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DON'T COUNT ON RUSSIA TO GET RID OF ASSAD

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The Trump administrations Syria policy continues to evolve in remarkable, even head-spinning ways. In the past two weeks alone, President Trump has pivoted from resolutely opposing U.S. military intervention to ordering missile strikes, and from acceptance of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remaining in power to a renewed focus on getting rid of him.

Now a third shoe may be about to drop. As Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrives for his visit in Moscow, the administration is signaling that Trump may be preparing to pivot from an approach that prioritizes working with Russia in Syria to one that presses Moscow to help with Assads removal. This was the strategy spelled out by top administration officials over the weekend, with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley explaining that we would not see peace in Syria or the region with Assad as the head of the regime or with Russia covering up for Assad. On Monday, a spokesman for British Prime Minister Theresa May put out a statement asserting that May and Trump had agreed that a window of opportunity now exists in which to persuade Russia that its alliance with Assad is no longer in its strategic interest.

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters on April 11 at a meeting of Group of Seven foreign ministers that the U.S. hopes Russia will abandon its support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. (Reuters)
Getting rid of Assad is a desirable goal given the horrors he has inflicted on his population and the region, and getting Russia to split with him would help accomplish that goal given Assads dependence on Moscow. The problem, however, is that there is almost no prospect that Russia will go along with U.S. pleas for such assistance, no matter how much pressure Tillerson seeks to exert. The reality is that if Washington wants to get rid of Assad, its going to have to do so over Russia, not with it.

This conclusion should be obvious from years of painful U.S. experience that carries lessons for Trump. As the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, I joined then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for countless meetings with her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, focused on getting Russia to drop its support for Assad. The closest we came was at the U.N.-sponsored Geneva talks in 2012, when we succeeded in getting an agreement on a

transitional Syrian government whose leaders would be chosen by mutual consent. For the United States and our European and Arab allies, that phrase meant only if the opposition agreed, and so Assad had to go. But Lavrov quickly claimed that mutual consent meant that Assad also had to agree, which meant he was staying.

Clintons successor, John Kerry, faced similar Russian obstructionism when trying to win Russian support for getting beyond Assad. Even as U.S. support for the opposition increased, the civil war dragged on and the costs of Russias support for Assad mounted, Moscow always rejected the argument that Assads policies were producing the very sort of Islamist extremism that it claimed to be fighting. Russian officials continued to tell us they were not Assads protectors, but quickly and more importantly added that it was not up to us to choose Syrias government and that they had no intention of pushing him out.

Those who put faith then in the hope that Moscow would come around or who may now be thinking that is the way forward overlook the depth of Russias perceived self-interest in keeping Assad in power. First, the very concept of regime change is anathema to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Whether in Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine or Libya, Putin has vehemently opposed the notion that if local populations did not like their governments they could take up arms against them until the United States and its allies Russias geopolitical enemies came to their rescue. Putins hostility toward Clinton and part of the reason he intervened in the U.S. elections to ensure her defeat was due to his paranoid fear that regime change was what she had in mind when she criticized Russias flawed parliamentary election in December 2011. Putin will do everything he can to ensure that Syria does not set a precedent that might invite others in the region — or even someday in Moscow — to use violence to overthrow their rulers.

The second reason Moscow is so hostile to regime change in Syria is that it believes in this case not without merit that it would not result in a stable, pro-Western regime (bad enough from Moscows perspective) but rather, that it would lead only to more chaos, instability and extremism. On this point, Russians are probably sincere when they say that they have no love lost for Assad but that they vastly prefer him to the Sunni extremists they are certain would take over Damascus — or at least fight each other for control — if Assad actually fell.

In interviews over the weekend, Tillerson said he hoped Moscow was thinking carefully about its continued alliance with Bashar al-Assad. National security adviser H.R. McMaster expressed his hope that Russia could be part of the solution if it could reevaluate what it is doing.

The problem is that Russia knows exactly what it is doing, and it is highly determined to keep on doing it. As the Trump administration looks to change Moscows calculus, it had better understand that it will take a lot more than a single set of missile strikes to do so.

Kaynak/Source: