

Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (20)

Can Russia live with an ongoing conflict in Syria? Mapping out Trends Among Russian Foreign Policy Elites

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Published in October 2020

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Introduction

September 30, 2020 marked five years since the start of the Russian Aerospace Forces operation in Syria. This was the first military operation Moscow launched far from its own borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today Russia is not only militarily involved but is deeply invested in the conflict as it seeks to shape the course of the negotiation process and the post-conflict socio-political development of Syria. Russia's grand strategy in Syria continues to evolve as it assesses its actions and goals in the light of current realities.

In this paper we look at how the Russian academic community and diplomatic circles see the outlook of the Syrian negotiation process. We conducted in-depth interviews with representatives of these groups in order to understand their perspective on the Geneva process, the prospects of the Astana format, and the impacts on Russia of an ongoing conflict scenario in Syria.

The Russian academic and diplomatic communities are naturally connected through Middle East foreign policy efforts and share a mutual respect due to common educational backgrounds and scholarly and institutional interactions. Nevertheless, their perspectives diverge in significant ways. First, the diplomatic approach is tied to the United Nations (UN) Security Council decisions and other official documents. In this regard, official diplomacy has to show more patience and flexibility in searching for options in peace negotiations as existing UN resolutions and the like are often declared "outdated" and "not relevant" by the public. Second, in order to support relevant negotiations, Moscow must have an operating understanding of its political partners' positions and occasionally relay those to Damascus. This understanding is challenged by the strategy development emerging from ongoing meetings between the United States (US), Europe, and Arab governments which support opposition forces of Bashar al-Assad's Syrian government.

Part I: The Geneva Process

The academic perspective: Russian academics are generally sceptical about the work of the Constitutional Commission in Geneva. Without questioning the imperative of having this international body, Russian experts question the likelihood of success because of the limitations on the Commission's innovations and an accompanying lack of mechanisms to influence the current situation on the ground. One of the interviewed experts also noted that preparing the constitution at a time when an inclusive interim government has not yet been formed contradicts UN Security Council Resolution 2254, thereby violating the UN-sponsored political transition process.

Since the Constitutional Commission is unable to significantly influence the unfolding situation on the ground, its power relies on whether the outcome of territorial control in Syria matches the

Commission's predictions and therefore can be implemented. However, one of the significant gains of the Commission, according to the interviewed experts, was the institutionalization of Ankara's presence which will impact the Commission's work as well as the Syrian regime's calculations.

The Russian expert community remains sceptical of the Geneva Process because its current form is set to serve the political interests of Moscow and the Syrian regime rather than achieve real political change in Syria. Specifically, the experts confirm the gains of the Geneva Process in three areas: 1) legitimization of the government of Bashar al-Assad; 2) consolidating the vision of post-conflict Syria in a way beneficial to Moscow; 3) promoting Russian mediation and diplomatic efforts.

While there is shared pessimism for the utility of the Geneva Process, Russian academics differ in how it could become more effective. One view suggests that continued association with opposition forces to President Bashar al-Assad may prove helpful. The increased military threat posed by the US, Turkey, and some Gulf States may in fact become a contender on the ground as seen in Idlib in early 2020. The escalation in Idlib prevented further agreement revisions, which in fact preserved previous agreements reached between Moscow and Ankara.

Other interviewees suggest effectiveness may be best increased by changing the composition and structure of the Constitutional Commission. One interviewee suggested diversifying Commission members, specifically including Syrian Democratic Council representatives and increasing the presence of Kurds (the only force outside al-Assad's control) to improve the Commission's work. Not everyone agreed, but most concurred that the composition of the Commission hinders its ability to influence the situation on the ground.

The diplomatic perspective: Russian diplomats believe that the poor effectiveness of the Geneva Process is not mainly due to its institutional weaknesses, but due to the continuing inconsistency in the participating parties' positions. Despite this reality, Moscow considers it imperative not to abandon any mechanisms formed in the course of the political process and continues to assist the process despite minimal practical results.

Most diplomats, unlike many academic specialists, believe that the drafting of a new constitution is an inevitable "landmark" element of a future formal end to the war. Therefore, Russian diplomats are motivated to address the weakness of the current composition of the Constitutional Commission in order to preserve the possibility of a new constitution. UN Security Council resolutions help pressure Syrian cooperation, even if it means inviting Kurdish representatives to the table.

Complicating the Geneva Process is the reality that drafting a new constitution or constitutional amendments will unlikely be completed before the next presidential election. Damascus is particularly interested in decreasing the number of issues receiving international criticism. Therefore, during the re-election campaign, al-Assad will be forced to manoeuvre expressing his support for the Geneva Process and Constitutional Commission to maintain international support. Since the constitutional drafting process is internationally supported, al-Assad's government will ensure the content of the amendments is amenable for Syria's political future so that it can successfully support the resulting constitution or amendments.

If the work of the Constitutional Commission produces positive results, Damascus may suggest the work has already been successful and therefore use it as a pretext to forestall a genuine power transition that would remove al-Assad. In this case, because the Geneva Process solves the final task of drafting a constitution for the government in Damascus, the Constitutional Commission would end its *raison d'être*.

Throughout the Geneva Process, Damascus has offered minimal official involvement, and that is unlikely to change in the future. However, Syria cannot afford to abandon the Geneva Process altogether, since the process is supported by the UN and several influential countries. Russia supports this reality, recognizing the need to incorporate key stakeholders' concerns, as long as the outcome does not ultimately jeopardize Russian interests.

Part II: The Astana Process

The academic perspective: The Russian academic perception of the Astana Process is significantly more positive than its perception of the Geneva Process. This is largely because the Astana Process's agenda and composition has produced a track-record of successful deliverables, albeit only military ones.

The Astana format provided the opportunity to reduce escalation and establish ceasefires in most parts of Syria in the mid-2010s. In this regard, the Astana Process was able to provide delimitation of zones of influence belonging to conflicting parties. This has meant that Russia, Iran, and Turkey often managed to routinize interaction with each other over critical issues. However, the Russian expert community acknowledges that the Astana Process allowed Russia to divide and weaken the Syrian opposition, which ultimately affected the quality of the political process and helped make robust political dialogue a fiction.

At the same time, the Astana format has practically exhausted itself and has no productive path in the medium- to long-term. In order to discuss the political aspects of a Syrian settlement, the Sochi format is more likely to be successful than continuing with the Astana Process. One of the

reasons is that Astana participants share hostility for the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, because of their link to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) which are perceived to be controlled by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).¹ Despite achieving some successes and identifying some shared threat perceptions, the limited number of participants hinders the transformation of the Astana Process from a military forum into a political one capable of gaining influential support in the region and the international community. Early efforts by Russia and Turkey to include other regional and global actors in the first years of the Astana Process were unsuccessful and are even less likely now.

Additionally, recent disagreements that arose between the three Astana members were resolved outside of this forum, which speaks to its reduced effectiveness. Specifically, the aggravation in north-eastern Syria in 2019 and growing tensions in the Idlib de-escalation zone in 2018 and 2020 could not be resolved in a trilateral format. The parties managed to reach agreements only within the framework of bilateral consultations, primarily between Moscow and Ankara.

However, no single participant in the Astana Process has acted as a spoiler of the format. Several experts note that Russia is still interested in the Astana Process, since within its framework, de-escalation on the ground was finally achievable. Therefore, the Astana Process continues to function as a mechanism for its participants to comply with their obligations and, as a result, allows the parties to keep their positions more predictable for each other. The Astana Process facilitates dialogue between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the core sponsors of the Syrian conflict, rather than only with sponsored parties within Syria. The importance of the Astana Process for solving tactical challenges (for example in Idlib and the east of the Euphrates) is also worth noting. With all these considerations, it can be concluded that the Astana Process currently retains its importance and effectiveness as a technical forum, rather than a political or military forum.

The diplomatic perspective: For diplomats, the Astana format has benefits for Russia beyond addressing concerns in Syria. Participating in the process helps Russian diplomats gain crucial experience in creating regional and international coalitions focused on specific, limited goals rather than general coalitions. For example, the Astana format has more than once made it possible to solve important military and political tasks without leaving an existing global security-military organization (for example, Turkey can cooperate with Russia while remaining a NATO member).

Russia is interested in the continued existence of the Astana Process, and using the experience and its success to replicate it in other regions. The Astana Process was designed to meet the challenges of aligning the interests of the three most important external actors in Syria - Russia,

¹ PKK is considered to be a terrorist organization in Turkey.

Turkey, and Iran. In practical terms, this primarily focused on issues where there were real possibilities for compromise. At this juncture, the more difficult problems have been delayed to a further negotiation stage where there will be more prerequisites for solutions in Idlib, the regions bordering Turkey, the American military presence, the complex problems of the Kurdish population, and other challenging issues.

As long as the Astana group members remain invested in the conflict, important compromises can be achieved. However, as Damascus is increasingly demanding temporary agreements on Idlib and other contested areas to be abolished, Russia, Turkey, and Iran may shift their level of investment and thus may be less likely to compromise. For example, the current Russian-Turkish agreements on Idlib and Libya are interim and thus do not exclude the possibility of sharp and open conflict in the future. However, the parties are not interested in confrontation and will likely minimize differences between Russia and Turkey when they arise. Iran, however, is motivated by its role on the international stage. Without a major power sympathizing with it, and not belonging to any global security-military organization, Iran sees the Astana Process as a rare opportunity to publicly demonstrate the importance of its political, military, and diplomatic potential.

Part III. Ongoing conflict scenario

Academic perspective: Taking into account that the Geneva and Astana processes are unlikely to have a chance in the short-term to make any significant contribution to the development of the political dialogue on Syria, Russian experts do not pin their hopes on either of them for qualitative changes in the political process. The only factor that can lead to the revitalization of the Geneva Process is if the key parties run out of resources. As for the Astana Process, it can be considered successful if it continues to manage to prevent Russia, Iran, and Turkey from direct confrontation in Syria.

At the same time, the impact of an ongoing conflict scenario carries risks for participants of the Astana Process, including Russia. First, Russia may lose face among regional actors as an effective mediator and facilitator for peace negotiations. Second, ongoing conflict will require Moscow to continue efforts to maintain the government of Bashar al-Assad and help suppress anti-government protest activity, continuing the consequences of the difficult socio-economic situation in Syria. Third, ongoing conflict will force Moscow to invest itself further in resolving inter-elite conflicts in Syria, which are already creating shockwaves (see for example the recent conflict between al-Assad and the Mahloun family).

However, other experts note that an open-ended conflict scenario is the best option for Moscow in the current conditions. The fall of Bashar al-Assad is not beneficial for Moscow, but the

complete defeat of the opposition is not better since it could lead to even more severe economic sanctions and a deepening split between Russia and the West, as well as with regional actors (Turkey, the Gulf States, etc.).

Regardless, Russia has few chances to avoid an open-ended conflict scenario. Even those experts who believe that Russia should exert more pressure on al-Assad's government to accommodate the opposition point out that this is unlikely to happen. However, rising tensions caused by socio-economic difficulties could theoretically provide Moscow with more tools to pressure Damascus. In general, the dominant point of view is that the Syrian government's inability to overcome the ongoing economic crisis is in fact the best opening for Russian diplomacy in the near future. In this context, Russia retains the opportunity to dialogue with the West as it supports former opposition groups. The regions under their control, according to Moscow, could potentially become "grey zones" where investments could come without violating the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.

The Russian government also has a broader and longer planning horizon than Western countries, which gives it an important political advantage. While foreign policy priorities and strategies of the US and the European Union member countries are affected by electoral cycles, those of Russian authorities are not tied to election cycles and always have the opportunity to wait for a change in the foreign policy positions of their opponents.

Diplomatic perspective: From the point of view of Russian diplomacy, the open-ended conflict scenario refers to the topic of the internal conflict in Syria – not one directly tied to Russian interests. Russia had not anticipated playing the first violin in mediations or rigidly associating itself with certain political figures or elite groups. In 2015, Russia came to the rescue of al-Assad in order to fight international terrorism in Syria, where the threat of an Islamic State (IS) takeover was looming. In fact, Russia voted in support of UN Security Council resolutions which supported creating transitional governance institutions, which caused displeasure in Damascus.

Moscow's unequivocal support for Bashar al-Assad and his regime today is largely a product of the lack of other plausible political forces to lead Syria. This is evidenced in part by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, his deputies, and other high-ranking Russian diplomats conducting meetings with representatives of various opposition forces in Syria. These meetings were held so that Russia could understand the logic of the opposition's actions and try to assess how they would behave if they took part in governing the country.

During the negotiations throughout the post-2011 period, President Bashar al-Assad criticized representatives of the opposition, emphasizing their political insignificance and dependence on

external forces. Russian diplomats have been convinced more than once that these characteristics and predictions of al-Assad turned out to be correct. As a result, Russia's respect and trust for al-Assad grew, and for all its shortcomings, Russia concluded the existing regime was still better than any other that could emerge on the ruins of the current power structures.

For an ongoing conflict scenario to be acceptable for Russia, two elements must be in place. First, forces loyal to Moscow must be preserved and remain indebted to the Russian Aerospace Forces for the political, moral, financial, economic, and military support in the early decisive days of confronting IS and other terrorist organizations. Second, Russia's naval and aerospace forces bases in Syria must be protected, which are of unique importance for ensuring Russia's status as a world power. For Russia, guarantees of free passage through the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, which connects the Black Sea with the world's oceans, are also of vital importance.

The open-ended conflict scenario is acceptable for Russia today because more advanced scenarios are not yet possible. Secondly, Moscow expects that the development of the situation in and around Syria will lead to the formation of more favourable conditions in the future. These hopes are fuelled by recent experiences of low-intensity insurgency zones transforming into Syrian control, including emerging efforts in the Idlib area. The Geneva and Astana processes are unlikely to officially recognize the reality of ongoing conflict. However, this scenario makes it possible to further postpone an open clash between the interests of the most important external players in the Syrian conflict.

There is still a long way to go before a complete settlement. However, the Russian diplomatic community already speaks of success due to accomplishments such as fighting international terrorism far from Russian borders, keeping a regime sympathetic to Moscow in power, and obtaining military and naval bases for stationing their armed forces. Now the most important thing is to keep the gains that Russia has won. As for other aspects of the settlement, it is not a good idea to artificially expedite things – the costs will be high, especially in terms of relations with Turkey and the US, and given the current balance of forces, a positive outcome is by no means guaranteed.

Russian diplomacy will strive to maintain a dialogue with the US, EU, and Turkey, without dramatizing the situation and putting forward any risky ultimatums. Moscow sincerely hopes that the dishonest play of political partners, who can also turn out to be political rivals, will inevitably lead to failure and a revision of Moscow's opponents' position.

Today, Russian diplomacy continues to adhere to its proposal of holding a comprehensive meeting with the UN Security Council members. An important element of this meeting's agenda may be the question of hastening the Syrian settlement by using the broadest international

platform: the Geneva Process. While radical, this appears to be the most effective way to restore the significance of the Geneva negotiating platform.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most public opinion in Russia is not optimistic that political dialogue can lead to any serious changes. Despite recognizing the importance of the Geneva negotiation process, neither Russian experts nor diplomats see opportunities for strengthening it. At the same time, they tend to associate the pessimism towards Geneva to a greater extent with the lack of sufficient Russian leverage over the Syrian regime.

When speaking about the Astana process, two things should be noted. On the one hand, it helped de-escalate the situation on the ground and served as a platform for coordinating actions between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, preventing direct conflict between these countries. On the other hand, Astana failed to acquire a global dimension and remained a local forum aimed at addressing immediate local needs. At the same time, strategic issues of long-term importance were nevertheless resolved outside Astana (usually in the format of a bilateral or multilateral dialogue).

The prospects for the open-ended conflict scenario are currently controversial in Russia. There is still no consensus on this issue, both in terms of its impact on Russia's position in Syria, and in terms of the stability of the Syrian regime itself. At the same time, we can confidently say that neither the expert community nor diplomats see the prerequisites necessary for a qualitative change in the situation. Therefore, from this point of view, the open-ended conflict scenario seems to be the most logical reality in Moscow.