

The War on Syria: The September 2013 Military Stand-off between Five US Destroyers and the Russian Flotilla in the Eastern Mediterranean

Two US missiles were launched towards the Syrian coast, and both failed to reach their destination

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

The Cape of Good Hope Presentation at the Rhodes Forum, October 5, 2013

First, the good news. American hegemony is over. The bully has been subdued.

We cleared the Cape of Good Hope, symbolically speaking, in September 2013. With the Syrian crisis, the world has passed a key forking of modern history. It was touch and go, just as risky as the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The chances for total war were high, as the steely wills of America and Eurasia had crossed in the Eastern Mediterranean. It will take some time until the realisation of what we've gone through seeps in: it is normal for events of such magnitude. The turmoil in the US, from the mad car chase in the DC to the shutdown of federal government and possible debt default, are the direct consequences of this event.



Remember the Berlin Wall? When it went down, I was in Moscow, writing for Haaretz. I went to a press-conference with Politburo members in the President Hotel, and asked them whether they concurred that the end of the USSR and world socialist system was nigh. I was laughed at; it was an embarrassing occasion. Oh no, they said. Socialism will blossom, as the result of the Wall's fall. The USSR went down two years later. Now our memory has compacted those years into a brief sequence, but in reality, it took some time.

The most dramatic event of September 2013 was the high-noon stand-off near the Levantine shore, with five US destroyers pointing their Tomahawks towards Damascus and

facing them – the Russian flotilla of eleven ships led by the carrier-killer Missile Cruiser Moskva and supported by Chinese warships. Apparently, two missiles were launched towards the Syrian coast, and both failed to reach their destination.

It was claimed by a Lebanese newspaper quoting diplomatic sources that the missiles were launched from a NATO air base in Spain and they were shot down by the Russian ship-based sea-to-air defence system. Another explanation proposed by the Asia Times says the Russians employed their cheap and powerful GPS jammers to render the expensive Tomahawks helpless, by disorienting them and causing them to fail. Yet another version attributed the launch to the Israelis, whether they were trying to jump-start the shoot-out or just observed the clouds, as they claim.

Whatever the reason, after this strange incident, the pending shoot-out did not commence, as President Obama stood down and holstered his guns. This was preceded by an unexpected vote in the British Parliament. This venerable body declined the honour of joining the attack proposed by the US. This was the first time in two hundred years that the British parliament voted down a sensible proposition to start a war; usually the Brits can't resist the temptation.

After that, President Obama decided to pass the hot potato to the Congress. He was unwilling to unleash Armageddon on his own. Thus the name of action was lost. Congress did not want to go to war with unpredictable consequences. Obama tried to browbeat Putin at the 20G meeting in St Petersburg, and failed. The Russian proposal to remove Syrian chemical weaponry allowed President Obama to save face. This misadventure put paid to American hegemony, supremacy and exceptionalism. Manifest Destiny was over. We all learned that from Hollywood flicks: the hero never stands down; he draws and shoots! If he holsters his guns, he is not a hero: he's chickened out.

Afterwards, things began to unravel fast. The US President had a chat with the new president of Iran, to the chagrin of Tel Aviv. The Free Syrian Army rebels decided to talk to Assad after two years of fighting him, and their delegation arrived in Damascus, leaving the Islamic extremists high and dry. Their supporter Qatar is collapsing overextended. The shutdown of their government and possible debt default gave the Americans something real to worry about. With the end of US hegemony, the days of the dollar as the world reserve currency are numbered.

World War III almost occurred as the bankers wished it. They have too many debts, including the unsustainable foreign debt of the US. If those Tomahawks had flown, the bankers could have claimed Force Majeure and disavow the debt. Millions of people would die, but billions of dollars would be safe in the vaults of JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs. In September, the world crossed this bifurcation point safely, as President Obama refused to take the fall for the bankers. Perhaps he deserved his Nobel peace prize, after all.

The near future is full of troubles but none are fatal. The US will lose its emission rights as a source of income. The US dollar will cease to serve as the world reserve currency though it will remain the North American currency. Other parts of the world will resort to their euro, yuan, rouble, bolivar, or dinar. The US military expenditure will have to be slashed to normal, and this elimination of overseas bases and weaponry will allow the US population to make the transition rather painlessly. Nobody wants to go after America; the world just got tired of them riding shotgun all over the place. The US will have to find new employment for so many bankers, jailers, soldiers, even politicians.

As I stayed in Moscow during the crisis, I observed these developments as they were seen by Russians. Putin and Russia have been relentlessly hard-pressed for quite a while.

- * The US supported and subsidised Russia's liberal and nationalist opposition; the national elections in Russia were presented as one big fraud. The Russian government was delegitimised to some extent.

- * The Magnitsky Act of the US Congress authorised the US authorities to arrest and seize the assets of any Russian they deem is up to no good, without a recourse to a court.

- * Some Russian state assets were seized in Cyprus where the banks were in trouble.

- * The US encouraged [Pussy Riot](#), gay parades etc. in Moscow, in order to promote an image of Putin the dictator, enemy of freedom and gay-hater in the Western and Russian oligarch-owned media.

- * Russian support for Syria was criticised, ridiculed and presented as a brutal act devoid of humanity. At the same time, Western media pundits expressed certainty that Russia would give up on Syria.

As I wrote previously, Russia had no intention to surrender Syria, for a number of good reasons: it was an ally; the Syrian Orthodox Christians trusted Russia; geopolitically the war was getting too close to Russian borders. But the main reason was Russia's annoyance with American high-handedness. The Russians felt that such important decisions should be taken by the international community, meaning the UN Security Council. They did not appreciate the US assuming the role of world arbiter.

In the 1990s, Russia was very weak, and could not effectively object, but they felt bitter when Yugoslavia was bombed and NATO troops moved eastwards breaking the US promise to Gorbachev. The Libyan tragedy was another crucial point. That unhappy country was bombed by NATO, and eventually disintegrated. From the most prosperous African state it was converted into most miserable. Russian presence in Libya was rather limited, but still, Russia lost some investment there. Russia abstained in the vote on Libya as this was the position of the then Russian president Dmitry Medvedev who believed in playing ball with the West. In no way was Putin ready to abandon Syria to the same fate.

The Russian rebellion against the US hegemony began in June, when the Aeroflot flight from Beijing carrying Ed Snowden landed in Moscow. Americans pushed every button they could think of to get him back. They activated the full spectre of their agents in Russia. Only a few voices, including that of your truly, called on Russia to provide Snowden with safe refuge, but our voices prevailed. Despite the US pressure, Snowden was granted asylum.

The next step was the Syrian escalation. I do not want to go into the details of the alleged chemical attack. In the Russian view, there was not and could not be any reason for the US to act unilaterally in Syria or anywhere else. In a way, the Russians have restored the Law of Nations to its old revered place. The world has become a better and safer place.

None of this could've been achieved without the support of China. The Asian giant considers Russia its "elder sister" and relies upon her ability to deal with the round-eyes. The Chinese, in their quiet and unassuming way, played along with Putin. They passed Snowden to Moscow. They vetoed anti-Syrian drafts in the UNSC, and sent their warships to the Med.

That is why Putin stood the ground not only for Russia, but for the whole mass of Eurasia.

The Church was supportive of Putin's efforts; not only the Russian Church, but both Catholics and Orthodox were united in their opposition to the pending US campaign for the US-supported rebels massacred Christians. The Pope appealed to Putin as to defender of the Church; so did the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch. The Pope almost threatened to excommunicate Hollande, and the veiled threat impressed the French president. So Putin enjoyed support and blessing of the Orthodox Patriarchs and of the Pope: such double blessing is an extremely rare occasion.

There were many exciting and thrilling moments in the Syrian saga, enough to fill volumes. An early attempt to subdue Putin at G8 meeting in Ireland was one of them. Putin was about to meet with the united front of the West, but he managed to turn some of them to his side, and he sowed the seeds of doubt in others' hearts by reminding them of the Syrian rebel manflesh-eating chieftains.

The proposal to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons was deftly introduced; the UNSC resolution blocked the possibility of attacking Syria under cover of Chapter Seven. Miraculously, the Russians won in this mighty tug-of-war. The alternative was dire: Syria would be destroyed as Libya was; a subsequent Israeli-American attack on Iran was unavoidable; Oriental Christianity would lose its cradle; Europe would be flooded by millions of refugees; Russia would be proven irrelevant, all talk and no action, as important as Bolivia, whose President's [plane can be grounded](#) and searched at will. Unable to defend its allies, unable to stand its ground, Russia would've been left with a 'moral victory', a euphemism for defeat. Everything Putin has worked for in 13 years at the helm would've been lost; Russia would be back to where it was in 1999, when Clinton bombed Belgrade.

The acme of this confrontation was reached in the Obama-Putin exchange on exceptionalism. The two men were not buddies to start with. Putin was annoyed by what he perceived as Obama's insincerity and hypocrisy. A man who climbed from the gutter to the very top, Putin cherishes his ability to talk frankly with people of all walks of life. His frank talk can be shockingly brutal. When he was heckled by a French journalist regarding treatment of Chechen separatists, he [replied](#):

"the Muslim extremists (takfiris) are enemies of Christians, of atheists, and even of Muslims because they believe that traditional Islam is hostile to the goals that they set themselves. And if you want to become an Islamic radical and are ready to be circumcised, I invite you to Moscow. We are a multi-faith country and we have experts who can do it. And I would advise them to carry out that operation in such a way that nothing would grow in that place again".

Another example of his shockingly candid talk was given at Valdai as he replied to BBC's Bridget Kendall. She [asked](#): did the threat of US military strikes actually play a rather useful role in Syria's agreeing to have its weapons placed under control?

Putin replied: Syria got itself chemical weapons as an alternative to Israel's nuclear arsenal. He called for the disarmament of Israel and invoked the name of Mordecai Vanunu as an example of an Israeli scientist who opposes nuclear weapons. (My [interview with Vanunu](#) had been recently published in the largest Russian daily paper, and it gained some notice).

Putin tried to talk frankly to Obama. We know of their exchange from a leaked record of the

[Putin-Netanyahu](#) confidential conversation. Putin called the American and asked him: what's your point in Syria? Obama replied: I am worried that Assad's regime does not observe human rights. Putin almost puked from the sheer hypocrisy of this answer. He understood it as Obama's refusal to talk with him "on eye level".

In the aftermath of the Syrian stand-off, Obama appealed to the people of the world in the name of American exceptionalism. The United States' policy is "what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional", he said. Putin [responded](#): "It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal." This was not only an ideological, but theological contradistinction.

As I expounded at length [elsewhere](#), the US is built on the Judaic theology of exceptionalism, of being Chosen. It is the country of Old Testament. This is the deeper reason for the US and Israel's special relationship. Europe is going through a stage of apostasy and rejection of Christ, while Russia remains deeply Christian. Its churches are full, they bless one other with Christmas and Easter blessings, instead of neutral "seasons". Russia is a New Testament country. And rejection of exceptionalism, of chosenness is the underlying tenet of Christianity.

For this reason, while organised US Jewry supported the war, condemned Assad and called for US intervention, the Jewish community of Russia, quite numerous, wealthy and influential one, did not support the Syrian rebels but rather stood by Putin's effort to preserve peace in Syria. Ditto Iran, where the wealthy Jewish community supported the legitimate government in Syria. It appears that countries guided by a strong established church are immune from disruptive influence of lobbies; while countries without such a church – the US and/or France – give in to such influences and adopt illegal interventionism as a norm.

As US hegemony declines, we look to an uncertain future. The behemoth might of the US military can still wreck havoc; a wounded beast is the most dangerous one. Americans may listen to [Senator Ron Paul](#) who called to give up overseas bases and cut military expenditure. Norms of international law and sovereignty of all states should be observed. People of the world will like America again when it will cease snooping and bullying. It isn't easy, but we've already negotiated the Cape and gained Good Hope.

(Language edited by Ken Freeland)

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