



America Threatens a Protracted War, « Ground Operations » in Syria: Interview with Russia's Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev:

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Featured image: Russia's PM Dimitri Medvedev

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Syria

Isabelle Kumar: Many thanks for being with us on The Global Conversation. The issue of Syria is dominating the international agenda. But we feel we could be reaching the turning point yet it's unclear which way it is going to go. What do you think?

Dmitri Medvedev: You know, as I was heading to this conference, I had a feeling that the situation in this area is very complex and challenging because we have yet to come to an agreement with our colleagues and partners on key issues, including the creation of a possible coalition and military cooperation.

All interactions in this respect have been episodic so far. That said, I note that here, in Munich, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Secretary of State John Kerry, and other colleagues acting in various capacities later joined them. They agreed on what should be done in the short run. For this reason, I'm cautiously optimistic about the prospects for cooperation on this issue. Let me emphasise that this cooperation is critical, because unless we come together on this issue, there will be no end to the war in Syria, people will keep dying, the massive influx of refugees to Europe will continue, and Europe will have to deal with major challenges. Most importantly, we will be unable to overcome terrorism, which is a threat to the entire modern civilisation.

Isabelle Kumar: What precise military actions and other, in that case, is Russia prepared to take to help in this de-escalation of the [conflict in Syria](#)?

Dmitri Medvedev: Let me remind you the reasons behind Russia's involvement in Syria. The first reason that compelled Russia to take part in this campaign is the protection of national interests. There are many fighters in Syria who can go to Russia at any time and commit terrorist attacks there. There are thousands of them in Syria.

Second, there is a legal foundation in the form of the request by President al-Assad. We will therefore take these two factors into account in our military decisions and, obviously, the developments in the situation. What matters most at this point is to agree on launching the

talks between all the parties to the Syrian conflict. Another important thing is to coordinate a list of terrorist groups, since this issue has been a matter of endless debates on who's good and who's bad. This is the first point I wanted to make.

My second point is the following. I learned that Secretary of State John Kerry said that if Russia and Iran do not help, the US will be ready to join other countries in carrying out a ground operation. These are futile words, he should not have said that for a simple reason: if all he wants is a protracted war, he can carry out ground operations and anything else. But don't try to frighten anyone. Agreements should be reached along the same lines as Mr Kerry's conversations with Mr Lavrov, instead of saying that if something goes wrong, other Arab countries and the US will carry out a ground operation.

I've answered this question only recently. But let me reiterate that no one is interested in a new war, and a ground operation is a full-fledged, long war. We must bear this in mind.

“We want sound, advanced relations both with the United States and the European Union”

Assad's future

Isabelle Kumar: Clearly, one of the key issues is the future of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Will Russia continue to support him at this crucial moment in time?

Dmitri Medvedev: Russia does not support President al-Assad personally, but maintains friendly relations with Syria as a country. These ties were built not under Bashar al-Assad, but back when his father, Hafez al-Assad, became president. This is my first point in this respect.

Second, we have never said that this is the main issue for us in this process. We simply believe that there is currently no other legitimate authority in Syria apart from Bashar al-Assad. He is the incumbent president, whether anyone likes it or not. Taking him out of this equation would lead to chaos. We have seen that on numerous occasions in the Middle East, when countries simply fell apart, as it happened with Libya, for example.

It is for that reason that he should take part in all the procedures and processes, but it should be up to the Syrian people to decide his destiny.

Syria's future

Isabelle Kumar: Are you therefore already working on ideas of political transition now in Syria?

Dmitri Medvedev: I don't think that we should go into too much detail on these issues. I'm talking about Russia, the [European Union](#) and the United States. We should focus on facilitating the launch of this process. We must make sure that everyone sits down at the negotiating table, in fact, make them talk to each other. Let's be honest and recognise that it will be anything but simple given the parties involved. On one side, you have President al-Assad, supported by a part of society and the military, and, on the other side, the other part of society, often representing different confessions, people who don't like al-Assad but have to sit with him at the same negotiating table. Nevertheless, they need to come to an agreement for the sake of keeping Syria united.

Ukraine crisis

Isabelle Kumar: I'd like now to switch focus and look at the conflict in Ukraine. We talk of the frozen conflict there with, it appears, renewed fighting in the east. What can Russia do to bring about the thaw in that conflict, to bring an end to this conflict?

Dmitri Medvedev: Well, understandably, the answer here is somewhat easier than in Syria's case. It is not just because this conflict is not as brutal, but because there is a clear understanding of how to move forward - by implementing the Minsk Agreements.

They should be implemented fully and in their entirety by all the parties. In fact, Russia calls on all the parties to do so, both those in power in the southeast, and the Kiev authorities. It is not a matter of Russia having some disagreements with Kiev or mutual dislike.

It would be fair to say that most of the provisions that were the responsibility of southeast Ukraine have been fulfilled. Most importantly, hostilities have ceased almost completely. Unfortunately, some action takes place from time to time, but not often. Finding political and legal solutions in keeping with the Minsk Agreements has now become vital. Whose responsibility is it? Of course, it is Ukraine's responsibility. If Ukraine regards the southeast as part of its territory, it is within the jurisdiction, competence and authority of the President, Parliament and Government of Ukraine.

Isabelle Kumar: If you meet President Poroshenko here, at the Munich security conference, what will you say to him?

Dmitri Medvedev: I haven't seen him and, to be honest, I haven't missed him. President Poroshenko is in contact with President Putin. There is no doubt that the main thing my colleagues should undertake is to do everything it takes to implement the Minsk Agreements. It would benefit them, as well as the Ukrainian state, which, no matter what anyone says, is a close, neighbouring country for Russia.

Crimea

Isabelle Kumar: Obviously, one of the major sticking points in this, for Ukraine, but also for the international community, is Crimea. Is the future of Crimea up for negotiation?

Dmitri Medvedev: No, there is no such issue for Russia. This issue was settled once and for all. Crimea is part of Russia. A referendum was held there, we amended the constitution. The Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol are part of the Russian Federation.

Russia's relations with the world

Isabelle Kumar: So the conflict in Syria, the situation in Ukraine has contributed to a real degradation of relations with Russia, with the EU and the US. Do you think a reset is possible?

Dmitri Medvedev: The question is how and for whose sake. If something is to be reset, it should be done on a fundamentally different basis. What kind of basis? Equitable, fair, solid basis for relations, considering that Russia is not the only nation that needs this - the European Union and the United States need it as well. We want sound, advanced relations both with the United States and the European Union.

The European Union is our most important trade partner, a group of countries located on the same continent as us, so we are bound by our shared European identity, history and values. These continuing tensions aren't doing us any good. But if we are told that they no longer want us around, of course, the first steps towards reconciliation should be taken by those who initiated the alienation. As for us, we are ready to discuss any issues.

Russia's economy

Isabelle Kumar: Well, one of the repercussions of the souring of relations has been the sanctions that have been imposed on Russia, which are hitting hard. How much of a priority is it for your government to get those sanctions lifted?

Dmitri Medvedev: They told us we were the bad guys and had to be punished. And then they made some calculations and began to weep: it turns out that for some reason it was hitting their own business.

We had a trade turnover with the European Union at 450 billion euros. It was 450 billion! Now it is down to 217 billion euros. Why don't they ask the people in the EU who are employed by the various companies that used to make products for Russia – how do they like all of this?

Again, we are not the ones who started this, so it is not up to us to undo it. They have always been trying to intimidate us with some sanctions, which were introduced even in the Soviet period, many times. It never brought them anything but lost profits. What is happening now is no different. They will have to have the courage to say, guys, we'll just scrap all this from day X, and could you please reciprocate by lifting your response measures as well. That would be the right approach.

Isabelle Kumar: So how are ordinary Russians feeling this economic crisis? Because the sanctions are contributing towards this, the falling oil prices are also contributing to this. What's it like for ordinary Russians?

Dmitri Medvedev: Indeed, we aren't in the best economic situation right now, with the dramatic fall in oil prices probably contributing the most to the overall state of the economy, to the decline in revenues. This is something we haven't seen for 17 years. The current prices are comparable to those in 1998. Unfortunately, our budget remains very dependent on oil prices. Although the structure of revenues has been improving, in terms of the share of oil and other sources, but yes, it remains commodity-dependent to a great extent. This could not but affect the incomes and the general standing of our people with their jobs and their real incomes.

The sanctions have had some effect as well. This is obvious, since some of our companies, for example, lost the financing they used to have from European banks, which means they cannot grow, some of them anyway. Therefore, in this sense, the economic situation is not the easiest. But there is also a positive effect. The economy is healing, it is becoming less dependent on oil, and we have an opportunity to develop our own industry and agriculture.

Perhaps one of the advantages of these sanctions and our response measures is that we started concentrating harder on domestic agriculture, so, to a large extent, we are now satisfying our demand for food, while wheat, for example, is now exported in large quantities. In this sense, the sanctions have helped. But they probably didn't help farmers in

the European Union.

Isabelle Kumar: I was asking about the ordinary Russians and how this was affecting them. And we hear of possible social unrest as their lives become more and more difficult in Russia. Is that something you are concerned about?

Dmitri Medvedev: Of course, the government must first of all think about the social impact of economic changes and the economic situation. Frankly, we have been compelled to cut budget spending in many areas, but we never touched social spending, or the public sector wages and benefits.

Moreover, we even indexed pensions last year, and this year, too, maybe not completely, but we did. We will try to continue doing this in the future. That is, the government's social spending is large, but it is inviolable. In this sense, we will try to do everything towards Russian citizens' social wellbeing, to keep them as comfortable as possible under these conditions. It is truly a priority for the government.

Russia's human rights record

Isabelle Kumar: If we take an international perspective once again, a black mark on Russia's reputation is the issue of human rights and freedom of speech, which Russia seems to continually backslide on. Why is that?

Dmitri Medvedev: To be frank, we've always differed in our views on the situation with the freedom of expression and the media in Russia. We've often been criticised and we are still coming under criticism. We have our own position on the issue. Perhaps in Russia, the media are somewhat different, for example, from the European media.

There are historical differences and there are growth issues. I rarely watch TV or read newspapers in print and I receive virtually all of my information from the Internet. And over half of Russia's population does the same. As you know, on the Internet, there is no regulation in this sense. All points of view are represented there, including, to put it bluntly, even extremist ones. So I believe it's not serious to think that some people have no access to different kinds of information in today's global world.

Litvinenko enquiry

Isabelle Kumar: Yes, but also it seems that dissidents are silenced. In Britain, as you know, there has been - the results of the inquiry into the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, which the inquiry said - it pointed the finger at President [Vladimir Putin](#), saying that it was likely that he ordered that murder. Will you be pursuing the British Government on this? There was talk of you suing the British Government over this inquiry.

Dmitri Medvedev: You've mentioned some report by some retired judge, in which practically every paragraph and each section opens with the word "probably". What is there to comment on? What is regrettable about this whole story is that the British Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary comment on a report that abounds in words like "probably".

This is reminiscent of a witch-hunt. When all is said and done, let it be on the conscience of the commentators. As for any legal action, this is simply ridiculous. We don't need this and the Russian Federation will never sue any country over some foolish fabrications or funny films.

Highlights

Isabelle Kumar: Finally, Mr Prime Minister, you've held the post of prime minister and also held the presidency, so you've got an overview, a full perspective of the issues we've been talking about, but if I were to ask you about one of the highlights of the your time in power, could you say what that's been?

Dmitri Medvedev: Well, there've been plenty. Both these posts are very serious and challenging. These eight years of my life - and it has been almost eight years - you know, it's this constant drive. As for events, there have been plenty, both in Russia - very good ones for me personally, notable, major, and sometime tragic events, like the ones we've been talking about now, and international events.

After all, we have not only argued and quarrelled. We've also accomplished a thing or two. For example, at some point we agreed on a New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. That was not bad at all. The document was signed. It is in force. It is being implemented and therefore we can work together and agree on different things. There have been contacts with my colleagues, including here in Germany, as well as in other European countries. We have dealt with a lot of issues. All of this is remarkable and exciting. Maybe one day I'll talk about this in detail. For the time being I continue working and this work is interesting.

Prime Minister, many thanks for joining us.

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