



Syria bombing risks a deadly escalation of conflict

Diplomacy, not weapons, the key to lasting peace

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US and Australian involvement in Syria has the potential to escalate into a conflict between nuclear powers, Michael Cornish writes.

When as many as 90 Syrian Government soldiers were killed by US, British, Danish, and Australian warplanes that attacked the Deir ez-Zor airport on 17 September, a few Australians were outraged, most Australians did not care, and I, very quietly, just held my breath.

I held my breath because US and Australian involvement in Syria creates the potential for the conflict to escalate. I have previously [argued](#) on both moral and practical grounds that Australia should not be at war in Syria, pointing out that “we may decry Russia’s support for al-Assad’s murderous regime, but the deadlock in the Security Council is putting the brakes on global escalation and the possibility, accidental or intended, of military confrontation between the great powers.”

Thankfully, there was no confrontation between Russia and the West that day in September, and I exhaled slowly in relief. Yet the potential for such conflict remains.

The US-led attack on Syrian Government forces at Deir es-Zor was the second of two potential flashpoints for a major escalation between a nuclear-armed Russia and the nuclear-armed West. The first was the downing of a Russian bomber near the Syrian-Turkish border by a Turkish warplane, indirectly leading to the deaths of two Russian servicemen. For a brief window of time, the possibility of escalation between NATO – of which Turkey is a member – and Russia seemed all too real a possibility.

The current situation in Syria is, as ever, very complex. Put simply, the Russians

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are supporting Syrian Government forces against ISIS, a wide range of rebel groups, and the Kurds; whereas the US-led Coalition is supporting the moderate rebels and the Kurds against ISIS.

For the West, Syria is akin to the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by what was then the USSR, or the Hungarian uprising in 1956. Confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia is not just inadvisable, but outright dangerous for the world. Any direct attack – whether accidental or intentional – on Russian or Syrian Government forces seriously risks escalating conflict with Russia.

To be clear – Syria is not a Cuban Missile Crisis-type situation, where the very survival of the free world is at stake. But the possibility of nuclear war, however small, is not to be shrugged off lightly. By some estimates, even a small-to-medium sized nuclear confrontation would see a nuclear winter that would destroy global agricultural production and wipe out most – if not all – of humanity. This is serious stuff.

If the West is to continue its military involvement in Syria at all – and I have grave reservations about any meaningful military involvement – the appropriate response is to support proxies, rather than to conduct large-scale military operations in the same battle space and risk an outright confrontation between nuclear-armed powers.

The counterargument is that the West is increasingly impotent against an emboldened Russia. Russia [allegedly engaged in cyber-attacks on Estonia](#) in 2007, it invaded Georgia in 2008, annexed Crimea and sent troops into eastern Ukraine in 2014, and has been bombing Syrian rebels since 2015.

So the sense that 'the West must do something' is completely reasonable. The West should maintain sanctions on Russia, and work constructively and creatively on peace-building and diplomacy. It is not enough to say that our diplomatic efforts thus far have failed and that deadly force is, therefore, the answer. We must renew our diplomatic efforts, and keep trying. We have already come close several times to a lasting ceasefire in Syria. We just have to keep on trying until we secure it.

ISIS is a murderous and totalitarian force that must be stopped. The Syrian Government is similarly culpable of mass war crimes and crimes against humanity. Most of the world desperately wants the suffering caused by the Syrian conflict to end. However, risking Armageddon on the hope that the West does not make any further mistakes or is better at brinkmanship than Russia, is just rolling the nuclear dice for humanity.

Michael Cornish is a Senior Policy Adviser to Ms Rebekha Sharkie MP. The views in this article are his own and do not reflect that of the Nick Xenophon Party.