

PLAYING CHESS WITH RUSSIA AND IRAN

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The WSJ reports that the US just doesn't get Vladimir Putin (even while explaining that Putin is legitimately miffed that US and its allies conducted regime change after claiming they wouldn't in Libya).

The tension between the two powers has been aggravated by a series of miscalculations and misunderstandings. U.S. officials acknowledge they have struggled to understand Mr. Putin, a former KGB agent. Russia, for its part, bristles at what it sees as the U.S. tendency to use humanitarian abuses as cover to remove regimes it doesn't like, such as in Libya.

It then lists all the big toys Putin's got in the Mediterranean.

Mr. Assad's arsenal of advanced Russian-made weapons systems, including a recent shipment of upgraded Yakhont antiship missiles, has made Pentagon planning for the strikes more difficult, U.S. officials say. As a precaution, the U.S. Navy is keeping its destroyers far from the Syrian and Lebanese coast lines and out of range, the officials say. Lebanon is home to Syria's close ally, Hezbollah, which also has sophisticated antiship rockets.

As of Thursday, Russia had two warships, two support vessels and three amphibious troop and equipment movers off the Syrian coast, which U.S. officials say they believe are tracking American military movements in the area to share with the Syrian regime. U.S. officials

say they believe Russian satellites and radar sites are also feeding information to the Syrian regime.

Given their professed inability to understand Putin, and given the extent of the military show of force he's making, then why the hell are they so sure this won't spin out of control?

Here's one potential worst case scenario.

If the Obama administration takes authorization from Congress and moves directly towards military action against Syria, the lack of a coalition is a significant condition that increases the strategic risk to the United States. Iran and Syria will recognize that this may be the only opportunity they will ever have to take on the United States without a broader coalition of support, and as such see this as their best opportunity to strike. In stepping through Red Team's calculations, consider how exposed the US truly is.

- 1) The United States has no coalition, so a targeted, direct strike against the United States in "self defense" significantly limits the degree to which the international community will respond in support of the US. The UK vote highlights that politically, the rest of the world does not stand with a belligerent United States in a unilateral military action.
- 2) The United States is strategically and politically exposed and military forces throughout the region are spread thin. There are no troops in Iraq. Sequestration has significantly degraded the capacity of the US military across the entire Department of

Defense towards fielding an effective reserve. Political cover by Russia and China will be available to Syria after the the US attacks.

3) Military objectives by Blue Team are not well defined, while military objectives by Red Team are well defined. All evidence suggests the leadership of the United States does not take seriously the threat of counterstrike. Russia has openly stated they will provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to help Syria, and that presumably would also be for support of military action in counterstrike.

4) Successful counterstrike against the United States will be celebrated regionally, resulting in significant restrictions of movement within the region by US military forces and a collapse of US political credibility broadly. Local pressure can be exploited by red team on regional military installations to restrict movement of US assets in the region.

When I take the red team perspective of action unfolding in the Middle East, if I am Iran and Syria supported by Russia, my calculation is that I may never have a better opportunity to change the regional security conditions and balance of power in the Middle East than the opportunity being presented in this situation unfolding. By throwing every military asset possible in attack of the surface action group of 4 destroyers in the Mederterranean Sea, and throwing the entire armed forces of Iran against the

Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group off the coast of Pakistan, the entire US policy for the Middle East would be dead in the water if Iran and Syrian attacks were to be successful. As red team, I would attack these targets specifically because they are sovereign US targets and don't inherently escalate tensions by giving any other nation a reason to join in.

[snip]

Is Europe going to seriously come to the aid of a belligerent US who got smacked for attacking another nation without a coalition, any legitimate alliance, or a UNSC resolution? The NATO alliance clause doesn't protect the US under the scenario unfolding in Syria. Remember, gas prices across the world will triple – or more, in the first 24 hours on the threat of escalation, so the gravity of the situation will hit the wallet of an happy American population as well. Where is the support for the US coming from? If you think the US has a reserve force ready to deploy in the US, you don't understand the impact of sequestration on the US military at all.

I would add two things to this scenario.

First, at a very minor level, I think war on Syria may lead international partners to bag on a number of our sanctions regimes, starting with Iran. Just today OFAC rolled out penalties against some people it says served as front companies for Iran, at the same time insisting it would ensure that Iran doesn't bypass sanctions.

"Our sanctions on Iran's oil sales are a critically important component of maintaining pressure on the Iranian Government, and we will not allow Iran to relieve that pressure through evasion

and circumvention,” said Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen. “We will continue to target those individuals and entities that devise schemes to evade our sanctions.”

But going to war in Syria without any sanction from the UN effectively tells the international community to fuck off. And there are a lot of countries – most notably China and India – that would welcome an excuse to start importing a lot more oil from Iran; if oil prices continue to rise, that urge will only become stronger. If the US is busy conducting unilateral action against Syria, what would prevent a bunch of countries from ending their adherence to our sanctions?

That would just serve to totally reverse our efforts to weaken Iran in comparison with the Saudis in the region.

Then there are Russia’s options. Consider: if the government has any reason at all to believe that Russia – either via coercive or consensual means – has obtained what is on Edward Snowden’s computers or in his head, there is a very good chance they know all of Saudi Arabia’s cyber vulnerabilities (to say nothing of our own). That’s because, as part of the Technical Cooperation Agreement signed in January, we’re now partnering with the Kingdom on cybersecurity. And Booz already got a chunk of that business. While Russia might avoid deliberately striking us in a cyberattack, Saudi Arabia might make an easier target (not least because they’re the ones drumming up Assad’s ouster in the first place). And if you can compromise Saudi oil production, it will quickly put the US in a very fragile spot.

We don’t know what Iran and Russia plan to do here. One thing we do know, though: they’re both shrewder than the people who caught themselves in this red line trap. That ought to raise more alarm about going forward.