

The G20 and Regional stability - A Summit Failure or an Impossible Vortex of Violence?

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Media Centre – G20 Summit. The barbaric attacks in Paris are an untimely reminder for the world's leaders of the instability and violence that has spilled over from the region surrounding the G20 Summit host. With almost all other topics being shunted to one side the expectation became a want for the G20 leaders to come together in order to agree to a viable solution to the crisis. In particular, the continuous media focus on the attack led to the development of a particular pro-intervention [narrative](#), which has built-up expectations to a point where the world is expecting a solution to be delivered at the G20 press conferences and official G20 communiqués. The irony of the terror attacks in Paris is that the carefully timed actions may actually provide the stimulant for the major players involved in the conflict to come to an agreement that could begin to make headway to resolve the crisis in Syria and

potentially entail the destruction of Daesh. However, the reality on the ground means that the options open to the leaders at the G20 are limited, in no small part due to their own actions surrounding the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

The background to the on-going civil war in Syria paints a bleak picture for the prospects for change in the region. With over 100,000 and counting killed and more than four million displaced both internally and throughout the region, the magnitude of the crisis is almost impossible to comprehend. Whilst the focus of the summit has shifted from an economic growth agenda to a more short-term crisis response, the links between the destabilising effect of the conflict in Syria and the attacks in Paris, claimed by Daesh, are clear. A brief but impromptu side meeting between President Obama and

President Putin on the first day of the Summit has fuelled the media speculation of a potential agreement on moves towards a resolution of the conflict in Syria. This has been reinforced by Prime Minister Cameron's rhetoric that the Western powers would no longer let the topic of Assad remaining in power dominate their thinking on the conflict. This volte-face in policy can be directly related to the attacks in Paris and the recognition by Western leaders that there will be no solution to the conflict without making an accommodation to Russian and Putin's interests.

Moreover, the escalation of the conflict in Syria by direct Russian military involvement has complicated an already distinctly chaotic situation for Western powers that have backed the removal of Assad from power and pursued a policy of Daesh containment, not destruction. Whilst Putin has ordered airstrikes against Daesh in some areas of Syria, they remain largely symbolic cover for the intended effort at propping up pro-government forces that are battling opposition groups throughout Syria. This complication has

been one of the overriding factors that have forced Prime Minister Cameron to be unsure that he will be able to pass a motion calling for British air strikes in Syria through the House of Commons. Conservative backbench opposition to involvement in the deteriorating situation, with the potential for mistakes with Russian and British jets sharing the same airspace, has led to his reluctance to risk being defeated for a second time on military action.

In addition, Iranian military involvement both within Syria to support the Assad regime through military advisers and its Hezbollah proxy forces - combined with its direct military involvement in the fight against Daesh in Iraq - continues to prove a difficult scenario to balance for the Obama administration. With the administration's big foreign policy achievement riding upon the nuclear weapons deal with Iran, the scope for movement in weakening Iran's support for the Assad regime remains limited. The United States also continues to be restricted in its ability to control Gulf state influence in support of rebel groups within Syria. Although the administration has shown some ability to reign in the

movement of high end weaponry, such as anti-aircraft missiles from being shipped to rebel groups, it has not been able to restrict the flow of money or more conventional weaponry which continues to fuel the conflict.

In light of the French airstrikes against Daesh targets in Raqqa on Monday in response to the Paris attacks, it is easy for the media to speculate that there will be an escalation in the Western response to the conflict. The reality is that the Obama administration has no desire to be dragged deeper into another conflict in the Middle East and will therefore restrict actions to air strikes and special forces raids in a policy of Daesh containment. The change in tactics of Daesh and its affiliated groups, which have led to the attacks in Paris, the suicide bombing of a peace protest in Ankara, and the potential bombing of a Russian airliner, have meant that Western powers have begun to show a change in tactics in regards to dealing with the conflict that has spread beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq. But here again Western powers are limited in their capabilities to make realistic changes on

the ground. The most effective fighting force against Daesh to date has been the Kurdish Peshmerga forces both in Iraq and Syria. Not only have they managed to hold back the assaults by Daesh with the support of American air strikes, for example in the brutally contested border town of Kobane, they have also managed to [retake ground](#) from Daesh.

Whilst Kurdish forces have been provided with American support they have also been on the receiving end of air strikes by the American ally and G20 Summit host Turkey. The Turkish military offensive against the Turkey based Kurdish militant group the PKK, which has close links to the Peshmerga forces across the border, has been driven by domestic political considerations. President Erdogan has escalated the conflict in order to drive up support for his AKP party in the run up to the parliamentary elections. This was done in the beginning of November in an attempt to use fear of disorder and violence to gain a majority for the AKP in parliament. The Turkish air strikes against Kurdish forces inside Iraq and Syria has also been driven by a Turkish government fear

of a growing region along the Turkish border that is under the control of Kurdish forces, which it sees as posing a threat to Turkish power and security in the region – especially given potential calls for an independent Kurdish state that would encompass large swathes of the Turkish homeland. Erdogan’s push for ‘no-fly zones’ along the border to protect Syrian refugees is no more than a tool to hinder that growing control rather than a desire to protect civilians from Syrian government air strikes.

As a result, Turkey’s actions in the region continue to destabilise the very forces that have the potential to deal with the threat posed by Daesh. The United States after a long period of lobbying have been provided with access to Turkish airbases in order to allow more effective air strikes against Daesh forces, however the clear price that the United States had to pay for this access was the acknowledgement that they would not speak out against Turkish military action against the very forces they support in the Kurdish controlled areas of Syria and Iraq.

The irony of this situation should not be lost on anyone who listens to the rhetoric that emerges from the American administration surrounding its continued assertions that the only solution to Daesh is from local forces on the ground. Following the election result a fortnight ago it remains to be seen whether Erdogan will change direction in his campaign against Kurdish forces now that his party has a majority in the parliament. Recent military action against PKK forces has indicated otherwise, and having not gained enough seats to create a super-majority in the parliament in order to change the Turkish constitution to create a more executive Presidency with stronger powers, it seems likely that the military campaign will continue in order to garner further domestic support through the perceived need for a strong leader within Turkey.

As a consequence, Media [reports](#) that President Obama and President Putin have reached an agreement on the sidelines of the G20 Summit regarding a political transition mediated by the UN to try and solve the conflict in Syria have failed to

recognise the fundamental flaws in the agreement. Whilst UN mediation between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition sounds like an eminently sensible response on paper, the reality on the ground is it that there is no effective, homogenous, Syrian opposition. The opposition forces are as disparate and diverse as can be imagined. From Kurdish forces that are aiming to establish a separate state, to Islamist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra an Al-Qaeda affiliated group, from exiled powerbrokers who claim to represent the Syrian people, to more local militias who simply want to retain and extend their local monopolies over regional locations. President Putin will use this situation to Russia's advantage as the negotiation process will be drawn out to an unworkable extent via the almost impossible task of finding a group of representatives who can be said to speak for the Syrian people. This will be compounded by the fact that Western leaders have no clear answer to the question of who would replace Assad were he to step down. If the intention of the UN negotiations is for elections to determine a

transition in Syria, as President Obama made clear is the aim, it will be hard for him and other Western leaders to confidently say that this process will be achievable in a country so divided and ravaged by civil war.

At President Obama's press conference during the G20 he combined strong rhetoric about America's 'goal is to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL' while also repeating his assertion that escalating American intervention above what they were already doing was an unsustainable proposition. Although this may be disappointing news for President Hollande who today declared that France was at war, and ordered the deployment of an aircraft carrier to the gulf to increase attacks on Daesh, there is no mistaking the logic of President Obama's thinking. Escalating the conflict is playing directly into Daesh's narrative whereby the Western powers have begun treating them as if they are a state entity that has invaded another legitimate state. The belief that the American military could easily clear Mosul, Raqqa and Ramadi of ISIL elements isn't in question, but the question of what

happens next if you do not have a population who wants you to be there, or how you deal with the insurgent operations that would follow, makes it quite clear what the administration and its military advisers feel what the limits are to greater involvement.

There remains some promise of hope from the renewed cooperation between President Obama and President Putin following the G20 Summit side meeting. Whilst there are clearly flaws in the UN mediated solution, with President Obama himself stating that 'hopes have been dashed before' in regards to the conflict in Syria, it is progress of a kind. For both President Obama and Prime Minister Cameron to have begun to bend in their stance on the required removal of Assad from power, the geopolitical situation starts to become more fluid in the number of possibilities available. For President Putin, he remains Stoic in his defence of Russia's national interests in Syria and the

region, a position that is difficult to see him moving from. Only time will tell whether the negotiating process through the UN will provide a solution that is amenable to Putin, but it remains clear that he sees Daesh as just as much a threat to Russia as they are to Western powers, and will be reluctant to allow them the opportunity to take advantage of the power vacuum that would be created with the removal of Assad from power. The G20 leaders have made statements of unity in the fight against terrorism following the attacks in Paris, however there have been no concrete moves towards a united effort to change the situation on the ground. Instead the vortex of violence that has engulfed the region continues to spread, leaving the potential for change amongst the world leaders at the Summit an abject failure.

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