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The Superpowers and the Struggle over Syria

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Along with the events on the ground in Syria, the war for the country's future is being waged on the international level. The principal players are the United States and Russia, conducting this clash while resorting alternately to pressure, threats, and attempts at dialogue. The most recent round occurred on June 17-19, 2013 at the G-8 summit in Northern Ireland. The summit, which generally deals with all major issues on the international agenda, was devoted this time almost entirely to Syria, and at the center was a charged interchange between the American and Russian Presidents about convening an international conference on Syria. Questions that will arise during the conference (dubbed Geneva-2) are now hotly debated, the key issue being Assad's ouster.

Although the battle in Syria has become an important international issue that will affect not only the future of the region but in many ways likewise the status of the superpowers involved, the conflict between Russia and the West is not limited to Syria alone. It has increased in tenor since the start of the Arab Spring as part of an ongoing global confrontation. In this context, Russia chose the Syrian civil war as the main arena of conflict where it maintains a provocative policy that couples increased assistance to the Assad regime with military and political activity to prevent external intervention. Russia's conduct has proven far more effective than what could reasonably have been expected, at least regarding Assad's survival. Russia would like to translate this achievement into success by promoting the idea of an international conference to determine Syria's future and thereby enhance Russia's status in the region and reap other dividends on the global arena. Hence the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the United States and its allies in the region to embrace the idea, the assumption being that Assad's days are in any case numbered and that one ought not help him survive or help Russia score points in the Middle East or in its other spheres of interest.

The first – and failed – attempt to promote an international solution to the crisis occurred in late June 2012, when a group in support of Syria, composed of Security Council and regional representatives, met in Geneva (in a meeting now referred to as Geneva-1). The group formulated a joint statement calling for the establishment of a transitional

government in Syria. More recently, apparently as the result of a sense that the tide has turned in Assad's favor, an attempt to promote Geneva-2 is underway. The United States agreed to the initiative during Kerry's visit to Russia in early May and was joined by other Western nations, with the new conference designed to begin with the conclusions reached at Geneva-1. Since then, the issue has become a key item on the international agenda, and the lack of agreement between the sides on the essence of future solutions is accompanied by respective efforts to wield influence. One can point to Russia's intentions – not yet realized and apparently not to be fulfilled for quite some time – to supply Syria with Russian S-300 missiles, or to Western declarations to cancel the embargo on supplying the rebels with weapons, the threats to operate a no-fly zone, and the statements on red lines, along with the stationing of American anti-aircraft missiles and fighter jets in Jordan, the joint maneuvers, and more.

The G-8 summit came at the height of this contest. The issue of Syria, with emphasis on convening Geneva-2, was at the forefront of the summit. The main disagreement on the contents of the conference has to do with the future of the Syrian regime. During the summit, the topic was discussed in meetings between President Putin and President Obama and among other heads of state, with efforts made to bridge the gaps. It seems the sides reached a compromise on the very convening of a conference and the topics that will be discussed, but there are still differences on two key issues for the Russians: a statement on the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and Assad's future. The first was resolved through the use of careful wording. The second was incorporated in the formulation of a paragraph on instituting a transitional government in Syria, leaving the main bones of contention in place.

The joint communiqué issued at the end of the summit included six paragraphs touching on Syria. These speak of:

- a. A commitment to act to stop the civil war.
- b. A commitment to provide a total of \$1.5 billion in humanitarian aid.
- c. A commitment to convene a Geneva conference as soon as possible on the basis of the understandings reached in 2012, including the establishment of a “transitional governing body with full executive powers.”
- d. A commitment by the conference participants to implement its decisions and work to achieve stability and reconciliation.
- e. An expression of concern about an increase in terrorism and extremism in Syria and a commitment to expel these elements, specifically al-Qaeda, from the country.
- f. A strong condemnation of chemical weapons and a demand for oversight of the sites where they are stored.

The problematic paragraph, which continues to arouse controversy, speaks of the transitional government. The wording chosen as a compromise with the Russians does not refer to a government, rather to a “governing body with full executive powers.” It seems that this wording leaves the door open, at least temporarily, for Assad’s inclusion in the process, thereby giving a relative advantage to the Russians and their future plans for Syria. This reality leaves all sides deeply frustrated, despite the positive summary for a comprehensive resolution to the Syrian crisis mentioned in the joint communiqué, including the convening of an international conference. This was soon reflected by the resumption of threats issued before the summit, such as the future supply of S-300 missiles to the Syrian regime and declarations of Western intent to aid the rebels.

Meantime, the question of Geneva-2 remains open. Although the joint communiqué speaks of holding the conference as soon as possible, no specific dates were mentioned. On the summit’s sidelines it was noted that the conference date would in all likelihood be set after a meeting between American and Russian representatives and UN representatives on Syria expected to take place on June 25, 2013. It seems that a date for Geneva-2 will eventually be chosen and the conference will ultimately take place, though probably not in July as was expected, rather in August.

Beyond this, follow-up meetings between President Obama and President Putin, in the context of the G-20 summit, have already been scheduled for this coming September in Russia. It has also been reported that during the summit, all issues concerning both Syria and bilateral and global aspects will be discussed. Until then, continued demonstrations of power and the mutual exertion of pressure to safeguard partisan interests in future agreements can be expected.

The convening of a conference in the format preferred by Russia indicates the gradual change in Russia’s standing, as it becomes an increasingly important player on the international arena.

