

Moscow Has Upped the Ante in Syria

As Syrian forces backed by Russia launch the final showdown in Syria against jihadist extremists in Idlib province, the potential for a U.S.-Russia confrontation has never been greater, as VIPS warns in this memo to the president. September 9, 2018

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: Moscow Has Upped the Ante in Syria

Mr. President:

We are concerned that you may not have been adequately briefed on the upsurge of hostilities in northwestern Syria, where Syrian armed forces with Russian support have launched a full-out campaign to take back the al-Nusra/al-Qaeda/ISIS-infested province of Idlib. The Syrians will almost certainly succeed, as they did in late 2016 in Aleppo. As in Aleppo, it will mean unspeakable carnage, unless someone finally tells the insurgents theirs is a lost cause.

That someone is you. The Israelis, Saudis, and others who want unrest to endure are egging on the insurgents, assuring them that you, Mr. President, will use U.S. forces to protect the insurgents in Idlib, and perhaps also rain hell down on Damascus. We believe that your senior advisers are encouraging the insurgents to think in those terms, and that your most senior aides are taking credit for your recent policy shift from troop withdrawal from Syria to indefinite war.

Big Difference This Time

Russian missile-armed naval and air units are now deployed in unprecedented numbers to engage those tempted to interfere with Syrian and Russian forces trying to clean out the terrorists from Idlib. We assume you have been briefed on that – at least to some extent. More important, we know that your advisers tend to be dangerously dismissive of Russian capabilities and intentions.

We do not want you to be surprised when the Russians start firing their missiles. The prospect of direct Russian-U.S. hostilities in Syria is at an all-time high. We are not sure you realize that.

The situation is even more volatile because Kremlin leaders are not sure who is calling the shots in Washington. This is not the first time that President Putin has encountered such uncertainty (see brief Appendix below). This is, however, the first time that Russian forces have deployed in such numbers into the area, ready to do battle. The stakes are very high.

We hope that John Bolton has given you an accurate description of his acerbic talks with his Russian counterpart in Geneva a few weeks ago. In our view, it is a safe bet that the Kremlin is uncertain whether Bolton faithfully speaks in your stead, or speaks INSTEAD of you.

The best way to assure Mr. Putin that you are in control of U.S. policy toward Syria would be for you to seek an early opportunity to speak out publicly, spelling out your intentions. If you wish wider war, Bolton has put you on the right path.

If you wish to cool things down, you may wish to consider what might be called a pre-emptive ceasefire. By that we mean a public commitment by the presidents of the U.S. and Russia to strengthen procedures to preclude an open clash between U.S. and Russian armed forces. We believe that, in present circumstances, this kind of extraordinary step is now required to head off wider war.

For the VIPS Steering Group, signed:

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Richard H. Black, Senator of Virginia, 13th District; Colonel, US Army (ret.); former Chief, Criminal Law Division, Office of the Judge Advocate General, the Pentagon (Associate VIPS)

Marshall Carter-Tripp, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) and Division Director, State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research

Bogdan Dzakovic, former Team Leader of Federal Air Marshals and Red Team, FAA Security (ret.) (Associate VIPS)

Philip Giraldi, CIA Operations Officer (retired)

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator (Alaska)

James George Jatras, former U.S. diplomat and former foreign policy adviser to Senate Republican leadership (Associate VIPS)

Michael S. Kearns, Captain, U.S. Air Force, Intelligence Officer, and former Master SERE Instructor (retired)

John Kiriakou, Former CIA Counterterrorism Officer and Former Senior Investigator, Senate Foreign Relations Committee

Karen Kwiatkowski, Lt. Col., USAF (ret.)

Matthew Hoh, former Capt., USMC Iraq; Foreign Service Officer, Afghanistan (associate VIPS)

Edward Loomis, NSA Cryptologic Computer Scientist (ret.)

Linda Lewis, WMD preparedness policy analyst, USDA (ret) (Associate VIPS)

David MacMichael, Senior Estimates Officer, National Intelligence Council (ret.)

Ray McGovern, Army/Infantry Intelligence Officer and CIA Presidential Briefer (retired)

Elizabeth Murray, Deputy National Intelligence Officer for the Near East, National Intelligence Council (retired)

Todd E. Pierce, MAJ, US Army Judge Advocate (ret.)

Scott Ritter, former MAJ, USMC, former UN Weapons Inspector, Iraq

Coleen Rowley, FBI Special Agent and former Minneapolis Division Legal Counsel (ret.)

Lawrence Wilkerson, Col. US Army (ret.); former Chief of Staff for Secretary of State; Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary (Associate VIPS)

Sarah G. Wilton, CDR, USNR (ret.); Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

Robert Wing, former Foreign Service Officer (Associate VIPS)

Ann Wright, retired U.S. Army reserve colonel and former U.S. diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War

APPENDIX:

Sept 12, 2016: The limited ceasefire goes into effect; provisions include separating the “moderate” rebels from the others. Secretary John Kerry had earlier claimed that he had “refined” ways to accomplish the separation, but it did not happen; provisions also included safe access for relief for Aleppo.

Sept 17, 2016: U.S. Air Force bombs fixed Syrian Army positions killing between 64 and 84 Syrian army troops; about 100 others wounded – evidence enough to convince the Russians that the Pentagon was intent on scuttling meaningful cooperation with Russia.

Sept 26, 2016: We can assume that what Lavrov has told his boss in private is close to his uncharacteristically blunt words on Russian NTV on Sept. 26. (In public remarks bordering on the insubordinate, senior Pentagon officials a few days earlier had showed unusually open skepticism regarding key aspects of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement – like sharing intelligence with the Russians (a key provision of the deal approved by both Obama and Putin). Here’s what Lavrov said on Sept 26:

“My good friend John Kerry ... is under fierce criticism from the US military machine. Despite the fact that, as always, [they] made assurances that the US Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama, supported him in his contacts with Russia (he confirmed that during his meeting with President Vladimir Putin), apparently the military does not really listen to the Commander in Chief.”

Lavrov went beyond mere rhetoric. He also specifically criticized JCS

Chairman Joseph Dunford for telling Congress that he opposed sharing intelligence with Russia, “after the agreements concluded on direct orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama stipulated that they would share intelligence. ... It is difficult to work with such partners. ...”

Oct 27, 2016: Putin speaks at the Valdai International Discussion Club

At Valdai Russian President Putin spoke of the “feverish” state of international relations and lamented: “My personal agreements with the President of the United States have not produced results.” He complained about “people in Washington ready to do everything possible to prevent these agreements from being implemented in practice” and, referring to Syria, decried the lack of a “common front against terrorism after such lengthy negotiations, enormous effort, and difficult compromises.”

Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) is made up of former intelligence officers, diplomats, military officers and congressional staffers. The organization, founded in 2002, was among the first critics of Washington’s justifications for launching a war against Iraq. VIPS advocates a US foreign and national security policy based on genuine national interests rather than contrived threats promoted for largely political reasons. An archive of VIPS memoranda is available at Consortiumnews.com.
