The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Practiced His Ukraine Strategy in Syria

By James Miller

July 16, 2014



In 2013 a former KGB agent and president of a struggling economy far past its prime was named the most powerful man in the world by Forbes. The secret to President Vladimir Putin's success is that, in the wake of recession and years of fruitless wars in the Middle East, the West's appetite for foreign entanglements resembles those of the weak-willed 1930s.

Putin's two greatest foreign policy victories, stopping international intervention in Syria and annexing Crimea, depended on the West's timidity. In both scenarios, Putin employed a two-fold strategy. First the Kremlin disarmed and delayed the high-level international response. Then it used propaganda to play on the West's inertia and erode public support for international action. However, it remains to be seen whether or not that policy will be successful in eastern Ukraine.

The Kremlin's recipe for success

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At various points in the Syria crisis it looked as if the world was prepared to intervene to stop the bloodshed. In the fall of 2011, as the crisis escalated and Syrian President Bashar Assad's own army defected, Russia vetoed the first United Nations Security Council resolution on Syria. A month later, Russia heralded a diplomatic breakthrough, as Assad inked an agreement with the Arab League to withdraw his troops. But as Assad told the world he was withdrawing, videos posted online clearly showed his tanks rolling into Syria's cities.

It took the Arab League months to revitalize its mission only to conclude that at no point in time did Assad ever comply with his agreements. By the time the UN started to search for an alternative solution, much of Syria was embroiled in civil war. Russia then ardently defended a weak plan that it helped broker. Launched too late and with no enforcement mechanism, the plan was clearly doomed to fail.

This is first part of the Kremlin's recipe for getting ahead in the world: delay, orchestrate and then immediately break international agreements. By the time the international community and the far-too-polite media reach the conclusion that you lied, you and your allies will be so far ahead of the game that it will not matter.

The second part of Putin's strategy is even more insidious, though, because it involves Western apathy skillfully exploited by Russian propaganda. Enter Russia's propaganda outlet RT, or Russia Today. Its guests and hosts range from the far right wing to the far left, from Julian Assange to Larry King. RT is able to obfuscate the facts just enough and rally enough voters on all sides of the political spectrum to help change the electoral math on foreign policy.

Russia's positioning of Assad as Syria's legitimate leader, despite the massive peaceful protests that launched the Syrian revolution, was also a propaganda coup. And while Russia praised Assad for fighting those it labeled terrorists, planes maintained by Russian specialists bombed Syria's cities into oblivion. Russia and Assad compounded the lie by claiming that these "terrorists" were really foreign agents working to topple the legitimate government.

As Assad's campaign became a sectarian war against Muslim Sunnis, Russian media, echoing the claims of the Assad regime, pushed the narrative that it was the opposition, not the regime, that was conducting a sectarian war.

The Kremlin knows that in today's environment, neither fiscal conservatives nor anti-war liberals are interested in forcefully challenging this narrative and thereby opening up their countries to foreign entanglements. Thus, despite U.S. threats that Assad's use of chemical weapons would bring down missile strikes, the West eventually embraced Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's plan to instead work with Assad to dispose of Syria's chemical weapons.

Since then the regime has won significant advances, fueled by fighters from Hezbollah, intelligence from Iran, and aircraft manufactured and repaired by Russia.

The Russian plan in Ukraine has so far followed a similar road map, more or less successfully in Crimea, but perhaps less so in eastern Ukraine.

With Ukraine, the Kremlin's media delivered the message that Western-backed "radicals" were cracking down on ethnic Russians. In reality, it was the ethnic Russians who were suppressing dissent, with foreign and Ukrainian journalists attacked and kidnapped for reporting on Ukraine. And while Russian separatists put civilians at risk by occupying heavily populated cities, Russia continues to point to civilian casualties as a sign that Kiev is ethnically cleansing eastern Ukraine.

The confusion over who really is to blame helped destroy the appetite for a strong international response to the crisis, and, at least in Crimea, enabled Russia to get what it wanted.

Eastern Ukraine, however, appears not to be going to plan, in part because Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has refused to play into Russia's attempts to use negotiations to slow the Ukrainian army's advance. Following the end of the recent cease-fire, Ukraine's military advanced and captured a significant amount of territory. Putin appeared to be loosing his own game.

Now, Russia is once again massing troops on the border, and more armored vehicles have crossed the border into the hands of Russian-backed separatists. As Russia is again escalating its interference in eastern Ukraine, will the world stand up to Putin?

Just like in Syria, Putin is working hard to make sure that the answer to that question is a resounding "no."

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