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## Questions Linger Over Russia's Endgame in Syria, Ukraine and Europe

### *Неминуці питання про російський ендшпіль в Сирії, Україні і в Європі*

*Тимчасове перемир'я в Сирії, детально розроблене Росією і США, стало кульмінацією свого роду зовнішньополітичного потрійного виграшу президента Володимира Путіна: Кремль силою домогся вирішальної ролі на Близькому Сході, Україна зазнає труднощів, а ЄС дає тріщини, як погано обпалений горщик. Це цілком може бути найяскравішим моментом для Путіна, але як і раніше виникають питання про російський ендшпіль за всіма трьома напрямками. У Сирії Росія досягла поставленої задачі - зміцнити позиції уряду президента Башара Асада. Тим не мени, її кінцеві цілі залишаються неясними, не в останню чергу, як спритно вийти з хаотичного конфлікту. В Україні Росія підтримує офіційні зобов'язання привести в життя мирну угоду річної давності. Однак відновлення бойових дій в підтримуваних Росією сепаратистських регіонах дозволяє припустити, що Москва прагне ще більше дестабілізувати уряд в Києві, і без того хиткий через внутрішні політичні негаразди. В Європі Путін хоче посилити розкол в ЄС, сподіваючись похитнути консенсус 28 країн з питання антиросійських економічних санкцій.*

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/24/world/europe/russia-endgame-syria-ukraine-europe.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/24/world/europe/russia-endgame-syria-ukraine-europe.html?_r=0)

The partial truce that Russia and the United States have thrashed out in Syria capped something of a foreign policy trifecta for President Vladimir V. Putin, with the Kremlin strong-arming itself into a pivotal role in the Middle East, Ukraine floundering and the European Union developing cracks like a badly glazed pot.

Beyond what could well be a high point for Mr. Putin, however, lingering questions about Russia's endgame arise in all three directions.

In Syria, Russia achieved its main goal of shoring up the government of President Bashar al-Assad, long the Kremlin's foremost Arab ally. Yet its ultimate objectives remain murky, not least navigating a graceful exit from the messy conflict.

In Ukraine, Russia maintains a public commitment to put in place a year-old peace agreement. Renewed fighting in the Russian-backed breakaway regions, however, suggests that Moscow seeks to further destabilize the Kiev government, already wobbling from internal political brawling.

In Europe, Mr. Putin wants to deepen cracks in the European Union, hoping to break the 28-nation consensus behind the economic sanctions imposed on Russia over its annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Kremlin recently cranked up its propaganda machine to malign the German chancellor, Angela Merkel — viewed here as the central figure in the confrontation against Moscow — portraying her as barren and her country as suffering violent indigestion from too many immigrants.

The target audience for these achievements is the Russian populace, partly to distract people from their deepening economic woes.

“On screen we can see that we are so strong, we are so important, we are so great,” Nikolai Petrov, a professor of political science at the Moscow School for Higher Economics, said sarcastically.

Mr. Putin announced the agreement to a “cessation of hostilities” in Syria on television late Monday night, underscoring its importance as a joint Russian-American effort. The Russian president has previously waxed nostalgic for the days when just two superpowers strode the world as problem-solving colossi, before the Soviet Union imploded.

“Russia will conduct the necessary work with Damascus and the legitimate Syrian leadership,” Mr. Putin said, while the United States will do the same with its allies and opposition groups. “I am sure the joint actions agreed upon with the American side will be enough to radically reverse the situation in Syria.”

There was more. Mr. Putin wanted to make clear that Russia’s intervention in Syria would avoid the kind of catastrophic collapse that occurred in Iraq, Libya and Yemen, lumped together improbably with the American-backed “color” revolutions in Ukraine in 2004 and Georgia in 2003. Syria, he said, could serve as an example of “responsible actions.”

Russia sent up to 50 combat aircraft to an air base near the coastal Syrian city of Latakia in September, along with more than 4,000 troops to protect them. In that move, Russia was seen as having five main goals: stopping regime change abetted from outside the country; thwarting plans by Washington to isolate Moscow; proving that Russia was a more solid ally than the United States; showcasing new Russian weapons; and presenting a new foreign policy spectacle to a Russian public weary of the war in neighboring Ukraine.

To some extent, all five goals have been achieved, prompting some voices to call for Russia to come home.

“We have clear achievements; the main thing is that everybody now speaks to us,” Boris B. Nadezhdin, a former member of the Duma, Russia’s Parliament, said on a popular talk show. “Assad’s regime, or Syria’s legitimate government, has stayed in power,” he added. “We need a political settlement, and to stop spending huge sums of money on an arms race.”

Syria remains unfinished business, however, and the roughly \$3 million daily cost of the Syria operation is widely seen as affordable.

Mr. Assad’s forces have nearly surrounded Aleppo, long an opposition stronghold. They will press the fight before the partial truce is set to begin on Saturday, and may well continue with attacks afterward.

Even as the Syrian government and a major opposition group said on Tuesday that they would observe a conditional pause in the fighting, there remains a gaping loophole in the agreement in that it permits attacks against the Islamic State and the Nusra Front, an Al Qaeda affiliate, to continue. This could work in Moscow’s favor, since many of the anti-Assad groups aligned with the United States fight alongside the Nusra Front.

Thus, while American allies are being asked to stop fighting Mr. Assad’s government, Russia and the Syrian government can continue to strike United States-backed rebel groups without fear, if history is any guide, of Washington’s doing anything to stop them.

Ultimately, analysts say that Russia wants to stick around long enough to supervise the transition to a new government in Syria; to ensure that Damascus remains a friendly capital; and to show that a political transition can be achieved through negotiations, not regime change. Mr. Assad just announced parliamentary elections for April 13.

How long this process will last, said Aleksandr Shumilin, a senior Middle East expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences, “will depend on the situation, which is very complicated at the moment.”

Among the complications is that Mr. Assad, who has grown bolder because of Russian and Iranian support, recently said he planned to reassert control over all of Syria. If Russia helps to vanquish the opposition in the western part of the country, only the Islamic State would remain as a formidable opponent.

That would put Russia in the unpredictable position of supporting Damascus through the long, most likely bloody slog needed to dislodge the Islamic militants. The Syrian government should “follow

Russia's leadership in settling this crisis," Vitaly I. Churkin, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, told the Kommersant daily newspaper. If the Syrian government thinks "that no truce is needed and we have to fight until the end," he said, "then this conflict will last for a very long time."

Another wild card for Moscow is its increasingly hostile relationship with Turkey, after a Russian warplane was shot down in November after briefly violating Turkish airspace. Russia accuses Turkey of plotting to invade Syria, and is likely to blame Ankara if the partial truce collapses.

So far, however, the Kremlin can count Syria as a success. "It is very cheap, bloodless, there are no Russian victims and it is seen positively by Russian society," said Mr. Petrov, the political science professor.

Syria has also distracted the Russian people from the war dragging on next door in Ukraine. Yet that conflict still serves Moscow's interests by destabilizing the government of President Petro O. Poroshenko and discouraging warmer relations between Kiev and Europe — a Russian goal in tandem with lifting economic sanctions imposed over the annexation of Crimea.

The sanctions cut off Russia's access to Western credit markets, among other measures, which it desperately needs to weather its recession. In part, the Russian intervention in Syria was meant to confirm Moscow's role as a dependable partner in solving international problems and thus help spur an end to sanctions.

But instead of attacking the Islamic State, Russia went after Western allies in the Syrian opposition, confirming its unreliable status to Western governments. So Moscow most likely views the tougher course of exploiting divisions in Europe as its best chance to end sanctions.

One thing is certain for Russia, particularly in light of the crash in energy prices, said Konstantin von Eggert, an independent political commentator. "It cannot return to the global stage under a bunch of sanctions," he said.