



Our Syria policy is still a mess: These are the dots the media refuses to connect

Russia's foreign minister reveals a strange talk with John Kerry, and explains much about American foreign policy

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MOSCOW—Sergei Lavrov, Russia's widely respected foreign minister, dropped a big one here last weekend. After an hour-long conversation with John Kerry, Lavrov asserted in nationally televised remarks that the American secretary of state told him he wanted Russian planes to stop bombing al-Nusra, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda, in their air campaign against the Islamic State and other terrorist groups. GlobalSecurity.org carried the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty account of the exchange; it is here and worth a read.

“They are telling us not to hit it [al-Nusra] because there is ‘normal’ opposition next...to it,” Lavrov explained very soon after the two put their telephones down.

Going public with a diplomatic conversation cannot have been a decision Lavrov took lightly. And he surely did not intend to embarrass the Obama administration's top diplomat with these assertions, although he did a pretty good job of it nonetheless. Equally, he may have had no intention of casting light on how distorting, impractical and costly Washington's standoff with Moscow has become—in Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere—but he did well on this score, too.

The State Department acknowledged Lavrov's exchange with Kerry but parried that the latter had asked only that Russian bombers avoid targeting what the U.S.—and next to no one else—calls the “moderate opposition” in Syria. If you take this as a counter-argument, think again. It is a standard example of Washington's familiar resort to evasion: Appear to confront the question forthrightly while subtly avoiding it altogether.

For the record, it has long been understood and occasionally acknowledged by those on the ground in Syria that many of the militias the U.S. has armed and trained are hopelessly tangled up with al-Nusra rebels. If you listen closely, this is not a matter of logistics or military strategy,

and still less of happenstance. It is primarily a reflection of ideological affinity, given how regularly these groups are in and out of alliances with one another. Washington's moderates, in other words, do not give much evidence of moderation. There is little ground left to qualify this even as a topic worth debate.

When Washington signed a "cessation of hostilities" agreement with Moscow last February, it agreed that its moderates—and the Russians were more than decent to accept there are any of significant number—had to separate themselves from al-Nusra and the Islamic State, the two groups excluded from the faltering-but-still-proceeding peace process in Geneva. Lavrov explained this on Russian television, clearly with the intent of begging certain questions: Why are these moderates still "marbled"—a term I heard here the other day—through al-Nusra's positions? Why has Washington neglected to tell the people it insists on arming to get in those armed pickup trucks they drive and disperse? Or has it told them and they have refused, even as the arms continue to flow?

This was not the first time the Obama administration put this weird request to Lavrov, according to several sources here. "They've asked the same thing on three or four previous occasions," Dimtry Babich, a Sputnik international affairs commentator, said in conversation after Lavrov's televised remarks. And on three or four or more occasions, what we get from Washington matches the pattern: We keep asking the Russians not to bomb our moderates, the spokespeople at State explain, but they are not yet obliging.

What are we watching? Why has Lavrov, having long remained silent on this point, decided now to take the problem public? The answers are interesting.

Lavrov and Kerry have a close relationship, as has been widely reported. In videos of the two it is plain they are friendly, if only out of professional respect. Recall that three years ago President Obama painted himself into a corner with his "red line" commitment to bomb Damascus after those C.I.A.-trained moderates sent poison gas into a suburb of the capital and then tried to frame the Assad government. It was Lavrov who intervened to persuade Assad to ship stockpiles of chemical weapons out of the country. More recently, Lavrov's cooperation was key as he and Kerry led the P5 + 1 group in negotiating the agreement that now governs Iran's nuclear program.

So it is not a case of subterfuge or diplomatic sabotage, as it might at first appear. It is hard to cite a case when Lavrov has indulged in either. I see two takeaways in Lavrov's decision last

week to go unexpectedly public with a private conversation with Kerry, both larger than the incident itself.

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One concerns the propaganda that crawls like kudzu all over official statements and press reporting on the Syria conflict. The two usually coincide, we need to note, though this is not always so.

Barrel bombs (of the kind American deployed against the Vietnamese), targeted hospitals, civilian casualties, blockaded populations pushed to starvation: If you have not read of all this and more you have not been reading the newspapers. Here is our question: How much of this do we know to be so and how much as to the culpable parties? Defending the Assad government is out of the question, of course. Damascus is something short of a Swedish dairy, to borrow a British bureaucrat's phrase in another context. But condemning it on the basis of what we are told is out of the question, too. One cannot do either with any certainty.

The reality is that most of us are far deeper in the dark than we realize. We are not supposed to recognize this, but the principled position requires us to. Propaganda is an effective device, let there be no question, but our recent wars—in part media wars, as John Pilger, the Australian-British journalist, puts it—are something new. In this environment, propaganda machines eventually over-produce, as if they have exceeded their design tolerances. One is told this, that and the other so incessantly that one ends up accepting none of it at face value.

One of the aims of this column since Salon and I began it just about three years ago is to encourage clear sight—to remove the gauze of exceptionalism that separates us from perfectly obvious realities beyond our shores. It is a defensible intention, I would still say, but it can come to this: We have to see clearly that we are often not permitted to see clearly. It is the only way to proceed sensibly through the swamps of mis- and disinformation that just about drown us.

Where is our information about the war in Syria coming from? This is the obvious, mandatory question we can never forget to ask. Official narratives, various intelligence services and the Pentagon are plainly parts of the answer. So we have one problem straight off the top. Web sites such as Bellingcat.com, whose connections one would be naïve not to question, present another. In different places we are fed material from different sources. In the Syrian case, there is the incessantly quoted Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which operates from an apartment in the English Midlands (as does Bellingcat). Ever have a coherent explanation of just what the Syrian Observatory is, who its people are, how it gets its information and how it checks what it

gets? No need to answer. (Its “about us” page says it is not associated or linked with any political group.)

The other week some correspondents on the ground in Syria reported on an Observatory report, for once. The Observatory put it out that a hospital had been bombed somewhere on the front between the Syrian army and the Islamic militias fighting it. So many casualties, so many women and children among them. This stuff is rarely confirmed, if ever, before it reaches newspaper readers and television viewers. Maybe it was because journalists happened to be there on this occasion, but the reports on the report clarified: No, the bombs fell in a park nearby. No casualties. All that the Observatory reported came from rebel factions of obvious motivation and who knows what ideological persuasion.

It is one incident among countless events in a war, but its implications are large. The Lavrov-Kerry conversation is another and also comes with implications. We know little about events on the ground and not much more about what transpires among the diplomats. At the risk of sounding like Donald Rumsfeld in that famous observation of his early in the Bush II years, we need to know what we do not know.

I blame the press as much as the policy cliques and spinners in Washington. Correspondents and editors are entirely complicit in landing us in a position of nearly paralyzing ignorance. They reproduce official versions of events as a matter of routine. Second or third sources are rare. They fail to investigate their unofficial sources or check what they get from them. This is not a matter of naïveté. It is a matter of gross irresponsibility, and if the question is again larger implications one hardly knows where to begin. I have written foreign affairs commentary for 20–odd years. The extent to which this now entails media criticism has not been greater than it is now.

One cannot question the horrific toll on civilians the Syrian conflict has taken. One can call no side innocent (as one cannot in any war). But Lavrov’s decision to lift the lid on Kerry, a few correspondents calling the Syrian Observatory on its facts—these and other such incidents, while exceptional, should be enough. Enough to remind us of the extent we are in the dark, which is where those shifting the gears on the propaganda machines want us. The task is to think and judge accordingly. One can support all efforts to end the war without equivocation, but that is about all for now. The rest will have to wait.

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Lavrov's revelation comes at a fraught moment for Russians. They have taken to asking a lot of questions lately, and we ought to ponder some of them. The biggest of them is simply put: Is it not time for Washington to conclude that cooperation on questions of mutual interest is simply too valuable to forego in favor of neo-Cold War confrontation? I have no access to the thoughts in any foreign minister's mind, but in my read Lavrov intended to suggest this question when he outed Kerry's request to lay off al-Nusra.

There is an animated debate here concerning Russia's next move in Syria, where it continues to bomb ISIS and al-Nusra—Kerry's entreaty notwithstanding. Sources here say some influential figures close to the Kremlin now favor putting Russian special forces on the ground as the Syrian army closes in on Aleppo and Raqaa; the latter serves as the Islamic State's capital.

"It's a risky business, but the view here is that all options have to be considered," Dmitry Babich, the Sputnik analyst, told me during our conversation a week ago. "It's clear now the Islamic State and al-Nusra have used the ceasefire to rebuild their positions."

Nobody yet knows who is going to prevail in this argument, which is said to be very heated, but behind it lies a bigger one. Russian liberals who favor obliging Washington's preferences more or less without limit—a Yeltsin-era legacy—now face mounting resistance from a tougher-minded constituency around President Putin. These are nationalists of one or another stripe. They are people who may oppose many or most aspects of Putin's domestic policy but back him on the foreign side. Some in this camp complain he is not doing enough in situations such as Ukraine and Syria.

This latter group concluded long ago that the U.S. has to be countered forcefully because it will never recognize Russia as an equal, never meet Russia halfway on questions of concern to both nations, and never work with it as a partner with shared interests. Considering this in the course of a few days here, I found myself wondering what I would have to say, if asked, to counter these convictions. (My conclusion: Nothing, at least for now.)

Sergei Karaganov, a Russian political scientist, terms this position the "iron fist" argument. It gained a lot of traction after the U.S.-supported coup in Ukraine two years ago, Fyodor Lukyanov, who edits the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, notes in the current edition of *Foreign Affairs*. Lukyanov's piece is [here](#) and worth reading.

Lukyanov—youngish, vibrantly intelligent, perfectly pleased to be Russian—does not come over as any kind of cravenly obliging liberal in the Russian sense of this term. But he recognizes the unexploited potential for another kind of relationship with the U.S. "Although the world order

has changed beyond recognition during the past 25 years and is no longer defined by rivalry between two competing superpowers,” he writes, “it remains the case that when an acute international crisis breaks out, Russia and the United States are often the only actors able to resolve it.... When it comes to shared interests and common threats, the two powers are still able to work reasonably well together.”

When I met Lukyanov, at the conference that brought me to Moscow, we spoke only very briefly. But I am just short of certain he, too, ponders the above-noted question: Can't we do better than this? Isn't it time we did?

Syria is one of the examples Lukyanov cites in his Foreign Affairs essay. Plainly it is the context of Lavrov's current thinking on the U.S. relationship. Moscow is entirely serious about the Islamic State's threat and has no intention of slackening the pursuit. At the end of May Russian jets tripled the rate at which they are bombing terrorist targets, according to Genevieve Casagrande, who follows Syria at the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington research organization. “Russia is clearly demonstrating its freedom of action in Syria,” Casagrande wrote in a note circulated the other day.

After many years of strained ties and two of hypertension, that biggest question is beginning to roll at us like a big, black bowling ball. Would we all be better off if Washington and Moscow could agree to turn down the heat? More cooperation, less confrontation? A lot of Russians think so, as just outlined. So does Donald Trump, who famously questions why we need NATO, a Cold War military alliance, when the Cold War's a quarter-century behind us.

But Russians and the Trump camp in the Republican Party are not alone. A month before an especially important NATO summit, European allies are signaling their growing weariness with sanctions, Ashton Carter's new NATO deployments, and the attendant tensions now prevalent between East and West. France appears to be sliding gradually back to the Gaullist position, suggesting that NATO is an infringement on national sovereignty and needs to be restrained. Germany recently agreed to support new troop deployments in Poland and other member nations bordering Russia—but reluctantly, and only after making the U.S. commit to renewing political dialogue with Moscow.

On this side of the pond, American policy experts of various stripes now assert that there is more to gain than lose by working with the Russians when opportunities to do so arise. Along with Lukyanov's essay on Russian policy abroad, Foreign Affairs—leave it to that troublemaking rag—published six others questioning how the U.S. and its allies can better respond to Russia's

drives and interests. The issue's cover line is "Putin's Russia: Down but Not Out." I question how down it is, and it is in no wise out.

Other voices: "Continuing confrontation is unlikely to yield any practical result," Doug Bandow, a longtime analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote in a much-circulated piece published recently by The World Post. "Only a deal seems likely to deliver peace for Ukraine, security for Russia, stability for Europe, and satisfaction for America."

That sums it up—in Europe, in the Middle East, and in the bilateral relationship between Washington and Moscow. Emphatically, it is time for the Obama administration and its successor to adopt policies of greater restraint (and not just toward Russia). The only thing wrong with this debate is that it has taken too long to get going.

Russophobes and Russo-bashers, Moscow correspondents childishly obsessed with producing ad hominem garbage about the Russian president ought to begin contemplating a Plan B. Who knows when, but someday the cut of their cloth will fall out of fashion. The signs gather.

One exits one universe and enters another when flying from New York to Moscow. One's attitude toward either matters not at all, as the experience of the passage deserves reflection. I will return to the thought in coming columns.