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## Overview

- US missile strikes in Syria exacerbated Russia-US tensions; US Secretary of State Tillerson's visit to Moscow effected a tenuous recovery.
- Efforts to resume implementation of the Minsk Agreements await decisive US push.
- EU High Representative Mogherini's visit to Moscow signalled a resumption of Russia-EU political dialogue after a 3-year freeze.
- US strikes posed new challenges for Russian operations in Syria.
- Russia took pole position in facilitating intra-Afghan dialogue, but differences with the United States may complicate the process.
- Japan PM's visit to Moscow sustained the momentum of Russia-Japan relations.

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## Russia & USA

The US Air Force strikes (59 Tomahawk missiles) on Syria's Al-Shayrat airbase in Homs province on April 7 diverted US-Russia relations into a rockier course than even in the last months of the Obama Administration. The strikes were in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons in a Syrian government airstrike (April 4) in Idlib province, which was apparently launched from Al-Shayrat base.

President Putin's spokesman immediately termed it as a violation of international law under a "trumped-up pretext". Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) said the strike had already been prepared in advance and was only awaiting a pretext – an inference also supported by the progressively hardening positions on Russia of US Secretary of State and Defence Secretary by end-March (described in our March Review).

Russia's Ministry of Defence said only 23 of the 59 missiles actually hit the target, and that the runway and operational Syrian aircraft were not hit. The Pentagon said 20% of the Syrian Air Force fleet had been taken out. Russia announced immediate suspension of the "de-confliction" arrangement and declared that it would enhance the air defence of all Syrian airbases.

A strongly-worded UNSC draft resolution co-sponsored by France, UK and USA, seeking an investigation of the chemical weapons use, was vetoed by Russia on the ground that it prejudices guilt by its intrusive demands for disclosures of Syrian military operations, while the rebel forces were only asked to permit delay-free and safe access to the site. Russia's argument that the chemical agents may have been stored by the militants was brushed aside. Subsequent research, including in the West, does seem to raise

some doubt about the “incontrovertible intelligence” of the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons; it did not divert allies from support of the US strikes. Even China, fresh from the Trump-Xi Summit and reluctant to jeopardize the gains from it, chose to abstain on a draft on which it would normally have voted with the Russians.

On the surface, US Secretary of State Tillerson’s visit to Moscow (April 12) reiterated the growing differences between Russia and USA, with Tillerson stating that bilateral relations were at an “all-time low” (a phrase repeated by President Trump shortly thereafter) and highlighting Russian meddling in the US Presidential elections (thereby criticizing the Russians for supporting his boss!). Foreign Minister Lavrov strongly reiterated Russian criticism of the Syrian missile strike and asserted that there was no real evidence of chemical weapons use by the Syrian Government.

However, some concrete progress was made: a two-hour meeting with President Putin obviously meant discussions on substantive matters; the “de-confliction” arrangement was renewed; and they agreed to set up a bilateral committee to resolve irritants in the relationship.

It is still too early to discern where the present confrontation with Russia will lead, given President Trump’s domestic pressures and external compulsions. An increasingly familiar tactic of the Trump Administration is to throw interlocutors (friends and adversaries alike) off-balance by contradictory statements (or tweets!) and actions, as a negotiating strategy to obtain the best deal. This is one possible explanation of recent US signals on Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan.

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## Ukraine

As described in our March review, US Secretary of State Tillerson “re-set” the Trump line on Ukraine at the NATO Foreign Ministers’ meeting on March 31, by supporting NATO sanctions and demanding Russian withdrawal from Crimea. However, the United States also moved to signal to Ukraine that this should not be seen as an opening to slacken on implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The US Ambassador to Ukraine warned Ukraine bluntly (April 6, in a speech on US policy towards Ukraine) that it would “lose the support of its Western partners” if it withdrew from the negotiations process. The implementation of the Minsk agreements remains deadlocked because of Russian and Ukrainian disagreement over sequencing of the political and military elements of the agreements. There are reports of impending significant cuts in US defence and civilian aid to Ukraine; it is not clear whether this is merely part of an overall cut in US overseas aid or is also meant to convey a signal. The leaders of the “Normandy Four” – Presidents of Russia & Ukraine, Chancellor of Germany and PM of France – had a telephone conversation on April 17, in which they reaffirmed their commitment to the security and the political settlement clauses of the Minsk Agreements.

Again, all parties await – in anticipation or apprehension – firm indication on whether the Trump Administration would follow his campaign line or his present aggressively confrontationalist policy on Russia.

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## Russia & Europe

As part of an intensifying engagement of European Union with Russia over the past few months, the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini visited Moscow on April 24. At her meeting and joint press conference with Russian FM Lavrov, both acknowledged continuing differences over Ukraine, Crimea and the chemical attacks in Syria, but emphasized a growing canvas of cooperation, including the recently recommenced counter-terrorism dialogue, cooperation in the Arctic and interactions in education and research. On Syria, the EU High Representative said EU & Russia could work closely together for a political solution, mentioning the “Astana process”, the UN-facilitated intra-Syrian talks and defeating Da’esh as shared interests. She identified other areas of common interest as Libya, the Israel-Palestine peace process (where EU and Russia are part of the Quartet), implementation of the Iran nuclear deal, denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and the peace process in Afghanistan.

The fact of this visit (the first by an EU High Representative to Russia since 2012) and its timing were

both significant, as was the non-confrontational tone adopted by both sides. However, it may be noted that the EU High Representative was not received by President Putin, though he was in Moscow on that day. President Putin does not normally receive visiting Foreign Ministers, but he had made an exception for Ms Mogherini, when she visited Moscow in 2014 as the Foreign Minister of Italy – since the Italian government and she personally were considered “friends” of Russia. It would appear that he chose not to make an exception on this occasion. In China also (which she visited a few days before Russia) President Xi Jinping did not receive her – she was received by PM Li Keqiang.

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## Russia & Syria

The US missile strike in Syria drastically disrupted the Russian game plan in Syria, including the fragile ceasefire brokered with Turkey and Iran and the “Astana process” of intra-Syrian dialogue. These developments had been helped by Trump campaign assertions, which instilled circumspection in various rebel groups and their sponsors. The about-turn from campaign positions released the groups from their caution. Turkey welcomed the US strike; President Erdogan got a further boost from a congratulatory telephone call from President Trump after the Turkish referendum. Turkish forces then went on a major offensive against Turkish Kurd PKK militia in north-eastern Syria and northern Iraq, causing some collateral damage to Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish militia. The Russian MFA spokeswoman deplored this action and Turkey’s backsliding on the “Astana process”, attributing both to the US missile strikes.

The presence of another important variable in the Syria equation was highlighted on April 27, when Israeli forces reportedly launched a missile strike near Damascus airport, apparently targeting a Hezbollah arms depot containing (allegedly) weaponry from Iran. Russia criticized this attack; however, given the deployment of advanced Russian air defence systems around Damascus airport, it is difficult to imagine Israeli forces venturing into this attack if they were not confident that the Russia-Israel de-confliction arrangements would hold.

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## Russia & Afghanistan

An international conference on Afghanistan hosted by Russia on April 14 was attended by representatives of India, Afghanistan, Central Asian Republics, Iran, Pakistan and China. The United States was conspicuous by its absence.

The conference expressed support for the Afghan government’s peace and reconciliation efforts. It appealed to the Taliban to abandon force and to contribute to national reconciliation through direct dialogue with the government. As per a Russian MFA press release, Russia offered to host future intra-Afghan talks and this was welcomed by all the participants. An Afghan MFA spokesman seemed to endorse this when he said in a press conference that Russia “has shown its willingness to host peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban”.

In an interview to a Central Asian TV channel, President Putin spelt out Russian perspectives on the Taliban: “many countries have contacts of one form or another with this organisation ... we always take the view that we must develop relations with all forces in Afghanistan based on three main principles: recognition of Afghanistan’s constitution, disarmament, and reaching full national accord”. Thus, Russia’s public stand on the Taliban now accords entirely with that of India, after some deviations in statements in end-2016.

However, US military officials in Afghanistan told the press that Russia had been supplying machine guns and other medium-weight weapons to Taliban over the past 18 months. Defence Secretary Mattis said the US would take it up with Russia. Russian FM Lavrov immediately refuted this allegation.

Since the standoff with the West commencing in 2014, Russia has increasingly viewed developments in Afghanistan through the prism of US (and the West’s) actions in that country and their implications for Russia’s security interests.

## Russia & Japan

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's visit to Moscow (April 27), barely four months after President Putin's visit to Japan in December 2016, underlined the continued momentum in Russia-Japan relations. The two leaders noted significant events since their last meeting, including the strategic dialogue, the "2+2" Defence and Foreign Ministers' meeting and the inter-governmental commission implementing priority projects of economic cooperation (see Review, December 2016). Japanese companies are responding to President Putin's invitation to invest in the Russian Far East, with benefits of tax holidays, simplified administrative procedures and Russian state financing of infrastructure modernisation. President Putin had suggested in December 2016 that a "peace treaty" settling the Kuril Islands dispute can only follow an effective confidence building exercise to create a conducive public opinion on both sides. In pursuance of this objective, the two leaders agreed to execute joint economic projects in the Southern Kurils and to facilitate a visit by former Japanese residents of the islands to family graves there.

While these are positive developments, the strategic issues involved in the Kuril Islands dispute should not be underestimated; they ensured that a settlement bilaterally agreed as far back as in 1956 was not implemented and was eventually repudiated.

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*(The views expressed are personal)*

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