



## PERSPECTIVES

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### **Free-Riding Allies are Painful. Free-Riding Enemies are Sheer Folly**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The victors in Syria and Iraq – Russia, Iran, Syria, and Turkey – met in Sochi for a conference last week to discuss a peaceful conclusion to the Syrian civil war. The loser in Syria and Iraq – the US – was conspicuously absent. The Americans' adversaries were the beneficiaries of their own campaign against ISIS. Instead of the sheer folly of watching enemies free-ride on US might, the US should have exhausted Iran and Russia in the process of defeating ISIS.

The victors in Syria and Iraq met last week in Sochi, the Russian equivalent of Camp David, to discuss the wrapping up of the Syrian civil war. Putin was host to President Erdoğan of Turkey and President Rouhani of Iran.

On the agenda was how to divide the spoils.

The US, the loser in Syria and Iraq, was not invited, for the obvious reason that the division of the spoils is intended to be at the expense of the US and its allies.

Of course, there is nothing fatal about a world power losing. The US lost in Vietnam, with many a pen eulogizing American might at the time. The demise of the Soviet Union nearly a generation later was solid proof that they were wrong.

Yet there is a major difference between American losses of the past and the losses it is encountering in Syria and Iraq in the face of gains made by its foes and adversaries. In Vietnam, the US lost in a fight against the enemy, however erroneous the domino theory leading to the war against Communism may have been. In Syria and Iraq, the US has actively helped its

own adversaries. They won by free-riding on the might of the US in its misguided war against ISIS.

The US spent billions training and arming the Iraqi federal army and bombing ISIS terrorists – while Iran concentrated on strengthening Iraqi militias to ensure Iranian control over the Iraqi state. The US armed the Syrian Kurds to blow back ISIS terrorists in eastern Syria, only to allow Assad and Hezbollah forces to team up with Iraqi militias moving from the south to recreate the Shiite crescent (which the rise of ISIS had temporarily destroyed). It was US air force intervention in Iraq and Syria, the first major US air campaign since the rise of Putin (the campaign in Libya was on a much smaller scale and run mostly by European states), that prodded Russia to do the same.

Yet Russia, by bombing Sunni insurgents, was doing so to benefit its allies and harm its Sunni enemy insurgents (of whom many hailed from the Caucasus). The US air campaign had the same effect, only the beneficiaries were the adversaries of the US, not its friends.

In short, it was the first time in US history that it was not only its allies free-riding on American might, but its adversaries as well. That US allies – the Europeans, Japan, and South Korea – free-ride on American might is economically painful. That the US allows enemies to do so is sheer folly.

In this sense Trump is no different from Obama. Both were blinded by the fight against ISIS into downplaying American vital interests in the area – ensuring oil and gas flows, containing Russia and Iran, and most important, bolstering local allies.

Instead of allowing its enemies to make gains by free-riding on American might, the US should have turned the tables by free-riding at the expense of Russian and Iranian interests in their resolve to destroy ISIS. ISIS was a far greater threat to Moscow and Tehran than it was to Washington. They would have destroyed the organization at the exhaustive cost of their own treasure and blood, which is what you want your adversaries to experience.

The US could have made do with its highly effective homeland security apparatus to effectively deal with the adverse effects of ISIS. After all, despite the group's dramatic rise and the subsequent increase in Islamic terrorism in Europe and the US, its dimensions in no way threatened the national security of the US or its European allies, or had any effect on their economies. The total number of American deaths as a result of jihadism since 9/11 adds up to 85, less than the number of homicides annually in Washington DC alone. All the jihadist attackers were home-grown individuals who carried out their attacks without the help of jihadists abroad.

All global powers, as Yale historian Paul Kennedy has eloquently argued, must sometimes temporarily retrench their commitments to their allies to sustain their strength. It is logical, then, that Trump calls upon the Europeans to beef up their militaries at their own expense in the face of a pugnacious Russia and that Japan do likewise against a more formidable and assertive China.

To commit treasure and firepower on behalf of one's enemies is unpardonable, yet that is the story of US involvement in Syria and Iraq.

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