
Putin's Power Play in Syria

How to Respond to Russia's Intervention

Angela Stent

At the end of September, Russia began conducting air strikes in Syria, ostensibly to combat terrorist groups. The strikes constitute Russia's biggest intervention in the Middle East in decades. Its unanticipated military foray into Syria has transformed the civil war there into a proxy U.S.-Russian conflict and has raised the stakes in the ongoing standoff between Moscow and Washington. It has also succeeded in diverting attention away from Russia's destabilization of Ukraine, making it impossible for the West to continue to isolate the Kremlin. Russia is now a player in the Syrian crisis, and the United States will have to find a way to deal with it.

Once again, Washington has been caught off-guard, just as it was in March 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began supporting pro-Russian separatists fighting Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine. For all of Russia's domestic problems—a shrinking economy, a declining population, and high rates of capital flight and brain drain—it has projected a surprising amount of power not only in its neighborhood but also beyond. U.S. President Barack Obama may refer to Russia as a regional power, but Russia's military intervention in Syria demonstrates that it once again intends to be accepted as a global actor and play a part in every major international decision. This will be a vexing challenge not only for Obama during his remaining time in office but also for the next occupant of the White House.

Why has Washington been so slow to grasp the new Russian reality? Russian President Vladimir Putin has not kept his agenda a secret. In February 2007, for example, he delivered a scathing critique of U.S.

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foreign policy at the Munich Security Conference. “One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way,” he warned. Countless times since, Russia has vowed to replace what it sees as a coercive U.S.-led global order with one in which the West respects Russia’s interests. In retrospect, Russia’s war with Georgia in August 2008 signaled Moscow’s willingness to use force to prevent its neighbors from drifting toward the West and to reassert its influence in areas that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. But the United States and its allies have repeatedly underestimated Russia’s determination to revise the global order that Moscow feels the West has imposed on Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union.

As the United States gears up for the 2016 presidential election, it faces two central challenges in deciding how to deal with Russia. First, it needs to determine the nature of Russia’s objectives in Syria and Ukraine. Second, because Russia depends on a highly personalized political system, Obama and his would-be successors need to decide how to manage relations with Putin, an especially difficult task given the overwhelming pressure on the campaign trail to look tough. The evidence suggests that if the next president wants to engage with the Kremlin in a way that is consistent with U.S. interests, he or she should focus on concrete areas where the two countries can and must work together—particularly nuclear and conventional military issues. Continuing to isolate Russia is not likely to work. Instead, the next U.S. administration should clearly communicate to the Kremlin what American interests and values are and join with U.S. allies in resisting further Russian attempts to unravel the post-Cold War order.

INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Over the past quarter century, Moscow and Washington have worked together most successfully when Moscow has felt that it has been treated as an equal. This explains the success, for example, of U.S.-Russian arms control treaties, such as New START, which were designed to deal with the nuclear legacy of the Cold War. Similarly, although the negotiations were arduous and drawn out, Russia and the United States successfully worked together, alongside four other world powers, to reach a nuclear deal with Iran. Indeed, Putin earned rare praise from Obama for his role in securing the agreement.

Moscow and Washington have also been able to work together in instances in which they shared narrowly defined common interests. In the fall of 2001, for example, Russia aided the United States in its initial military campaign in Afghanistan, providing information and intelligence that contributed to the U.S. defeat of the Taliban. As Russia's former foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, subsequently explained, "We wanted an antiterrorist international coalition like the anti-Nazi coalition. This would be the basis for a new world order."

That rather lofty goal has remained predictably out of reach. And in fact, Russia and the United States have had difficulty maintaining their counterterrorist cooperation, largely because they often disagree on which groups to designate as terrorist organizations—a problem that has cropped up most recently in regard to the various Syrian opposition groups. Nevertheless, Russia and the United States have been able to cooperate on other security issues, working together in 2013, for example, to eliminate the Assad regime's stockpile of chemical weapons. In that instance, Russia took the initiative after the United States proved reluctant to act.

Cooperation has been least successful on issues involving Russia's neighboring states and the NATO alliance. It has become clear that despite the West's numerous efforts in the 1990s to reassure Russia that an enlarged NATO would not represent a threat to Moscow, the United States and its allies have been unable to create a post-Cold War security architecture in which Russia feels that it has a stake. Perhaps doing so would have been impossible, especially given Russia's belief in its right to a sphere of "privileged interests" in the post-Soviet space and its desire to limit its neighbors' sovereignty. The wars in Georgia and Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea have represented, in part, Russia's answer to its perceived exclusion from the post-Cold War European security order. The same sense of grievance explains Putin's ongoing push to establish a new arrangement among the great powers that would give Russia more leverage on matters of European security. Specifically, Putin seeks an agreement that would ensure that no additional post-Soviet states will join NATO.

PUTIN'S BIG MOVE

Putin's decision to intervene militarily in Syria is rooted in similar concerns about Russian power and influence. Russia has justified its foray into Syria as part of an effort to reduce terrorism by shoring up

the Assad regime, which by the summer of 2015 was facing military setbacks. As Putin said in October, "The collapse of Syria's official authorities will only mobilize terrorists. Right now, instead of undermining them, we must revive them, strengthening state institutions in the conflict zone." Although Moscow may not be wedded to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the long run, it is adamantly opposed to anything that would weaken the rule of secular strongmen in the Middle East—hence Putin's repeated denunciations of U.S. support for opposition forces during the Arab revolts of 2011 and his anger over the NATO military action against Libya that year, which led to the ouster of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. In Putin's eyes, the disorder in Iraq, Syria, and North Africa, combined with the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS), demonstrates the failure of the West to think through the consequences of undermining the authoritarian states in the region. Putin fears that chaos in the Middle East will strengthen Islamic extremism on Russia's borders, in the neighboring states of the former Soviet Union, and potentially in Russia itself.

The next U.S. president should not attempt another "reset" with Russia.

At the same time, Russia's actions are designed to guarantee that Moscow will have a decisive say in who rules Syria, even in a hypothetical post-Assad future. By using military force in Syria, Moscow is sending a message to other regional players: unlike the United States, Russia will support leaders and governments against popular uprisings and will not desert them when opposition groups attempt to seize control, as the United States abandoned Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

The Syrian gambit is thus part of a broader move to recoup Russian influence in the Middle East. In the second half of 2015, the leaders of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates all visited Moscow, and some have signed agreements to purchase arms from Russia. In July, Saudi Arabia pledged to invest up to \$10 billion in Russia, mostly in agricultural projects; if Riyadh delivers on that promise, it will be the single largest foreign investment in the country. Israel and Russia have maintained a steady dialogue as the crisis has progressed in Syria, partly to ensure that Russian aircraft don't clash with the Israeli jets that have occasionally struck

targets in Syria, including those associated with the Lebanon-based militant group Hezbollah, which has sent thousands of fighters to Syria to aid the Assad regime. Although the Israelis have no particular affection for Assad, they seem to share Russia's preference that his regime stay in place, because what comes after Assad could be more detrimental to Israel's security: Israeli officials have quietly pointed out that under Assad's rule, Israel's border with Syria has been calm.

Domestic political factors also contribute to Putin's calculations. The sanctions that the United States and the EU levied against Russia after its annexation of Crimea have hit hard, especially when combined

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with the global fall in oil prices and preexisting structural problems in the Russian economy. The Kremlin has sought relief by "freezing" the conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine—a cease-fire between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists has been in force since early September, and both sides have pulled back some of their

heavy weaponry, although sporadic reports of fighting have surfaced since then. Putin has calculated that the cease-fire and the decision by pro-Russian separatists to postpone local elections in eastern Ukraine may lead to the partial lifting of EU sanctions. Moreover, by making the Ukraine crisis appear to be headed toward resolution, Russia intends to shift the focus from its role as an instigator of conflict to its new role in Syria as a responsible leader in the global campaign against terrorism.

Russia has presented its intervention in Syria as a counterterrorist operation that will reduce the number of refugees leaving Syria for Europe. But Moscow's policy could have the opposite effect. In fact, by November, there had already been a 26 percent increase in the number of Syrian refugees, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, further exacerbating Europe's migrant crisis. The Russian bombing campaign may have contributed to the upsurge in refugees. Moreover, Russian air strikes in support of the Alawite-led Assad government—which Sunni extremists consider to be an apostate regime—may both encourage more Russians to join ISIS (more than 4,000 people from Russia and Central Asia have already done so) and further alienate Russia's own Sunni population, which numbers about 20 million. Putin has insisted that Russia has no



From Russia with love: after a Russian air strike in Aleppo, November 2015

interest in taking sides in a sectarian dispute and is merely fighting extremism, but this may be a hard sell domestically, as some Russian Muslims question Russia's support of a regime that bombs its Sunni population. And Russia has not acknowledged that the Assad regime's brutal treatment of its own population is a recruiting tool for ISIS.

Putin's intervention in Syria has sent a mixed message. On the one hand, he has blamed the United States for creating the conditions that allowed ISIS to emerge; on the other, he has offered to join the United States in an anti-ISIS coalition. In remarks last October, Putin said, "Syria can become a model for partnership in the name of common interests, resolving problems that affect everyone, and developing an effective risk-management system." Yet unlike in Afghanistan in 2001, Moscow and Washington do not agree on the identity of the enemy. Although they both see ISIS as a major threat, Russia has bombed Syrian opposition groups that the United States has supported, and Washington sees Assad's rule as a major part of the country's problems. Thanks to these differences, it will be difficult for Russia and the United States to work together in Syria.

Until recently, Washington's preferred policy was to avoid clashes in Syrian airspace, cautiously increase the presence of the U.S. military on the ground, observe Russian actions from the sidelines, and wait to see whether Russia would get pulled into a quagmire. But the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris may have changed Washington's calculations and given new impetus to joint U.S.-Russian efforts to deal with

Syria and ISIS. At the G-20 summit in Turkey soon after the attacks, Obama and Putin agreed to support a cease-fire in Syria and intensify diplomatic attempts to end the civil war. At the very least, Putin has succeeded in getting Washington to engage more closely with Russia and abandon policies aimed at isolating it.

If part of Putin's main goal in Syria is to force Washington to recognize Russia's importance in the Middle East, it is worth asking whether Putin sees that recognition as an end in itself or as an initial step toward a tripolar world in which China, Russia, and the United States make the major decisions—a cherished aspiration of some Russian pundits. On the other hand, although it is tempting to search for a broader strategy behind Russian military activity in Syria, it's quite possible that Putin charged into the conflict without thinking through the endgame.

GETTING REAL ABOUT RUSSIA

For the remainder of Obama's second term, tensions over Syria and Ukraine will dominate U.S.-Russian relations. The best that can be achieved in Ukraine in the near term is a "frozen conflict" in which the cease-fire holds even though Kiev remains unable to control the Donbas region and Russia continues to exercise influence there through its proxies. The most the United States is likely to do is continue its modest economic and political support for the Ukrainian government, which is struggling to address systemic problems of corruption and economic disorder. Although some in the U.S. government have argued for more economic and military assistance to Ukraine—including the provision of lethal defensive weapons—the White House has consistently refused to do this for fear of further provoking Russia, and it is unlikely to change its policy in 2016.

Meanwhile, it will be a continuing challenge for Moscow and Washington to work together in Syria to combat ISIS. But short of more robust and direct U.S. military engagement—for which there is little domestic support after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—Washington has limited options. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has spearheaded discussions with Russia and other key players, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, on how to end the Syrian civil war and transition away from an Assad-led government. Russia and the United States will continue to work together in this way, but securing agreement on a post-Assad Syria will be a major challenge. Direct military cooperation

in Syria is highly unlikely, meaning that there are few prospects for Russia and the United States to work together other than on making sure their respective military operations stay out of the other's way.

Even if the United States finds an effective way to respond to Russia's moves in Syria, or even cooperate with the Russians there, there is no guarantee that Putin won't try to assert Russia's military presence elsewhere: he has surprised the West twice in recent years and may yet have other ambitions. Iraq has hinted that it may ask Russia for help in fighting ISIS. When asked in October about whether Russia would intervene in Iraq, Putin replied that Russia had not yet received a request from Baghdad. Russia has also indicated that it will not stand by if the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates further, as this would threaten Russia's neighborhood by destabilizing Central Asia.

The next occupant of the White House will have to define U.S. interests in Syria and Ukraine; determine the extent to which Washington should counter destabilizing Russian moves in those countries and elsewhere; decide when and where the United States should cooperate with Russia; and consider, as U.S. options become more limited because of shrinking resources and public opinion, whether the West is ready to acknowledge that Moscow has in fact succeeded in modifying the rules of the game in its favor in both Syria and Ukraine.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, four U.S. presidents have tried to "reset" relations with Russia and find a more productive way to interact with Moscow, and each attempt has ultimately failed. Russia has not evolved in the way the West believed it would in the 1990s: the United States has to deal with the Russia that exists, not the one Americans might wish for. Indeed, for the foreseeable future, Washington should expect the U.S.-Russian relationship to be defined by tension and antagonism rather than cooperation.

The next U.S. president should not attempt another reset. He or she should work with Russia on issues on which Moscow and Washington share clearly delineated common goals, in Syria and elsewhere. Issues the two countries can work on together include keeping nuclear weapons from Iran and North Korea and managing emerging resource and security issues in the Arctic. But the next president should also clearly define and defend U.S. interests and accept that so long as the Kremlin continues to portray the United States as its main enemy, dedicated to weakening Russia and the primary source of all its troubles, common action on shared goals will be shaky and elusive. 🌐

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