A Win-Win For Assad

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The United States and Russia seem to be on a collision course in Syria, which is just fine for the regime in Damascus.

On Sunday, a U.S. Navy F/A-18E Super Hornet shot down a Syrian Su-22 fighter bomber that was conducting operations near positions held by the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces outside the besieged Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa. The shoot-down took place after repeated warnings for the Syrian aircraft to disengage, and the Coalition justified the action as being "in accordance with rules of engagement and in collective self-defense of Coalition partnered forces." The next day, a U.S. Air Force F-15E downed an Iranian-made Shahed 129 armed drone near the site of a U.S.-backed training base at al Tanf for rebels opposed to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

In response, the Russian defense ministry announced it was withdrawing from a previous agreement to deconflict flight operations over Syria and warned that "all flying objects, including planes and drones of the international coalition, detected west of the Euphrates will be followed by Russian air defense systems as targets." This was short of a threat to shoot down Coalition aircraft, but a clear warning that the possibility existed. In response, Australia announced it was suspending air operations against the Islamic State group in Syria as a precautionary measure.

These events underscore the increasing complexity of the conflict in Syria. The fighting in and around Raqqa involves the Syrian Army and allied Iranian-backed militias; the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and Coalition forces; Russian assets; and of course the beleaguered Islamic State group. As the Islamic State group continues to draw inward, the battlefield becomes more crowded, and each party to the conflict seeks to hold as much liberated ground as possible. This heightens the possibility of clashes between Syrian regime forces and rebel groups in the area, as well as increasing the risk of a confrontation between the United States and Russia.

Neither Washington nor Moscow benefit from the increase in hostilities. The White House has been working to deescalate the situation, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joe Dunford has expressed confidence that deconfliction protocols with Russia can be maintained. However, Assad remains the wild card in this tense situation. The shoot-down on Sunday took place after Syrian troops had attacked Syrian Democratic Forces fighters in the village of Ja'Din, southwest of Raqqa. The Syrian SU-22 conducted its bombing run despite warnings from the coalition and with the knowledge that U.S. aircraft were on the scene.

The virtual suicide mission was a win-win for Assad. Either the U.S. would hesitate to act, or it would take down the aircraft and increase U.S.-Russian tensions. This helps Assad because his endgame is not only defeating the Islamic State group but also reasserting regime control over the entire country. He cannot do this so long as Washington backs the various rebel factions that oppose him. The Syrian Democratic Forces, for example, are not only fighting the Islamic State group but also seeking to establish an autonomous or independent Kurdish semi-state, which is much more likely so long as the United States is part of the equation. But the Assad regime also knows it cannot drive the United States away on its own, which is where Russia comes in. Provoking a clash between Washington and Moscow will raise the cost for the Americans to remain in Syria, perhaps to the point where it is no longer worth the effort.

So Assad has every interest in continuing these provocative actions. He is telling the Russians, as the old saying goes, "Let's you and him fight." Hopefully the cooler heads in Moscow and Washington will prevail, and the focus will remain where it belongs: defeating the Islamic State.

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