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Overview

- Russo-phobic hysteria seized the US Congress and media; with hints of US-Russia coordination on Syria were also indications of continued frictions.
- Russia strove to retain its primacy in the Syrian crisis resolution, seeking to reconcile conflicting interests & actions of major stakeholders.
- India and Russia sustained the tempo of interaction on bilateral and regional issues, in preparation for the forthcoming Summit in June.
- As the Russian economy moved into positive growth territory, major rating agencies upgraded its sovereign rating.

Russia & Syria

An extraordinary drama played out in the US Congressional hearings, accompanied by some sensational media reporting, about alleged Russian “meddling” in the US Presidential elections, “inappropriate” dealings of senior Trump campaign staff with Russian diplomats in Washington and “manipulation” of American public opinion by Russian media. The hearings were dominated by simplistic analyses and partisan posturing.

The drama looks set to continue, with former NSA Flynn, former Trump campaign manager Manafort and the President’s son-in-law & advisor Kushner all offering to testify before Congressional committees on the subject.

Meanwhile, almost under cover of this media blitz, a high-level meeting was held in Turkey between the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Chief of the Russian General Staff and their Turkish counterpart. A US statement said the meeting discussed “the fight against all terrorist organizations in Syria” and “measures for de-conflicting operations”. This is the kind of coordination that the Russians had been persistently demanding. The fact that the meeting was held at the highest Armed Forces level (rather than a functional commanders’ level) hinted at efforts to coordinate a future approach, rather than merely aimed at “de-conflicting”.

A new US outlook was spelt out 30 March by Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, who told journalists that the US was no longer insisting on President Assad’s removal: *“You pick and choose your battles... our priority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out”*. Later the same day, at a press conference in Turkey (one of Assad’s bitterest foes) and standing beside his Turkish counterpart, US Secretary of State Tillerson said it more directly: *“I think the... longer term status of President Assad will be decided by the Syrian people”*. Russian officialdom, at all levels, has been saying precisely this for a few years.

Even as the Russians welcomed US signals on Syria, other US actions and statements aroused their alarm. Secretary Tillerson first caused consternation among NATO countries by conveying that he could not fit the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting on 5/6 April into his schedule, even as his forthcoming visit to Russia was reported. NATO Foreign Ministers promptly rearranged their programmes to suit Tillerson's convenience and the meeting was held on March 31. When he did reach Brussels, Tillerson's remarks satisfied the most hardline critics of Russia in Europe: *"American & NATO support for Ukraine remains steadfast... NATO... will not accept Russian efforts to change the borders of... Ukraine ...US sanctions will remain until Moscow reverses the actions that triggered our sanctions."* US Defence Secretary Mattis echoed similar sentiments on a visit to London, calling Russia a "strategic competitor", saying it should "act in accordance with international norms and international law" and expressing concern about its actions in Afghanistan.

In a separate signal to Russia, the Trump Administration sought and obtained US Senate approval to ratify the accession of Montenegro to NATO, its first expansion in eight years. Russia has strongly opposed this accession. In a letter urging Senate approval of the ratification, Secretary Tillerson wrote, *"Montenegro's participation in the May NATO summit as a full member ... will send a strong signal... that no third parties have veto power over NATO decisions."*

Another blow to Russia was the indictment, by a Californian grand jury, of four Russians, including two officers of the national intelligence agency FSB, for hacking and economic espionage. They are charged with breaking into about 500 million Yahoo accounts, including those of US & Russian government officials, journalists and corporate employees.

A confrontation may also be brewing on the alleged Russian deployment of cruise missiles near its western borders, which in US view violates the US-Russia Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987. This information was helpfully leaked to *the New York Times* by Administration officials in February, just before a NATO Defence Ministers' meeting.

While Russian officials and Ministers have, by and large, refrained from criticism of the Trump Administration, there is clearly unease at the increasingly strident tone of senior Administration officials.

The jury is, therefore, out on whether President Trump can (or still wants to) pursue the various strands of the Russia "re-set" policy foreshadowed in his election campaign, together with its companion piece of toughness on China. The aggressive push back from the US establishment and Europe – which the outgoing Obama Administration had cleverly instigated in its sunset days – has certainly restricted his immediate options. Whether the recent moves represent a tactical retreat to avoid opening multiple battle fronts or herald a re-think on US strategic policy will be evident only in future weeks or months. The forthcoming visits of Secretary Tillerson to Russia and Chinese President Xi to USA may provide some clues.

Russia & West Asia

Russia – and, personally, President Putin – remains involved in an intricate exercise to reconcile the multiple conflicting interests in the tortuous path to an endgame in Syria.

The US-Russia-Turkey Generals' meeting mentioned above illustrated some convergence of US-Russian perspectives on Syria, but major US-Turkey and Russia-Turkey divergences may be opening up. This was illustrated by the tense standoff outside the northern Aleppo town of Manbij, which had been occupied by Syrian Kurdish units along with US-supported militias. Turkey's suspected plans to oust the Kurds from Manbij were forestalled by Syrian army forces (with Russian support) occupying some surrounding areas and a unit of US Army Rangers occupying others. It also became clear that the US would snub the Turkish desire to join its assault on Raqqa and would ignore Turkish pleas that the Kurdish militia YPG should not be involved in that action.

President Erdogan got no solace on this matter on his visit to Moscow on March 10. The bilateral statements sought to emphasize economic cooperation while papering over differences on Syria, though President Erdogan did underline at the joint press conference that Turkey considers the Kurdish

Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the YPG as terrorist groups on par with the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. He added, however, that though Turkey and Russia do not see eye to eye on various issues, they are determined to keep their cooperation channels open. The sense from the visit was that, having burnt its other political bridges, Turkey had to stick with Russia and seek the best deal from it.

Turkey did, however, send a signal to Russia by nudging the Syrian opposition groups to boycott the March 14 Russia-Turkey-Iran brokered Astana talks for a political settlement in Syria. Synchronized attacks by Jabhat al-Nusra and other groups on Syrian government-held areas around Damascus and in Hama province also indicated that the external support to rebels had not subsided. Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) noted that military formations participating in the ceasefire had joined in these attacks, but did not name an external sponsor.

In what the Russian MFA described as a lightning-fast attack, the YPD and the US-supported Syrian Democratic Force, with the support of about 1000 US Special Forces, captured Tabqa air base, about 45 km west of Raqqa. It was also reported that SDF forces were within 10km of Raqqa from the north, seeking to effectively surround the city before launching an assault. Some reports said the SDF (and therefore USA) now controlled all approaches to Raqqa, except from the Euphrates river south of Raqqa, and therefore the Syrian Army's approach to Raqqa was also effectively blocked. The Russian MFA has not so far expressed any concern about this; it has only warned the coalition to act responsibly to prevent civilian casualties and damage to critical civilian infrastructure, like Syria's largest hydroelectric power plant, Euphrates, on the banks of the river.

The battle for Raqqa may be bloody and extended, but the real problem is of its aftermath, with the competing Russian, US, Turkish, Iranian and Kurdish interests and those of the Gulf countries, who have expended political and financial capital for their regional interests. There is also a strong Israeli interest in the shape of a final Syrian settlement, as PM Netanyahu reminded President Putin during his working visit to Moscow (March 9): substantial progress has been made against radical Sunni Islamic terrorism (and Russia has a great contribution in this), but Israel does not want Iran-led Shia Islamic terrorism to replace the vanquished Sunni terrorism.

Russia & India

There has been a flurry of India-Russia bilateral activity, in preparation for the Annual Summit, scheduled for early June, in the setting of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum.

Foreign Secretary Jaishankar had bilateral consultations in Moscow on political and strategic issues, as well as cooperation in BRICS. His meetings with two Russian Deputy Foreign Ministers and with President Putin's top foreign policy advisor Ushakov were reported to have cleared the air on bilateral and regional issues on which there was some concern about Russia's stance.

A dialogue of the National Security Councils of the two countries was held in end-March, at the level of Deputy National Security Advisors.

Russian Deputy PM Trutnev, who is also President Putin's Special Envoy for the development of the Russian Far East, visited India. Attracting investment into the Russian Far East has been a strategic focus area for President Putin, who has personally hosted the President of Korea and the Prime Minister of Japan in Vladivostok in a bid to attract investments from these countries. President Putin has promised personal attention to requests for facilitating measures from the Russian government: infrastructure, tax holidays, etc. Indian companies – besides our oil companies, which are already present in the region – are reported to be exploring investments there.

A Military-Industrial Conference, which was decided upon at the Goa Summit in October 2016, was held in mid-March. About 100 Russian companies and 150 Indian companies were reported to have participated. The idea was to promote joint ventures for repair, maintenance and overhaul facilities in India for Russian-made defence platforms and for manufacture of sub-assemblies and components under the Make in India initiative.

Russian Economy Upswing

The Russian economy has recorded positive growth since the third quarter of 2016 and is expected to grow 1-1.5% in 2017 and 1-2% in 2018 & 2019, as per projections of IMF and the Russian Central Bank. The Central Bank announced a reduction in key lending rate to 9.75% from 10%, reacting to a fall in inflation to 4.3%.

International rating agency S&P upgraded Russia's sovereign rating from stable to positive, while Moody's upgraded it from negative to stable, on the basis of GDP growth prospects and low sovereign debt.

(The views expressed are personal)

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