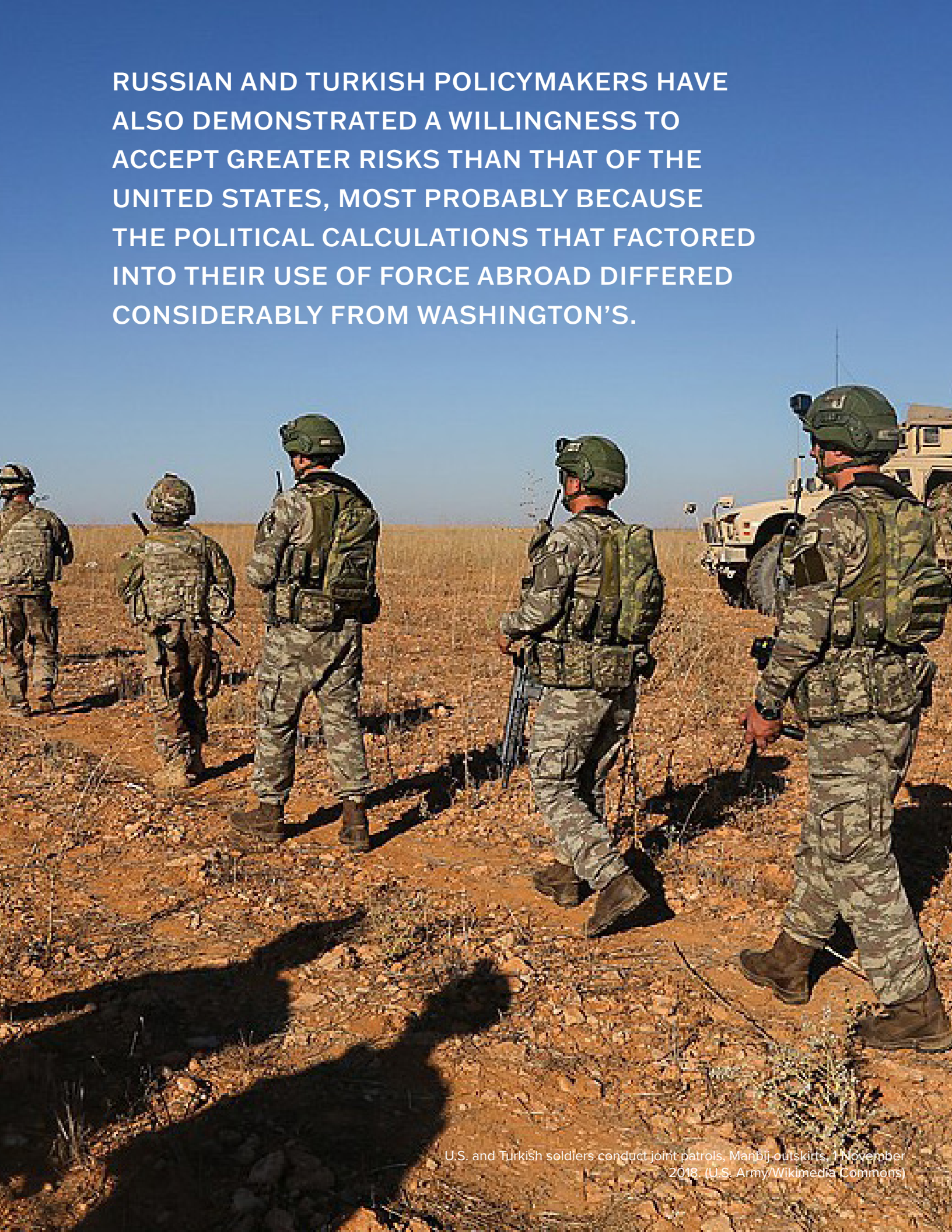
Russian and Turkish policymakers have also demonstrated a willingness to accept greater risks than that of the United States, most probably because the political calculations that factored into their use of force abroad differed considerably from Washington's. Ankara was, at the outset of the war, relatively risk averse and sought to cloak its intervention in a clandestine arming and training program and withheld from using overt military force. Russia, too, held back from deploying troops. The trigger for both states to intervene, however, came in reaction to U.S. actions. For

19 "Russian negotiator positive after 'birth' of Astana Syria process," *Reuters*, January 24, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-russia/russian-negotiator-positive-after-birth-of-astana-syria-process-idUKKBN15820R.

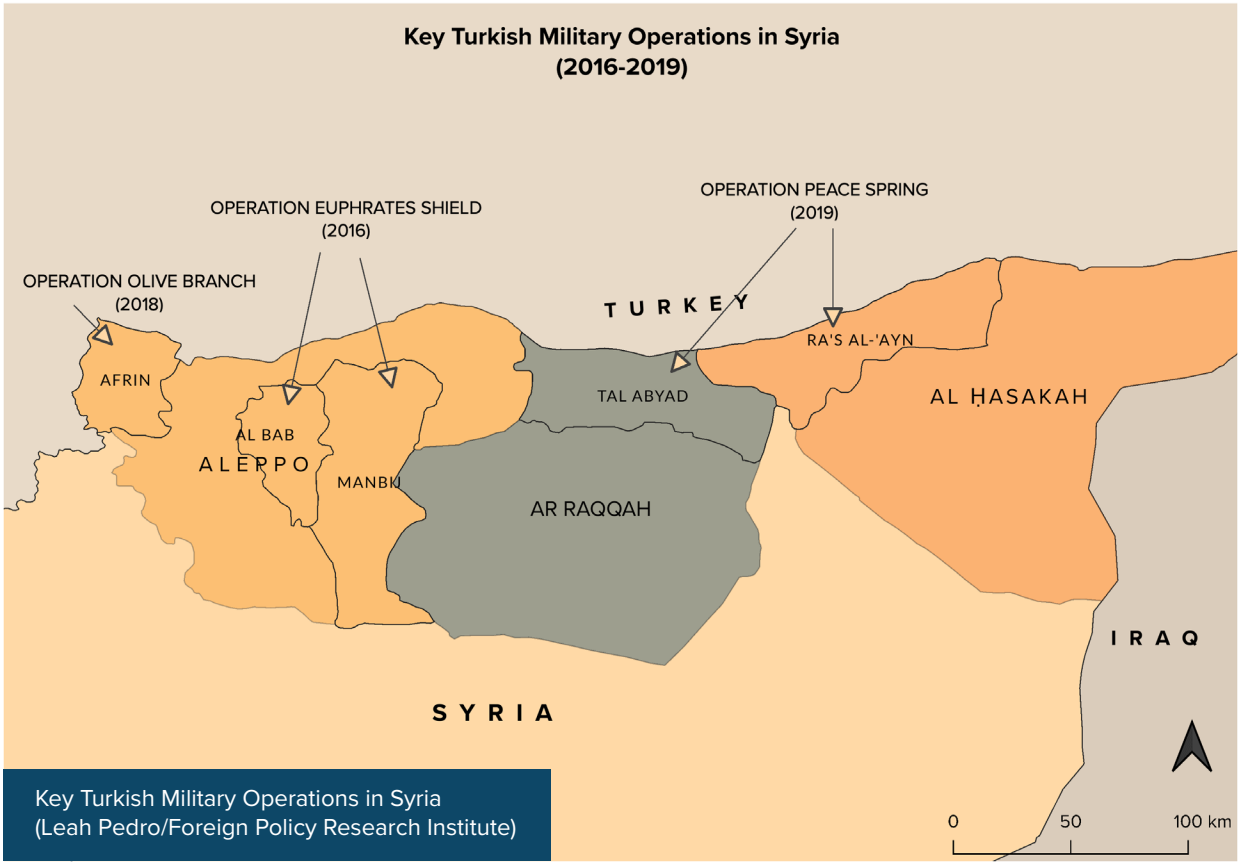
20 Dimitri Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

21 Trenin, *What is Russia up to in the Middle East?*.

RUSSIAN AND TURKISH POLICYMAKERS HAVE ALSO DEMONSTRATED A WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT GREATER RISKS THAN THAT OF THE UNITED STATES, MOST PROBABLY BECAUSE THE POLITICAL CALCULATIONS THAT FACTORED INTO THEIR USE OF FORCE ABROAD DIFFERED CONSIDERABLY FROM WASHINGTON'S.



U.S. and Turkish soldiers conduct joint patrols, Manbij outskirts, 1 November 2018. (U.S. Army/Wikimedia Commons)



Key Turkish Military Operations in Syria
(Leah Pedro/Foreign Policy Research Institute)

Turkey, the risk of a SDF-controlled enclave that ran the entirety of the Turkish-Syrian border proved too much for Ankara, and, in August 2016, the Turkish military invaded Northern Aleppo.[22] The Turkish military's operation, as it would turn out, was based on joint plans that Washington and Ankara had worked on together to clear this part of Syria with militias that Ankara was comfortable with. It was only after this operation failed and Washington chose to use the Syrian Democratic Forces to liberate Manbij, a town west of the Euphrates, that Turkey decided to use unilateral military force. For Moscow, the trigger for intervention was the success of the clandestine American and allied arming program of the anti-Assad opposition. This arming program was, however, a Faustian bargain. The United States shied away from arming extremists, but the groups that Washington trained fought closely with the extremists that Washington was trying to marginalize. The end result was that the United States ended up enabling unsavory elements of the anti-Assad opposition, allowing them to take greater control over Idlib with the help of men armed to prevent such an occurrence. The presence of these extremists, then, was used as a justification for the Russian intervention.

The CIA-led program began to ramp up in 2013, and, less than two years later, the anti-Assad opposition that the United States had trained and equipped forced the Assad regime from the Idlib governorate. The collapse of the Assad regime in the northwest indicated that the Syrian Arab Army could no longer muster offensive combat operations and that the war would freeze along unstable lines of contact. It also meant that the attrition curve had more or less balanced, meaning that the

22 Tim Arango, Anne Barnard, and Ceylan Yeginsu, "Turkey's Military Plunges Into Syria, Enabling Rebels to Capture ISIS Stronghold," *New York Times,* August 24, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/25/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-isis.html.

regime was being attrited at a similar rate to the armed opposition. That armed opposition was receiving significant external support, which if left unaddressed could invert the attrition curve and set the regime down a path of slow defeat. The Russian intervention righted that attrition curve, reinforcing regime positions and providing overwhelming fire support—both from artillery units and from the deployment of the Russian aerospace forces (VKS)—to the Syrian regime. Moscow correctly assumed that its intervention would not prompt a direct American counter-response and, in parallel, calculated that the defeat of U.S.-backed forces was critical to stabilizing the regime.

The Turkish government also adopted a risky strategy, launching a series of cross-border interventions in proximity to U.S. forces. Throughout the Syrian conflict, the main concern for the United States was that the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Turkish military would shoot at one another and that the stability that the United States had pushed for along the border would suddenly break down. Washington never deployed a large number troops in Syria, and it remains dependent on the SDF for internal security, as well as to prosecute the war against ISIS. A Turkish-Kurdish flair up would give Ankara a *casus belli* for armed intervention—an act that would all but ensure that the Islamic State war would never finish because the SDF would be drawn into a two front war. As the war against the Islamic State entered its final phases, however, Ankara grew more emboldened. After launching Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch in northern Aleppo and Kurdish-held Afrin, the Turkish military invaded northeastern Syria, where U.S. forces were present along the border.

The operation, dubbed Peace Spring, was audacious because it came after months of threats that ended in President Trump capitulating to President Erdogan and acquiescing to the Turkish invasion. During ground operations, the Turkish military bracketed a U.S. special forces base with artillery fire, and the two militaries stared down one another near a large U.S. base that housed European troops, as well as the SDF.[23] The Turkish decision to use military force carried with it the risk that Ankara could accidentally kill American soldiers.

THE UNITED STATES' APPROACH TO COMBAT IN SYRIA WAS FAR LESS RISK AVERSE, AND THE ENTIRETY OF THE GROUND OPERATION TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE REQUIRED THAT U.S. FORCES RETAIN A MINIMAL GROUND PRESENCE IN THE COUNTRY.

23 Shawn Snow, "U.S. troops believe Turkey deliberately fired artillery at an American commando outpost in Syria," *Military Times,* October 13, 2019, https://www.militarytimes.com/2019/10/13/us-troops-believe-turkey-deliberately-fired-artillery-at-an-american-commando-outpost-in-syria/.

The United States' approach to combat in Syria was far less risk averse, and the entirety of the ground operation to defeat the Islamic State required that U.S. forces retain a minimal ground presence in the country. The main focus was the Islamic State, but as the war dragged on and Ankara grew so bellicose, managing Kurdish-Turkish tensions became a main focal point of U.S. diplomats and for U.S. forces deployed inside Syria. For the diplomats, there was a multi-year effort to manage Turkish concerns that yielded little and, during the Trump administration, incentivized Ankara's invasions. For the forces on the ground, the goal was to manage risk and to ensure that the SDF would not be the instigator of conflict, so as to deny the Turks any legitimate reason to invade the U.S.-controlled areas of Syria.

These dynamics meant that as the war against the Islamic State was wrapping up, geopolitical considerations outside of the narrow war effort was overtaking U.S. policy in Syria. This also meant that any such action that overstepped the legal authorities for the war risked bringing down unwanted congressional scrutiny and muddying a mission that the Department of Defense had skillfully kept very narrow since its inception in June 2014. The Trump administration never truly adopted a coherent policy in Syria, but one dominant strand within the schizophrenic policy process was that Washington and Ankara shared an interest in Syria and that Turkish pressure on the SDF could be leveraged to Washington's advantage. This line of reasoning, pushed primarily by elements within the State Department, argued that a closely aligned Turco-American axis in Syria could pressure the Russians and the regime because they would be denied total victory. This pressure campaign required reducing the PKK's influence within the SDF and renewed support for Turkish-backed groups dominant in northern Aleppo and Idlib.

This argument, however, failed to account for the nuance of Ankara's positioning in Syria and its real insistence on a near complete American withdrawal from the northeast. Turkey is, quite simply, unwilling to countenance any U.S.-SDF partnership. And yet, the United States remains dependent on the partnership to retain its presence in Syria. The two sides, therefore, simply have irreconcilable goals that cannot be overcome in the country, no matter the state of the Turco-Russian relationship. This means that Moscow and Ankara are actually better positioned to negotiate than the United States is with Turkey.

The failure of the United States to truly understand Ankara's motivations spanned two administrations and has driven a series of policy choices that strengthened the Turkish position vis-à -vis the United States and maximized its ability to coerce American leaders. The Russians were able to free ride on the back of the Turkish-American tensions over the SDF to wrest concessions from Ankara over its own, separately sponsored political efforts to manage the violence in the country. The Russian point of view on Syria has focused on making incremental changes to the country's constitution and scheduling elections, without first creating a transitional government body that is called for in the Geneva Communique. Ankara had, at the beginning of the conflict, gravitated towards the U.S. position, which was to insist on a governing body as the first step towards political change in the country. Ankara's position shifted shortly before Operation Euphrates Shield and has sense gravitated towards the Russian position, which is to focus only on the constitution and potential elections, rather than on seeking to sideline Assad and empowering a representative council before any election.

GETTING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE COST CURVE: A COMPETITIVE STRATEGY

The American military mission in Syria has clearly drifted from its sole strategic purpose of defeating the Islamic State. Instead, what has happened since the fall of the last Islamic State stronghold, Baghouz, in March 2019 is the bifurcation of U.S. policy in the country. The first, and more legally dubious aspect of the policy, is to deny the regime victory through the maintenance of an American presence—even if that presence is hemmed into a small amount of Syrian territory south of the M4 highway and near Syrian oil facilities. The second, and more straightforward policy, is to use JSOC and CIA teams to hunt for Islamic State- and Al Qaeda- linked targets throughout Syria and to eliminate high-value targets. The former strategy requires that the United States retain a presence in Syria, both on the ground and in the air, while the latter relies more on a network of sources and human intelligence and strike assets controlled remotely.

The zero-sum thinking about the U.S. war in Syria has replaced in any semblance of strategic thought about how best to compete with Russia. The basic argument is that the United States has an incentive to deny Russian expansionism. Therefore, it makes strategic sense to retain U.S. troops in Syria, even if the legal authorities for doing so are dubious and the missions that these men and women are assigned with carrying out are nebulous. A more comprehensive strategy would expand how the United States thinks about Syria and how it could be leveraged to advance the broader national security goal of competing more effectively with Russia. To do so, the United States must first evaluate where it has a competitive advantage with Moscow, both in terms of being able to achieve strategic goals and in being able to dictate preferred outcomes.[24] In Syria, the Russian Federation has achieved its narrow military objectives, but has struggled to marry its gains on the ground to a negotiated end to the fighting. Instead, it has pursued a series of ceasefires throughout its military campaign, designed to freeze fighting in areas to allow the regime to amass forces along one front and with Russian aerial assistance to seize territory from the opposition.

This tactic worked well at the outset of the Russian intervention, but with the hardening of battle lines in Idlib and with the Russian return to the northeast following the U.S. withdrawal, the pace of regime expansion has slowed. In Idlib, fighting surged in March 2019, following a breakdown of a Turkish-Russian de-escalation agreement. The fighting resulted in the regime returning to the M4-M5 highways, despite an intense Turkish air campaign that destroyed Syrian regime armor and air defenses. However, the main vehicle through which outsiders were able to analyze the conflict was from Turkish drone video released on social media.[25] These videos were specifically curated and released without any reciprocal Russian and Syrian regime releases, giving way to a highly stylized impression of the conflict. While there is no doubt that the Turkish military was

24 This approach is based on the work on strategic competition with the Soviet Union. See: Andy Marshall, "Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis," Rand Corporation, 1972, https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R862.html.

25 Can Kasapoglu, "Turkey's Drone Blitz Over Idlib," The Jamestown Foundation, April 17, 2020, https://jamestown.org/program/turkeys-drone-blitz-over-idlib/.

able to strike Syrian targets, the end result of the conflict was decided in Russia's favor, most likely because the VKS could strike targets along the entire front line and use overwhelming firepower to ensure that the Syrian regime would not be routed in areas where the Turks concentrated firepower.

THE RUSSIAN GUARANTEE OF REGIME SECURITY ENSURES THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL NOT BE TOPPLED BY AN EXTERNAL FORCE, LEAVING THE UNITED STATES TO USE ECONOMIC LEVERAGE TO FORCE THE REGIME TO MAKE CONCESSIONS.

The battle underscores how difficult resolving this conflict will be—and represents an opportunity for the United States. The fragile security situation throughout Syria ensures that the Russian military will be required to augment the capabilities of the Syrian ground forces for the foreseeable future. The Russian guarantee of regime security ensures that the government will not be toppled by an external force, leaving the United States to use economic leverage to force the regime to make concessions. The Russian advantage with this strategy is that Moscow's military presence costs less than that of the United States. As Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly argued about total Russian military spending, "Measuring military power is fraught with difficulty because it can be so context-driven and scenario-based," but that when analyzing Russian defense spending, as compared to the United States, it is best to use Price Purchasing Parity (PPP).[26] Using this method, Kofman and Connolly argue that Russian defense spending is more robust than is commonly believed, but also that it has plateaued in recent years because Russia is at the tail end of a procurement cycle and is committed to avoiding the runaway defense costs of the type that bankrupted the Soviet Union.[27]

The United States, in contrast, has increased its defense spending during the Trump administration and faces a number of decisions about replacing aging systems built decades ago that were used at a high operational tempo during the post-9/11 wars. The total cost of the war against the Islamic State is well over $20 billion, although those costs do not account for secondary costs accrued from flying legacy aircraft on seven-to-eight-hour missions on multiple tours—and in support of multiple different conflicts. For aircraft, the general rule is that they become more expensive to operate as they age, which means that for much of the U.S. fighter inventory used in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the cost of flight

26 Michael Kofman and Richard Connolly, "Why Russian Military Expenditure is much Higher than Commonly Understood," *War on the Rocks,* December 16, 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/12/why-russian-military-expenditure-is-much-higher-than-commonly-understood-as-is-chinas/.

27 As written in, Aaron Stein, "What Syria ought to teach America about competition with Russia," *War on the Rocks,* March 16, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/what-syria-ought-to-teach-america-about-competition-with-russia/.

A U.S. F-15 Strike Eagle breaks away after being refueled by a KC-135 Stratotanker from the 28th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron Feb. 11, 2019, while flying over Syria. (U.S. Airforce/CENTCOM)

hours has increased because of the need for more maintenance.[28] It also means that as fighter wings rotate out of the war, the costs to operate them will further increase, which then means that there will be an increase in the percentage of the Air Force's overall budget allocated to the Operation & Support (O&S) fund.[29] As a result, there is less money to be spent on procurement at a time when the Air Force is charting out its overarching strategy to maintain its edge over state-level powers. Thus, while the overall costs of OIR, as compared to other U.S. wars, is low, the campaign has a series of secondary costs that detract from a strategy of state-level competition.

The Russian presence in Syria costs less than the American one. The VKS aircraft deployed are less maintenance intensive, and the costs to equip a Russian solider are less than an American one. The necessity of defeating the Islamic State justified the initial cost of the U.S. deployment, but in the absence of an air and ground war against the group, the daily operational cost, the secondary costs, and the opportunity costs should also factor into U.S. decision-making. The secondary costs are the further wear-and-tear of U.S. assets. The opportunity costs are more pertinent to future U.S. defense strategy. A dollar spent on a F-15E mission in Syria, for example, has the upfront price per flight hour cost, the secondary maintenance expenditure, the tertiary cost in the necessity to appropriate money for this aging system, and a fourth—and hard to quantify—cost of not being able to spend these dollars on other items. The cost of this war comes amid the COVID-19

28 Raymond Pyles, *Aging Aircraft: USAF Workload and Material Consumption Life Cycle Patterns* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2003), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1641.pdf.

29 The Department of the Air Force, Fiscal year 2021 Budget, Department of the Air Force, February 10, 2020, https://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/Portals/84/documents/FY21/SUPPORT_/FY21%20Budget%20Overview_1.pdf?ver=2020-02-10-152806-743.

(U.S. Army/CENTCOM)

pandemic and the reality that U.S. defense spending will almost certainly decrease. Thus, as a percentage of U.S. defense spending, O&S could rise further, undercutting efforts to procure new platforms, which each service has circled as necessary for great power competition.

OPTIONS: A STRATEGY FOR SYRIA

The United States has an incentive to get on the right side of the cost curve in Syria. The United States' military presence in the country doesn't actually serve any broader strategic goals, other than to impose a marginal cost on the Syrian regime. This cost is not enough to seriously alter the regime's political calculus, nor will it be enough to force the desired political concessions. Instead, the regime has managed to win open-ended Russian support. Moscow has agreed to guarantee the security of the regime, using deployed military assets to manage the insurgency and to provide top cover at international organizations like the United Nations Security Council. The Russian approach has managed to coerce Ankara to support its political process, despite the two sides remaining at odds over the future of Idlib. Given the current reality in Syria, a reassessment of U.S. policy is needed. The strategy that the Trump administration has implemented hinges on the Assad regime collapsing under the weight of its own economic crisis, which has grown worse as neighboring Lebanon has suffered an economic collapse and COVID-19 has ravaged the international economy.

A more coherent American approach would be to narrow its own goals in Syria, dropping the implicit effort to topple the Syrian regime through economic sanctions. If this goal were dropped, then the United States could explore how best to withdraw its forces from Syria. This withdrawal should come at the end of negotiations with Moscow, centered on a political arrangement for the Syrian Democratic Forces. As the vanguard in the

fight against the Islamic State, the group has sketched out a series of political demands for the Syrian regime. These demands are tantamount to self-rule and are certain to be rejected by Damascus. However, there is an opportunity to wrest some concessions from Moscow that may fall short of this demand, but which has some guarantees of devolved political power for the group in the northeast. This arrangement would include a mutual Ruso-American agreement to signal to Turkey that an invasion of SDF territory would entail costs and that Ankara's best pathway forward would be to negotiate with the SDF, either through mediated talks or as part of a broader effort to settle the conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

In parallel, the United States and Russia have already established a model to sustain a cost-effective and strategically useful policy to target Islamic State and Al Qaeda leadership targets throughout Syria. During the war against the Islamic State, the air war relied heavily on Joint Terminal Air Controllers that were not deployed in country. The United States was able to use sensors to scour the battlefield and to direct airstrikes, with both the aircrews and the sensors linked to a Joint Operations Center (JOC) that coordinated the campaign. The United States has continued to leverage this model for strikes in Idlib, where Al Qaeda-linked elements remain present and where Islamic State leaders have sought refuge.[30] This model could form the nucleus of a "deconfliction plus" arrangement that could underpin an American counter-terrorism strategy in Syria. The anchor for such an arrangement would be for the two sides to formalize an arrangement for U.S. overflight of Syria with unmanned drones. This arrangement would entail the continuation of U.S.-Turkish intelligence cooperation, which allows for the CIA to send teams in and out of Idlib to facilitate strikes on high-value targets. This arrangement precludes much intel sharing with Ankara, but access to the border is important. This mode of cooperation, however, allows for the United States to work around two hostile powers to pursue a narrowly focused goal of pressuring terrorist groups.

THE RESOLUTION OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT, THEREFORE, WOULD BE SUBORDINATED TO THE REALIZING OF A NARROW COUNTER-TERRORIST FOCUSED POLICY.

This approach would also implicitly recognize that non-state actors should not drive U.S. national security decision-making. In other words, if there is an ISIS resurgence, the United States would not necessarily be the country that should take the lead in combatting it. Instead, it would seek to deal with the Islamic State through targeted strikes from dislocated positions in the region and leave the handling of the day-to-day insurgency to other countries. This may not be the most effective way to deal with an Islamic State insurgency in Syria, but it would be pursuant to the overarching emphasis on recalibrating U.S. national interests around great power competition. The Islamic State is not a great power; the United States should not treat it as such. This does not mean that

30 Author Interview, U.S. Military Officials, Philadelphia, PA, July 2020.

the United States should ignore the group completely, but should assess whether the group's nascent insurgent campaign in the Syrian desert rises to the level of an acute threat against U.S. interests that would require American intervention. That bar should be set quite high because of the looming resource constraints and the necessity of making harder choices about where to devote finite resources.

The resolution of the Syrian conflict, therefore, would be subordinated to the realizing of a narrow counter-terrorist focused policy. If an agreement with Moscow on a deconfliction plus mechanism to facilitate continued U.S. strikes in Idlib were to be concluded, then a natural follow on would be to discuss durable ceasefires throughout the country. This approach would entail open-ended discussions with the Russians, on behalf of the Assad regime, about a series of other issues that the United States cares about most. One area that warrants further discussion is the regime's violation of its commitments to eliminate its chemical weapons stockpiles, in accordance with the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). The regime has not completely disarmed, per a commitment made in 2013 to the United States and Russia, and the potential for these weapons to be used in combat or to spread is a security concern for the United States. The United States should signal that it is prepared to remove certain sanctions on the Syrian regime, if it were to comply with the CWC. Any such agreement would need to be verified, and such a verification process should have the buy-in from the Russian Federation. If the regime does not comply, then the sanctions should remain, and the United States should explore increasing sanctions on the Russian suppliers of spare parts to the regime for equipment that could be used as chemical weapons delivery vehicles, which includes aircraft and helicopters.

SYRIA: A DISTRACTION FROM GREAT POWER COMPETITION

The civil war in Syria is a global tragedy. Thousands have been killed, and millions displaced. The Assad regime has committed war crimes, documented in vivid detail by defectors and survivors of Syrian prisons. The reality, now, is that the United States has few options to topple the Syrian regime and that its efforts to do so before 2015 backfired. The success of the multi-national, CIA-assisted program to topple the regime did lead to tangible military gains on the ground, but those gains prompted Russian intervention. Moscow's intervention, in turn, created a Faustian choice for the United States. A policy of regime change would entail accepting the risk of escalation with Russia. While the Russians, too, accepted risk that its actions could lead to tensions with Washington, they correctly calculated that the United States would not trade victory in Damascus for a theoretical conflict with the Russian Federation. This assumption underpinned Russian war planning and enabled Moscow to take more risks than the United States. This basic formula has not changed. However, the circumstances for U.S. troops in the country have grown less favorable following the October 2019 Turkish invasion.

The United States cannot simply hit the reset button and return to the pre-October 2019 status quo. Russian forces are now present along the Turkish-Syrian border and in Manbij, two U.S.-controlled areas before the Turkish invasion. The Turks also control a box of territory, spanning from Tel Abyad to Ras al Ayn, extending as deep as the M4 highway.

The United States is not going to oust these external forces, nor should it. Instead, it should understand that its primary mission has been achieved: The Islamic State's territorial caliphate has been defeated. A continued presence in Syria makes little strategic sense, given that a counter-terrorism focused strategy can be done remotely without losing any effectiveness. Further, an expansive mission, that includes a counter-Iranian component, stretches the counter-terrorism authorities that underpin the U.S. presence far beyond their intended meaning and most probably requires additional congressional authorization for action. Absent these authorities, the American forces in Syria have no serious counter-Iranian effect, other than back in Washington where some pretend that a small base can interdict the Iranian weapons flow to Syria.

The United States' national security strategy suggests that Washington is assuming that long-term competition with Russia and China will underpin defense planning. The Syrian civil war is not a place where the United States is poised to win the competition. Instead, it is a drain on resources, underpinned by a counter-terrorism mission that has shifted from a ground war to the targeting of individuals. A narrowly defined counter-terrorism strategy has the benefit of inverting the cost curve with Russia, shifting further responsibilities for internal security to Moscow. The Russians are unlikely to be able to perform this role as well as the United States, but the point of such a strategy is to reprioritize interests and not allow for non-state actors to drive U.S. national security decision-making. This approach is not without risk, particularly because Islamic State insurgents are active south of the Euphrates River in areas that Moscow has nominal control over. The intent is for Moscow to maintain its costs in Syria, while the United States drives its own costs below that of the Russians. This gets the United States on the right side of the cost curve and frees up finite dollars. It also drives down the second, third, and fourth order costs that aren't accounted for in most budgets, freeing up more resources to train and equip the U.S. military for great power war. Meanwhile, Russia will be saddled with an irritating war that it may never be able to win outright, but which it will be required to remain engaged in for the foreseeable future. Great power competition does not mean seeking to counter Russian influence everywhere Moscow has deployed troops. Instead, it should force thinking about how best to counter the Russians across multiple theaters of conflict, how those tensions can be managed in ways that are advantageous to the United States, and how to exploit Russian overreach and security guarantees. Simply put: The United States has an interest in Russian defense spending on a civil war that is of peripheral interest to Washington because it deprives Moscow of some resources that it could spend in ways that are more of a threat to U.S. interests.

The United States has a pathway to compete in Syria, although its best move is to simply let Russia win, so long as it wrests concessions on the future of the SDF and on a counter-terrorism mechanism to continue overflight over Idlib. These two outcomes are doable for Washington and should reshape how U.S. policy is set in 2021 and beyond.

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