Earlier this month, an American tourist in Iceland tapped the wrong address into his car's GPS system and instead of driving to his hotel in Reykjavik, he drove from one side of the country to the other — without noticing he was going in the wrong direction. Indeed, all the signposts were telling him that his real destination was somewhere back the other way, but he ignored them, kept on driving — and ultimately ended up somewhere that he had never intended on going. That may now be where the United States is headed; not to a remote town in Iceland, but to a confrontation between NATO and Russia over its refusal to read the signposts and turn back before it was too late. The list of things the Obama administration failed to anticipate about the Syria crisis is not short. First, they failed to see how difficult it would be to break the Syrian Arab Army, consistently and wrongly assuming that their ultimate goal — the toppling of Bashar al-Assad — was just around the corner. Next, they failed to see how serious Russia was about keeping the Syrian state intact and were thrown for a loop when Moscow intervened in the conflict, derailing long-held plans for regime change. Then, they failed to see how turning a blind eye to Turkey’s motivations on the Syrian border would bring not only various US-backed groups into direct confrontation with each other, but would actually create the conditions for a direct confrontation between Russia and a NATO member state. Obama clung to the mantra ‘Assad must go’ while the house was burning down, and in doing so, prolonged the suffering of the Syrian people. After backing radical Islamist groups and illegally bombing the country for more than a year to no avail, his administration steadfastly refused to cooperate fully with Russia to solve the crisis. Instead, it partnered with states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both of which are inarguably interested in the total collapse of the Syrian government — an event which would plunge the country into even deeper chaos, destroying the secularism that held it together and ultimately paving the way for an Islamist regime to take control.

Institutional hatred of Russia prolonged Syrians’ suffering

It’s not that there weren’t plenty of opportunities when the US could have changed course. Military men, academics, historians, journalists — even the CIA, according to some reports — were warning the White House it was on the wrong track, fighting a losing battle — and yet the administration stuck with a policy which may have done more to benefit radical Islamists than anyone else. Why? Ask the State Department and they’ll tell you they are on a humanitarian mission to save the Syrian people from Assad, that his government has lost legitimacy, that until he goes there can be no peace, that the so-called “moderate” opposition groups must be part of a solution — and so on. That all sounds lovely, but here’s another theory: Maybe it’s just never okay to be on the same side as Russia. Could that be why the US refused to change tack in the face of so much empirical evidence that their strategy was not working? Is there some element to this that is simply about saving face? Washington’s historic hatred of Russia has meant that from the very beginning of its intervention in Syria, there was nothing Moscow could do that the US would accept. It was simply inconceivable that Russia could be labelled anything other than a dangerous irritant. This narrative was important to maintain, particularly given that the State Department had spent the two years prior demonizing Moscow and drilling away at any semblance of a working relationship that remained between the two powers. Such behaviour has proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is Washington stuck in a Cold War mindset, not Moscow. When Russia asked for an international coalition to fight ISIS, Washington didn’t want to know. Even after the Paris attacks last November, when European rhetoric softened on Assad, still the White House prioritized information war against Moscow over solutions to the crisis. For Washington, it was more important to prove that Russian bombing was ‘exacerbating’ the refugee crisis and that Russia was ‘not really’ fighting terrorists than it was
to critically reevaluate US strategy. The White House was so reluctant to budge, that according to one bombshell report by veteran reporter Seymour Hersh, the Joint Chiefs of Staff — believing that the administration was fixated on Vladimir Putin and “captive to Cold War thinking” — actually went behind Obama’s back to provide Assad with intelligence via Russia, Germany and Israel, which would help him push back ISIS and Al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda.

Where are we now?

While the US has backed itself into a corner, Russia’s strategy has remained consistent and borne fruit. It is Moscow’s intervention that has been decisive and “irreversibly changed” the military dynamic, causing both ISIS and other jihadist groups to lose ground. With Russia’s aid, the Syrian Arab Army has proved itself to be the only fighting force on the ground or otherwise that can defeat ISIS. The problem is, that if the US was ever serious about defeating ISIS, it must now be realizing that it partnered with players who were less concerned by head-chopping terrorists and more concerned with own their regional interests — some of which just so happen to coincide with ISIS interests. Turkey’s latest gamble — firing across its border at the Syrian Kurdish YPG — has exposed the true absurdity of Washington’s actions in Syria. Here we have the American-backed Kurds fighting American-backed jihadists all the while being shelled by American-backed NATO member, Turkey. You could not make it up if you tried. This is an almost incomprehensible state of affairs — and incredibly dangerous. If Turkey, emboldened further by Washington’s tacit or explicit approval, steps up its campaign against the Kurds in Syria, potentially even going so far as a ground invasion with Saudi Arabia — there is no telling where this conflict will end. Such an action would lead NATO state Turkey into direct military confrontation with Russia inside Syria. Then, all bets are off.

Malevolence or incompetence?

There are generally two competing opinions among the harsher critics of US foreign policy. The first, is that Washington has knowingly and deliberately tried to destabilize the Middle East over the course of decades, that its motives are almost entirely malevolent. The second, argues that the various crises in which the US finds itself entangled are the result of foreign policy and diplomatic incompetence — a “loss of strategic direction,” as Sergei Karaganov, former foreign policy advisor to Putin has politely put it. Of course, it’s nearly impossible to decipher which side is right and which is wrong — in reality, it’s probably a bit of both, depending on which administration you are dealing with — but watching Obama’s White House as it tries to haplessly scramble to maintain some semblance of control over the Syria crisis, it would be hard to believe that the world has been dragged to this dangerous precipice by some cunning Machiavellian strategist.

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