

Putin's New York Times Blunder

By [Buck McKeon](#)

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In his much-discussed op-ed in The New York Times last week, President Vladimir Putin has made a curious case to the American people and the international community about the conflict in Syria. Using flowery language about internationalism, diplomacy and compassion, Putin made a few reasonable points, but by and large he drew entirely the wrong conclusions about the nature of the Syrian conflict and the lessons he should learn about the U.S. response.

Putin wryly characterizes his opposition to Western involvement in Syria as a benevolent appeal of empathy for the innocents and respect for international law. Putin has warned that the violence in Syria would be worsened by U.S. intervention. He humbly omitted Russia's role in that affair: in the millions of tons of equipment, ammunition and arms that he has sent to the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. These weapons have killed far more Syrians than chemical weapons. With more than 100,000 Syrian civilians killed, the blood of scores of innocents is on Putin's hands.

The readers of

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Putin speaks grandly on the importance of the United Nations and chides the U.S. for failing to seek UN Security Council authorization for humanitarian interventions. Of course, the U.S. has not been alone in seeking this authorization to deter the Assad regime — and other tyrannical regimes like it across the globe — from committing more crimes against humanity. It is Putin and his Chinese counterparts who have blocked this avenue. The world continues to wait for leadership from Putin or the Chinese Communist Party when it comes to human rights.

My suspicion is that Putin's sudden inspired confidence in the UN isn't so much warmhearted goodwill as it is a place where he has a veto over Western strategic interests. After all, I imagine the Security Council was as surprised as I was to see Putin's tanks rolling towards Tblisi, Georgia in 2008.

I acknowledge that U.S. humanitarian interventions are controversial and often unpopular. We have seen successes and failures. With that said, I welcome any humanitarian comparisons between the Western intervention in Libya and Putin's intervention in Chechnya.

To be fair, Putin did get one thing right. Neither the U.S. nor Russia is interested in seeing a fundamentalist Islamic state emerge from Syria. But with that said, he is spinning a tall tale that the American people don't buy and the international community shouldn't believe.

The Americans who read Putin's op-ed are not dupes. They are aware of the suppression of the Russian people, the intimidation of journalists and the wanton disregard for basic human rights. In addition, they are able to identify irony when they see it — particularly when it is Putin who is making a spontaneous appeal for humanitarianism and the observance of rule of law.

But it is difficult to overlook his glaringly obvious strategic aims. Putin is trying to achieve two simple objectives. First, he wants his puppet Assad to remain in power, and he wants the Russian Navy to have the ability to park their ships at the five heavy piers in Tartus, Syria. Second, Putin wants to mischaracterize the resolve and nature of Americans, suggesting that the U.S. is in decline and rules without a rudder.

Western intervention would likely mean a degradation of Assad's tools of terror. Putin knows that the U.S. may have its challenges, but we have no equal when it comes to destroying a dictator's tools of war. All Putin can do is be a spoiler. No wonder Putin would be interested in bringing any Western initiative before the UN, where he has veto power — his only true measure of great-power status.

Putin miscalculated when he tried to mask his self-interest with benevolence. He also miscalculated in achieving his second objective, using a surreal blend of hypocrisy and convenient ignorance of the facts. No one should confuse U.S. reluctance to use force at this time in Syria with a reluctance to defend our national security or to use all means necessary to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

U.S. President Barack Obama may well not have persuaded Americans that Assad's use of chemical weapons in the midst of the Syrian civil war affects our national security. Likewise, many members of Congress remain unconvinced that the limited military action he proposed would achieve the aims that Obama outlined. Some say that the uncertain outcome of military action with such limited goals isn't worth the strain on U.S. military forces. But this is a temporary failure of leadership, and the current circumstances are unique. Demonstrate to us that vital U.S. interests are at stake, and we will act decisively.

History is on our side. Putin may be a fair-weather UN fan. So be it. But make no mistake: It is the U.S., not the UN, that has provided the strategic framework for stability and peace since World War II.

That responsibility will continue for decades to come — with or without the approval of Putin.

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