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## OPINION (/OPINION), OP ED (/OPINION/OP-ED)



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## Foreign Pulse: In Syria, a Putin-Obama tango

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📷 Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama at United Nations headquarters (Photo: AP)

Truth is stranger than fiction. The complexity of world politics throws up surprising combinations. The teamwork between two unlikely bedfellows, Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama, to try and resolve the

grinding Syrian war is a prime example. Although the latest ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia and the US has unfortunately unravelled, such initiatives are positive omens because Mr Putin and Mr Obama are cooperating against the odds. Given the overall misgivings between Russia and the US on numerous fronts, why exactly are they essaying a puzzling tandem in Syria? Great powers do not view the entirety of their foreign relations in crude black and white or zero-sum game terms. They segment one issue from another and resort to quid pro quos that serve broader goals. Mr Putin was never interested in getting bogged down in endless war in Syria. To him, Syria was a test case of Russia's return as an acknowledged great power, which must be included at the high table as a decision-maker to resolve the crisis. Western attempts to exclude him and to impose a solution in Syria prompted him to intervene directly by inserting the Russian military and altering the local balance-of-power in favour of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Once the limited goal of shoring up the Syrian state apparatus from collapsing was achieved, Mr Putin hinted at withdrawing the Russian military and opened a more vigorous diplomatic track with Mr Obama. The strategy was to render Russia indispensable and then pursue a grand bargain with the Americans that would prove Mr Putin as Mr Obama's equal in stature and importance. To Mr Putin, who has been demonised in the West as a thug and a tyrant, what matters is not American love or praise but respect. He is now getting it, however grudgingly, in Syria. For Mr Obama, the Syrian war and the menace of the Islamic State (ISIS) that emanated from it are haunting phenomena as he winds up his presidency. A believer in diplomacy rather than military force, he is looking to salvage his legacy in the ashes of Syria through deals with Mr Putin that vindicate his policy approach of avoiding overseas military entanglements. Moreover, having made a bold diplomatic overture to Iran on its nuclear programme and sealed that deal, the American President is averse to blindly supporting Iran's prime rival, Saudi Arabia, which wants perennial war in Syria until Mr Assad is overthrown.

Mr Obama has overruled anti-Iranian and pro-Saudi conservative voices within the US establishment who argue that Tehran and its proxies like the Shia militant outfit Hezbollah pose a bigger threat to the US and Israel than ISIS. The pragmatic understanding Mr Obama struck with Mr Putin in 2013 to avert deploying the US military in a frontal attack on the Assad regime after its alleged use of chemical weapons indicated how he does not mind a duet with Mr Putin, notwithstanding anti-Russian hawks with Cold War instincts in the American administration and the "gaps of trust" with Russia that Mr Obama candidly admits. The Pentagon openly objected to the US coordinating militarily with Russia and has been overruled by Mr Obama. The intense engagement between US secretary of state John Kerry and the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov to pave the ground for a political transition in Syria is thus a product of political will from their respective bosses who have kept Cold War-remnant tendencies in check in Washington and Moscow.

Sadly, the crumbling of yet another Syrian ceasefire suggests that not all elements of this multi-dimensional war can be fixed by great power accords. There are local grievances relating to the dynastic rule of the Assad family, the domination of the state apparatus by the minority Alawite Shias, the self-determination ambitions of the Kurdish groups, and the alienation that Sunnis across the border in Iraq feel towards what they perceive to be an ethnically discriminatory regime in Baghdad. Syrians and Iraqis across ethnic lines are frustrated with endemic corruption, misgovernance and lack of personal security. The artificial nature of nation-state boundaries are under challenge not just by jihadists but ordinary civilians caught

in a war that respects no borders. None of these resentments can be satiated through a top-down deal hammered out by Russia and the US sitting in a backroom in Geneva. But if great powers act responsibly, stop further militarising heavily armed local actors, and restrain their proxies from extreme behaviour, they can constitute the necessary confidence-building prerequisites before longer-term peace and justice are addressed.

In the decade of the 1970s, the US and the Soviet Union undertook a spell of diplomatic détente and helped end or thaw some simmering proxy armed conflicts of that era. Parallels between Cold War détente and today's US-Russia engagement have limits. We are currently in a multipolar world where several regional hegemonies and powers are competing for influence and leverage. It takes more than a tango by Russia and the US to calm the Syrian imbroglio. Even if Iran's close ally Russia and the Saudi bosom ally US pair up, there is little sign of détente between Tehran and Riyadh, which are waging turf wars not just in Syria and Iraq but also in Yemen. Washington lacks the means to convince all anti-Assad armed groups to de-escalate.

Many of these rebels are out of American control and dance to the varied tunes of their paymasters in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE and Bahrain who detest Iran the most. Turkey, which has lately made up with Russia and Iran, is also not amenable to American diktats. A divided West Asia with clashing interests is fuelling the Syrian quagmire and undermining the best intentions of Mr Putin and Mr Obama. Still, if the outside principals — Russia and the US — display maturity, moderate their bilateral duelling, and consummate the tantalising prospect of jointly attacking ISIS, Al Nusra and other hardline jihadists, one can expect Arab, Persian and Turkish actors to redraw their plans and emerge in favour of peace. Unity at the pinnacle in international affairs matters as a signal to spoilers at the regional and local levels that their global backup systems are depleting or shifting priorities. Mr Obama and Mr Putin, who have no love lost between them, must continue demonstrating nobler purpose and sagacity which are the only ways forward for Syria's salvation.

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