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Overview

- Russia continued to retain decisive influence on both military operations in Syria and the consultations for a political settlement.
- An intensified tempo of European engagement with Russia could be a manifestation of the “Trump effect”.
- High-level India-Russia interactions aimed to harmonize strategic outlooks and enhance security cooperation.

Russia & Syria

Russia continued to be intensively involved in both the military operations and the political process in Syria, carefully navigating between the conflicting interests of the various parties involved. The assault on the ISIS-held Al Bab was an example. Turkish forces, along with the rebel group Free Syrian Army, and the Syrian forces were both separately pushing ahead to re-capture this strategic town. Russia was involved in a coordination mechanism to avoid clashes between these forces. Notwithstanding its support for Syrian government forces, Russia also carried out a number of airstrikes to support the Turkish operations. Significantly, it was reported that the Turkish forces had also been assisted by American airstrikes during the operations.

Russia and Turkey moved swiftly to prevent bilateral friction over the death of some Turkish military personnel in one of the Russian airstrikes, apparently because of wrong coordinates given to the Russian pilots by the Turkish Army. Both countries issued high-level statements accepting it as an unfortunate accident.

Continued tight-rope walking will be involved in further anti-ISIS attacks, particularly on Raqqa, in view of Turkey's opposition to the participation of the Kurdish armed group, YPG. The nature and extent of tacit or explicit American involvement in such operations is another crucial unknown at this stage.

The second meeting of the “Astana Process”, launched by Russia, Iran and Turkey, convened in the Kazakh capital on February 15-16. It was on a smaller-scale in terms of numbers and levels of the participants; did not see direct dialogue between the Syrian Government and the opposition groups; and did not yield an agreed statement. However, Russia announced that the meeting resulted in the strengthening of a trilateral mechanism to monitor and ensure full compliance with the ceasefire established on December 30, 2016.

The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Steffan de Mistura, did not attend the Astana meeting, but instead held consultations in Moscow – from where he issued a strong statement of support for the Astana process,

declaring that it provides a positive input for the Geneva process. The Geneva talks, which began on February 23, were disrupted by the terrorist attack on Homs on February 25, which Syrian opposition groups alleged were engineered by the Syrian government itself to sabotage the peace process into which they felt pushed by the Russians. As of the date of this Review, the Geneva talks themselves remained bogged down in discussions with the Special Envoy on the format of negotiations.

Russia & Europe

As political debate rages in the US about the Trump Administration's approach on Russia and his enigmatic remarks on the trans-Atlantic relationship, there have been some perceptible changes in the tone of Europe's recent engagement with Russia. Discussions on resuming economic contacts have commenced (though somewhat low-key).

The unease in large parts of Europe over EU's current hard line posture on Russia had so far been suppressed by firm American pressure – which President Obama sought to sustain even after the US Presidential elections, during his European visit in November 2016. The “Trump effect” seems to be bringing them to the surface again.

One of the more prominent EU “dissidents”, Hungarian PM Viktor Orban visited Moscow on February 7 and, in a press conference with President Putin, deplored the “anti-Russia rhetoric”, which “has become trendy” in some parts of Europe. He declared that non-economic problems cannot be resolved by economic means and hoped that “in the near future, we will be able to welcome new, good relations between Russia and the European Union”. In anticipation of this, a number of agreements were concluded in the energy sector, including gas supplies and nuclear energy.

Visits to Russia by the Slovenian President and the Swedish Foreign Minister in February conveyed the message in a more nuanced manner that an early implementation of the Minsk agreements would open the door to normalization of Russia-EU relations. Telephone conversations between President Putin and German Chancellor Merkel and between the Foreign Ministers of the two countries focussed on the Minsk agreement, as also a meeting of officials of the “Normandy Four”: Russia, Ukraine, France & Germany.

The anxiety for forward movement on the Minsk agreement coincides with a sharp deterioration of the conflict on the ground. While both sides are guilty of ceasefire violations, the bulk of the blame on this occasion seems to be on the Ukrainian side, as the reports of the neutral OSCE monitoring committee seem to suggest.

The obverse side of the “Trump effect” seems to be at work here. During the Obama Administration, the Ukrainian Government was virtually assured of strong American support for its maximalist positions in negotiations on the modalities of implementation of the Minsk agreement – a fact that frequently annoyed the Franco-German negotiators. The White House readout of the telephone conversation between President Trump and Ukraine President Poroshenko did not indicate such unequivocal support: it said President Trump said he would “work with Ukraine, Russia, and all other parties involved to help them restore peace along the border”. With this anodyne American message, the Ukrainian game plan may have shifted somewhat – to seek to militarily change the ground situation to complicate the implementation of the Minsk agreement and to make it difficult for American and European policy-makers to reverse the sanctions against Russia.

The Trump Administration added another variable into the mix, through a statement at the UN Security Council by its PR to the UN, Ms Niki Haley, wherein she stated, “Crimea is a part of Ukraine. Our Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine.” This goes well beyond recent statements by even the Obama Administration, which (like the Europeans) has linked lifting of sanctions to implementation of the Minsk Agreement, which is silent on Crimea. It is not clear whether this reflects a lack of coherence in the Administration's policy articulation or part of a “good cop-bad cop” routine to enhance negotiating leverage.

Europe is today in a state of flux. Brexit, the refugee influx and regional economic disparities have exposed the limits of its integration. The recently launched EU global strategy on foreign and security

policy seeks to revive (in somewhat more limited form) Europe's effort, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, to develop a role in global affairs outside the US umbrella. That effort was stymied by (among other developments) the reassertion of NATO's primacy, the Iraq war and the divisions between "new" and "old" Europe. President Trump's stated world view appears to provide some space for renewal of the effort, but internal political tendencies within Europe may create headwinds. The outcome of forthcoming elections in Netherlands, France and Germany will be crucial determinants.

The future of Russia-Europe relations would be determined by these American and European variables; India's interests would lie in a Russia-US thaw and a coherent European policy of cooperation with Russia.

Russia & India

India-Russia high-level interactions in February appeared to have assuaged apprehensions of significant divergence in strategic and security perspectives of the two countries. These apprehensions developed from the growth of Russia-Pakistan relations, Russia's reported interest in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the joint military drills barely a week after the Uri terrorist attack and a perceived Russia-China-Pakistan axis for promoting Taliban's interests in Afghanistan.

National Security Advisor Ajit Doval visited Moscow on January 30-31 with a senior Indian foreign affairs and security team and had extensive discussions with Russian counterparts in the National Security Council and the Government. An official press release said the discussions had a "special focus" on security and defence cooperation, ongoing cooperation on national security threats, "particularly those emanating from terrorism in their respective regions", and unequivocally reaffirmed the continued intention to cooperate in confronting these challenges.

Additional information from these meetings appear to confirm the impression that the dialogue clarified misapprehensions about Russian dalliance with the Taliban. A dialogue on counterterrorism at the level of Deputy Foreign Ministers, held in Delhi soon after the NSA's visit, is reported to have been productive. In a frank briefing to the Indian media, a high-ranking Russian government official was reported to have confirmed that Russia would not hold joint military drills with Pakistan or supply lethal weaponry, in view of India's sensitivities.

India was duly invited by Russia to consultations on Afghanistan, along with China, Iran and Pakistan, on February 15. In a significant departure from the statement issued in January after a Russia-China-Pakistan meeting in Moscow, the joint statement after the February consultations recorded agreement to promote intra-Afghan reconciliation "while preserving the leading role of Kabul and compliant with previously agreed principles of integration of the armed opposition to a peaceful life".

A 300-strong Russian delegation participated in the biennial Aero India show in Bengaluru from February 14 to 17. It was announced at the show that Russian defence exports to India in 2016 were about \$4.6 billion. The Stockholm International Peace Research institute (SIPRI) annual report on arms transfers 2016 recorded that over the period from 2012 to 2016, 68% of India's arms imports came from Russia, with USA providing 14%. It adds, "based on existing orders and weapons, Russia will remain, by far, the main supplier of major arms to India for the foreseeable future".

(The views expressed are personal)

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