

A Trump-Putin Bromance at the G20 Will Become the New Sykes-Picot Agreement

GREGORY STILES
The University of Sheffield

Executive Summary

The ongoing Syrian crisis has been a prominent feature of past G20 summits. Negotiations have collapsed and ceasefire agreements have been broken in the wake of an intractable conflict. This year's G20 has been dominated by the prospective re-engagement of the United States and Russia in an informal side meeting between Trump and Putin, and the resulting agreement on a de-escalation of the conflict in Syria. In reality this agreement is far from complete, nor does it range wider than the self-interest of both states. The development of a budding relationship between Trump and Putin bodes ill for the hopes of an effective resolution to the civil war in Syria.

The Syrian Civil War

The Arab Spring that began the civil war back in 2011 seems a distant memory to both those reporting on the conflict as well as those reading about it. Yet the brutal struggle continues to make Syria one of the [most dangerous](#) places to live on the planet. The mass migration of the Syrian population over

the last few years has been a clear indication of the horrific living conditions that exist within the region, whichever side of the conflict people reside.

That no resolution to the carnage has been achieved by the international community is testament to the complicated nature of the conflicting parties on the ground. The differing religious and ethnic backgrounds, the regional disputes over natural resources, and the indifference and interference of members of the international community have spurred a region-wide chaos that has eluded diplomatic solutions.

The [inter-ethnic religious rivalry](#) between different sections of Islam has partially driven some of the more heinous acts of the conflict, alongside political struggles for power. However, the traditional Sunni-Shia divide within the region has also split along more minor ethnic-religious lines between Sunni-Alawite and Shia-Christian communities. The inclusion of the fundamentalist Islamic State (IS) into

the mix, since its rampant takeover of [large swathes of Syria and Iraq](#) in 2014-15, has added a level of impetus to Western-dominated attempts to control the conflict in the region. This control, however, has been dominated by efforts from the United States and coalition partners to degrade and systematically destroy IS through [air strikes](#) and financial and military support for forces on the ground.

The recent military successes by Iraqi government forces, assisted by Shia militias and Kurdish forces, have enabled significant progress towards the ejection of IS from the second largest Iraqi city of [Mosul](#). Just prior to the G20 Hamburg Summit the news began to break of advances by US backed Kurdish and Syrian forces in entering the IS capital of [Raqqa](#). These advances have been reported as significant steps towards solving the larger picture of violent chaos within the region by removing one of the most repressive forces, which is also vehemently opposed to any interference from Western countries or those of other creeds and religions.

The fact that this Western-led investment in removing violence from the region has been directed predominantly at the one group that has actively targeted and attacked Western countries makes clear their limited priorities. These priorities see the reduction of the power and capabilities of IS as the single most

important aspect of solving the crisis in Syria. The question of what happens after the fall of IS is one that seems to be absent from the majority of foreign policy declarations.

How Many Players to Solve a Conflict?

Any analysis of the Syrian conflict starts with the internal forces on the ground. The remnants of the Assad regime's forces continue to hold and advance at a grinding pace over parts of the Syrian landscape. These regime forces, however, suffer from an extreme manpower shortage and [morale](#) continues to be low outside of major regime strongholds. In order to maintain its hold on power and militarily progress against both rebel Syrian forces and IS, the Assad regime has essentially sold its sovereignty to multiple competing international regional powers.

In the first instance, the military backing of the regime by the Russian government has seen the Russians secure and expand their hold over a significant [naval base](#) in the Mediterranean and a large-scale [air base](#) to increase their ability to deploy military power in the region. Russian missile strikes, from both planes and warships in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, have supplied the Assad regime forces with much needed [firepower](#) to conduct a series of tactical advances over opposition

forces. These advances however, have not been conducted just by government forces. The Assad regime has been reinforced, and directed by Iranian funded and backed militias that have been recruited from Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. These military forces have begun to resemble the expeditionary nature of the growing [Iranian influence](#) in the region, at times being directed on the ground by Qasem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

In addition to this mix there are the multitude of opposition forces vying for control throughout the country. The cross border nature of IS has proved difficult to pin down with its control once extending from the city of Raqqa in Syria, across the [oil rich region](#) of Dier ez-Zor in the East, to the second Iraqi city of Mosul. The recent advances of Iraqi and Kurdish forces have begun to reduce the scale of IS influence in these areas, indeed the Syrian regime itself has prioritised retaking the oil fields of Dier ez-Zor in order to gain a foothold in the valuable resource-rich regions, in anticipation of an end to the conflict.

However, the slow demise of IS is not guaranteed. The brutal close quarter fighting inside the old city of Mosul continues to bubble over alongside a large-scale humanitarian crisis with civilians trapped within the conflict zone. In fact, whilst the recent breach of the ancient city walls of Raqqa by

US-sponsored opposition forces in the face of [stiff IS resistance](#) is seen as the death nail in the coffin for IS, it is in fact only the beginning of what will be a long drawn-out battle for control of a large and populous city.

The other rebel groups that continue to provide an armed opposition to government forces within Syria also provide a myriad of differing positions, factions and intents. US-sponsored forces range in size and scope throughout the region, and fight alongside more hardline Sunni militia groups that are financed and [sponsored](#) by Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia. This complicated, and certainly unclear, picture of patronage and financing that exists within the country adds to the already toxic mix of local and international power plays that rarely line up in one single policy direction.

Potentially, one of the most toxic relationships within the region is that between the opposition Kurdish forces, who have carved out a [vast swathe of control](#) throughout Syria and Iraq, and who are regarded by the US Defence Department as their [most effective allies](#) on the ground for dealing with IS. Indeed, the Kurdish forces have been at the forefront of the fight in both Mosul and across a vast swathe of northern Syria. The significant [battle for Kobani](#), near the Turkish border, is seen as one of the turning points in the conflict with IS within the region. Even

now the Kurdish forces are leading the assault, alongside US-sponsored Sunni militias, on the IS capital of Raqqa.

The complicated layer of the expansion of Kurdish influence in the region has been Turkey's response to the [perceived threat](#) that a Kurdish controlled enclave would have to the separatist parts of Turkey's South East, which have been under a sustained assault from Turkish armed forces in recent months.

There can be no illusion that Turkey will allow the formation of an independent Kurdish state following the resolution of any conflict in Syria. In fact, there are few players in the region who would welcome this initiative that the Kurds themselves still [hope to achieve](#). Turkey, Iran, Iraq and whatever remains of a Syrian state, will be opposed to any moves towards independence for their own Kurdish ethnic regions that may wish to band together to create a viable independent entity. The very nature of this problem means that the Kurdish forces that have proved so effective in the fighting on the ground in Syria and Iraq are unlikely to go peacefully into the night when surrounding states and international actors ask them to give up their dreams for a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

The Putin-Trump Sideshow

Beyond the players on the ground, the international forum of the G20 in Hamburg has allowed the leaders of the US and Russia to [dominate](#) the scene. The much-anticipated side meeting between the two has been perceived as a success for both leaders in garnering agreement on a ceasefire in the south-west of Syria.

The groundwork for this meeting, conducted by US and Russian officials in the Jordanian capital over the preceding weeks, has allowed the two leaders to claim the beginning of a profitable relationship during their two-hour bonding session. Flying in the face of the increased rhetoric between the two leaders in the days leading up to the summit, Trump's controversial [speech in Poland](#) and Russia's vetoing of a Security Council proposal on North Korea, this agreement on the de-escalation of hostilities is being touted as the breakthrough that the Syrian conflict desperately needed.

In reality, this agreement is both as unsurprising as it is short on substance. The de-escalation agreement covers only a small part of the south-west of Syria bordering Israel and Jordan, a conflicted and volatile region that neither the Americans nor the Russians have a vital strategic interest in. That there are no significant tactical advantages to

this area for the Russians means that there is, in reality, nothing to lose from this agreement in terms of their larger strategy for influence in both Syria and the region. For the US, the fact that forces aligned to IS have an entrenched [presence in the area](#) makes it a priority in what US Secretary of State Tillerson describes as the important process of defeating IS before any resolution to the conflict can be achieved.

The fact that both sides can find agreement in this pocket of Syria due to the presence of IS offers no surprises. Nor does the fact that Jordan is part of the agreement having long seen the border region in the south-west as a threat to its security and territorial integrity due to the nature of the [displaced civilian population](#) as well as radicalised elements spreading dissent across the border. The significant factor that has not been analysed in this policy development in the de-escalation agreement is that of Israel. Israeli fighter jets have made a number of cross-border sorties in recent times, targeting Assad regime forces that they suspect of assisting in the transference of weapons to the Lebanese militia group Hezbollah, in addition to responding to [cross-border shelling](#) by Assad forces during fighting with rebel groups.

The fact that Israel perceives the growing Iranian and [Hezbollah](#)

[influence in the area](#) as a threat to its national security is just one of the wild cards present in this de-escalation agreement. If a ceasefire is implemented between rebel groups and the Syrian regime forces, there remain questions as to its stability if Israel conducts preemptive strikes against regime forces and their allies independent of US pressure to uphold the agreement.

Although the exact details of the deployment of forces has still to be agreed, the US Secretary of State was clear during his [briefing at the G20](#) that there will be some form of boots on the ground in order to provide information to the monitoring group being established in Amman. For this action to be effective, however, it will require the active cooperation of all the groups currently involved in fighting in the south-west region, something that cannot be guaranteed by an American-Russian international agreement alone.

A Sykes-Picot for the Twenty-First Century

That this acquiescence may not be achieved is ultimately not of a concern to Russian and American policymakers. Instead, this side meeting, and the focus on a region of Syria that poses a threat to both countries' interests due to the presence of IS forces, is the beginning of a broader strategy to begin to divide

the conflicted region into traditional spheres of influence.

The original Sykes-Picot agreement was an attempt by the French and British colonial powers to carve the Middle East into mutually agreed spheres of influence. The Trump-Putin de-escalation agreement is the beginning of a similar pattern, whereby the changing nature of American leadership in the world – that of 'America First' – is aligning more with the zero-sum thinking that has been pursued by the Russian government. The fact that the tactical situation on the ground in Syria between government and non-IS rebels has begun to stagnate provides Russia with the incentive to secure and stabilise the spheres of influence it has acquired, whilst for the US the priority remains containing Russian influence and, perhaps more importantly, stemming the tide of growing [Iranian control](#) over the region.

The multitude of groups fighting in the Syrian civil war, combined with the cross-border nature of the conflict, paints a telling picture of the intractable nature of any movement towards peace in the region. This imagery, confronting a US administration that sees America's interests as paramount and is reluctant to be dragged into global policy issues, has set the precedent for a more brutal realist approach to dealing with international relations. The Putin-

Trump meeting has exemplified this new doctrine of nationalist driven diplomacy, an approach that ironically may do more for bringing to an end some of the worst fighting in Syria.

This self-interested approach has already brought an agreement on the aim of removing IS from the region as a viable force, an interest that both Russia, America and European states view as a priority above removing the Syrian regime. However, the US Secretary of State has made it clear following the leaders meeting in Hamburg that the Assad regime cannot remain in power in the long run. Although up until now the Russian government has backed the Assad regime during the conflict, its involvement has always been self-interested and its actions revolve around retaining significant military and naval bases within Syria, providing much needed access to the Mediterranean, and securing and extending its influence within the region. The key aspect of this Russian policy going forward, however, is that the security of its interests do not have to rely upon the [maintenance of the Assad regime](#) if there can be an agreement with the US on a grand division of spheres of influence.

The formulation of a twenty-first century Sykes-Picot agreement between the US and Russia would have to include a division of spheres of influence that reflects the broad nature

of the groups that both sides support on the ground – a division that may well frustrate other regional powers in their attempts at spreading influence and political and religious agendas. However, for an agreement of this size to be achieved it will take more than a simple, if extended, side meeting [between Trump and Putin](#) at the G20 to secure the myriad of details and obligations that are required to build and maintain a long-term deal.

To Infinity and Beyond

If the Trump-Putin Agreement is to develop further, then it would spell the beginning of a radical international power shift, not only within the region, but internationally. The attempt to return to a [bi-polar system](#) of power in the world would fly in the face of two decades of analysis that has seen the world drive towards a system of multilateralism, indicative of the kind of summit gathering that Hamburg has hosted.

The reality of the completion of such an agreement lies not, however, in Syria, but within the corridors of power in Washington and Moscow. Vladimir Putin is an experienced and wily political operator, his [machinations over Ukraine](#) and other global issues have shown him to prioritise national interests and the desire to see Russia once again as a great power. This process means that Putin will be open to the potential for a grand bargain

with a receptive US administration, but not naive enough to place all his eggs in one basket.

This has meant that the G20 Hamburg Summit has provided Putin with the ability to [test Trump](#), to push the US President and to see how he reacts going forward. Putin will be acutely aware of the reaction President Trump has had to his [perceived rebuttal](#) by Xi Jinping to take definitive action in dealing with North Korea, and will be waiting to see whether Trump has the patience to continue with what will be a long drawn-out process of negotiation and compromise in the face of domestic American opposition.

For Putin, the world has always been a zero-sum game, a game in which he is happy to outplay those who would take advantage of Russia, or who would challenge its perceived sphere of influence. In this respect, the development of a division of spheres of influence in Syria, which would draw to a close the large-scale fighting, would be acceptable if it guaranteed the strategic interests of Russia. However, for Putin, the continuation of the fighting in Syria would not present a problem for him or Russia's interests, it would in fact provide the potential for further strategic gains. In light of this scenario, the de-escalation agreement is a win-win situation. If it works, and can be expanded to other parts of Syria, then he will have achieved Russia's long-term goals in

the region. If it were to fall apart, then Russian military and political interests would [still be protected](#) within Syria and the ensuing fallout would continue to undermine Trump both domestically and internationally, thereby further weakening the US.

If the Russian and US presidents were actually serious about creating an effective end to the violence in Syria, then they would need to reach out to other G20 countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia and embrace a level of multilateralism that they have yet to engage with. The G20 itself would be able to provide the valuable platform for these talks, as would the ability to include a guest member, such as Iran, in order to address the negative positioning of a direct engagement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which would play badly for both countries domestically. The possibility of using the G20 format to provide the

environment for an international negotiation to solve the Syrian crisis remains on the table.

However, for the sad and rather strange figure that Donald Trump has cut at this year's G20, there remains the overwhelming belief in his own powers of persuasion and ability to make a deal. Having come away from the side meeting with Putin with a news-dominating narrative, the US President can possibly be forgiven for entertaining the idea that there has been a great leap forward in relations with Russia. The reality is that Putin is a master player of international politics, and he has only just moved his opening pawn in the beginning of a new Great Game.

Gregory Stiles is a Doctoral Researcher in International Relations at the University of Sheffield.