

DEFENSE AND INTELLIGENCE

# The Meaning of Russia's Campaign in Syria

By **S.R. Covington**

Foreword by **Kevin Ryan**



HARVARD Kennedy School

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## Foreword

Stephen Covington explains the strategic and tactical reasons for Russia's deployment to Syria and helps the reader see the world through the eyes of President Putin and his advisors. Together with his earlier paper, "Putin's Choice for Russia," published with Belfer Center in August 2015, this paper provides the reader with the strategic threads that run through contemporary Russian geopolitics. His insights into Russian strategic thinking are based on years of study and practical experience with the Russian military and, his opinion matters as a person who advises NATO's senior military leaders on Alliance security and defense matters.

**BG Kevin Ryan** (U.S. Army retired),  
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## About the Author

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*A Russian Su-34 bomber takes off on a combat mission from Hemeimeem airbase in Syria, Saturday, November 7, 2015*

*Russian Ministry of Defense*

## Introduction

Russia's actions in Syria are designed to do more than prop up a teetering Assad regime and reassert Russian influence in the Middle East through the use of military power. Russia's President Putin is preserving the outposts of Russia's power, having learned the lesson from Mikhail Gorbachev, the last of the Soviet Cold War leaders, who did not defend or support the Soviet Union's allies during its transition, and ultimately lost them and his country. Putin is also opportunistically using Syria to double down in a broader, self-driven competition with Western powers. Putin is challenging Western countries that uphold a security system Russia sees as serving predominantly and disproportionately the interests of the U.S., and one Putin believes exists at the expense of Russia's security, and threatens Russia's future as a great, strategically competitive power. President Putin's aim is to create a new security system that ultimately places limits on Western institutions and US power in the 21st century, in particular, reducing the US role in key regional security arrangements and the global security system as a whole.

# The Meaning of Russia's Campaign in Syria

Russia's actions in Syria are designed to do more than prop up a teetering regime and reassert Russian influence in the Middle East through the use of military power. Russia's President Vladimir Putin is preserving the outposts of Russia's power, having learned the lesson from Mikhail Gorbachev, the last of the Soviet Cold War leaders, who did not defend or support the Soviet Union's allies during its transition, and ultimately lost them and his country. Putin is also opportunistically using Syria to double down in a broader, self-driven competition with Western powers. Putin is challenging Western countries that uphold a security system Russia sees as serving predominantly and disproportionately the interests of the U.S.. It is a system that Putin believes exists at the expense of Russia's security and threatens Russia's future as a great, strategically competitive power. President Putin's aim is to create a new security system that ultimately places limits on Western institutions and U.S. power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in particular, reducing the U.S. role in key regional security arrangements and the global security system as a whole.

For Russia, Syria represents part of the struggle against the security system that took shape at the end of the Cold War. In one way, Russia's deployment of military might to Syria is a tactical move to protect its client and ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad. Russia clearly is pursuing a campaign in Syria to destroy all of the regime's opponents, and sees protecting Assad as key to achieving its aims in the Syrian crisis. In another way, Russia's actions in Syria are designed to destabilize existing

security systems and networks, reconnect them with a different orientation, and restabilize them on different values, principles, and rules (or the absence of universal values, principles, and rules) that serve Russia's interests. Russia's campaign seeks to change 21<sup>st</sup> century systems and networks of security as much as to achieve geographic spheres of influence or control. Syria represents Russian opportunism at the grand strategic level—opportunism driven by perceptions of Russia's own grand vulnerability to national decline absent fundamental changes to the current regional and global security system. Putin believes the current security system is unjust and, most importantly in understanding Russia's future actions, he believes the system is vulnerable.

Syria represents Russian opportunism at the grand strategic level.

Putin's rationale for his campaign in Syria is similar to his motivation in the campaign against Ukraine. Russia's leadership places the blame for the conflict with Ukraine directly on the European security system, and U.S. leadership in the European system. In the same way, Putin claims that the security system that produced the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS does not work and is the main cause of the worsening civil war inside Syria. As is the case with Ukraine and Europe, Putin offers alternative approaches and arrangements for the Syrian crisis with different goals and different leading actors; notably Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah.

This Russian challenge to the West is very different from the Cold War. Russia's new policy is not in reaction to the policies of a single Western government or administration. Russia's challenge comes at a time when regional powers, smaller states,

and non-state actors are pursuing changes to security arrangements, rules, and principles in multiple places around the world. For some countries, the simple fact that more wealth exists outside U.S. borders than inside them raises questions about the vulnerability and sustainability of a U.S.-led international order fashioned at the end of World War II. These actors and rising powers are working with different methods, different means, and under different timetables, all of which whittle away the regional building blocks of the existing global security system. Putin's opportunism attempts to exploit these 'system change' actors without necessarily forming strategic partnerships or coordinating joint actions.

Russia's policy, timing, and tactics suggest a view from Moscow that as the sole remaining superpower, the United States faces enormous difficulties in financially sustaining the existing system against the accumulative weight and pressure from nations and non-state actors seeking changes to it. Russia's strategy is characterized by decisive, risk taking actions, using conflict to exploit perceived points of vulnerability in the system - all for immediate effect. Moscow's actions seek to 'spark' and accelerate change in the existing system, an acceleration that is fundamentally necessary because, time is not a strategic asset for Moscow. Therefore, Putin's policy accords the highest priority at this stage of the campaign to seizing initiative, maintaining critical momentum, and diversifying and expanding pressure on the current system to exploit vulnerabilities. Moscow is opportunistic on a strategic scale, and tactically deliberate inside this strategic framework - a framework that guides where, when, and how destabilization opportunities can be exploited for maximum effect and benefit and where, when, and how Western counter-moves can be best deflected and minimized.

Russia's leaders show no concern for the instability created by their actions because, that is the intent of the policy. Russia's actions today align with some very familiar political formulas concerning crisis and system change. As former Soviet leaders understood, the worst thing that can happen to a revolution is the loss of momentum - and Putin's actions reflect a commitment to sustaining pressure on the West by seizing and maintaining momentum in his campaign. That very same culture of political thought also held that crises in systems were characterized by sharpened and expanded contradictions that precede, as Lenin described it, the collapse of all that is rotten. For Moscow, the choice is between Russian inaction and the continuation of the existing security system or Russian action to destabilize the current system. As the last two years demonstrate, Putin has consistently chosen action to destabilize the current system over inaction that would preserve it.

Russia's deployments to Syria are Putin's "all in" statement and the subsequent Kalibr cruise missile launches in September are his "shock and awe" moment. Putin's actions in Syria, however, are ultimately misguided, desperate, and full of risks. Putin's typical approach to problems values strategic risk-taking and is intolerant of failure. Russia's actions in Syria make that already tough combination even more difficult to sustain. Russian combat operations outside the former Soviet space risk Putin's entire agenda, if the military fails and discredits Russia.

Putin's campaign to date has relied on an economy of effort and ambiguity to challenge a

**Russian combat operations outside the former Soviet space risk Putin's entire agenda, if the military fails and discredits Russia.**

stronger West. But in his Syrian gambit, he may have undermined both of these tactics. As we have witnessed with the bombing of the Russian airliner, Putin's policy has exposed Russia's vulnerability to extremism at home and abroad. His actions have put at risk Russia's internal stability and public support for his campaign. Putin's move in Syria also risks opening a second front of competition with the West when Russia's economic power and military strength are already stressed by an effort in Europe against Ukraine. Strikingly, Putin seems to have left himself no real exit strategy from Syria, or Ukraine, or the strategic competition he has initiated with the West – absent a reversal of his own policy aims. As a result, he has fewer choices and fewer means to achieve his strategic aims.

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While Putin's actions periodically steal a headline or momentarily seize the public's attention, he has adopted a strategically flawed policy, relying more and more on a military instrument that may not be able to achieve his aims on its own. The partnership of Russia, Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah as a means to resolve the crisis

in Syria and undermine the current U.S.-led security system is not a strategic alternative for the West, but it is Russia's only alternative. Similarly, the partnership between Russia and separatists in Eastern Ukraine is not acceptable for the West's vision of a Europe whole and free, but it has become Russia's only alternative to achieve its goals in the near abroad and to undermine the U.S.-dominated European security system.

Putin's decisions in Syria – as in Ukraine - reflect the priority Moscow attaches to changing the regional and global security system around Russia to avoid Russia's inevitable loss of great power status and Putin's loss of personal power at home. Russian actions in Syria have moved Moscow's broader strategic aims from the shadows into daylight. Moscow is deliberately testing the West to determine who will tire first in the contest between destabilizing or preserving the existing security system.

Observers in the West often conclude Putin does not have a strategic framework; that he is not a grand strategist but a master tactician. This conclusion is based on false assumptions and Western conceptual thinking. It does not appreciate how the Russian leadership actually thinks about the world around Russia or acts to secure Russia. Russian aims are not a secret. Two decades of trying to encourage Post-Soviet Russia to be a stable, strong, and critical part of the Post-Cold War security order makes it difficult for many Western observers to accept that Russia has shifted its policy from one seeking integration of post-Soviet Russia into the existing security system to one designed to challenge it. One thing should be clear, however: dismissing or rationalizing away Putin's aims, his framework, and strategies only sets in place the pre-conditions for future surprise.







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