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West Must Play It Cool With Putin (Op-Ed)

By Mark Galeotti

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One minute President Vladimir Putin is on the ropes, isolated and mistrusted, then a few bombs later, he's again the grandmaster of geopolitical chess, the man who outsmarted the U.S. The truth of the matter is that he was and is neither, and the sooner the West stops veering wildly from one extreme perception to the other, the better — and the less powerful Putin will be.

Russia, after all, has its strengths and is capable of sending a few dozen bombers into Syria, while stirring up trouble on its borders. These should not be overplayed, though.

Talks of the risk of a "new Afghanistan" fail to appreciate just how much of a difference it makes being able to send troops across a common land border rather than having to ship or fly every soldier, liter of jet fuel or ration pack. More to the point, they fail to appreciate the order of magnitude difference between Soviet and Russian military capabilities. The Soviets kept more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan at any one time for 10 years. The challenge of keeping at most 10,000 troops in the Donbass all but exhausted Russia's best

formations.

Of course there is ample scope for Russia to be sucked deeper into the Syrian quagmire. In war, things always go wrong: there could be defections from the regime, a truck bombing on the Russian base at Latakia, Saudi Arabia could start equipping "its" rebels with surface-to-air missiles. When that happens, Moscow will face the usual dilemma: cut and run, or up the stakes and hope that everything works out for the best.

At present, though, a relatively small force is launching air strikes against a carefully undiscriminating mix of targets, both Islamic State and the anti-government forces Washington loves to call "moderate insurgents." The Americans, needless to say, are unhappy.

But the bottom line is that however deeply unpleasant, the regime in Damascus is still the legitimate government and it is clearly both delighted to see the Russians bomb with abandon and also eager to see more immediate threats addressed before distant ones.

Irksome and embarrassing for the U.S., yes, but not a game changer. The Russian attacks will at best delay, not in the long term reverse, the slow defeat of the Bashar Assad regime. And even if only some of their attacks hit the Islamic State, every little bit helps, no?

But Washington's response appears driven by pique and frustration as much as cool logic. In some ways, Moscow's greatest weapon is not the Su-24 bombers currently flying over Syria, nor the Spetsnaz special forces commandos who took Crimea, not even the nuclear submarines cruising beneath the polar ice floes. Rather, it its ability to irritate, to provoke and to surprise.

This seems to be the West's curse: Whenever Russia acts, it seems to feel it must react. Sometimes, of course, that is both appropriate and necessary. The annexation of Crimea demanded a punitive response, for example.

Often, though, the West does not really think through quite why it does what it does, beyond it being, well, what it always has done.

So Russia sends Tu-95 bombers flying around NATO airspace? At present what this means is that interceptor jets are scrambled, at ridiculous expense. (Keeping a Eurofighter Typhoon in the air, factoring in everything from fuel to maintenance, costs some $18,000 per hour.) But why bother? It is not as if those planes are going to launch an attack otherwise, so let Moscow waste its aviation fuel and wear out its bombers, as the tempo of such operations takes its toll.

So Putin threatens to send nuclear weapons to Kaliningrad? Big deal. Unless we expect a war with NATO — inconceivable at present — then it doesn't matter where they are. So far, he has been able to push Western buttons with the n-word — nuclear — but why give him the satisfaction?

So suddenly Russia is in Syria? It is not as if it wasn't there before, supplying weapons, running intelligence stations and coordination operations. Now they are giving the regime more fire support, but in a mission as much as anything designed precisely to make the West

feel it has to play nice with Moscow. Let them join this messy little war, find out how much fun it is to tangle with the Islamic State, and see how long they are willing to underwrite Assad with Russian lives and hardware once it becomes clear the West isn't ready to take the bait.

The fundamental point is this: The more the West lets itself be shocked into responses by Putin, the more power it gives him, the more reason he has to continue to goad and needle. A more relaxed, positively comatose response might not feel right to leaders conditioned in the modern "fire fighting" school of governance, and certainly will not appeal to the more shrill commentators and back-seat drivers. But it might help wrench the political initiative from Putin.

In short, we might help prevent a cold war by being a little more cool.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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