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The Kremlin and the Crash: Putin's Dilemma

By Yury Barmin

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Russia's leadership has so far resisted saying that the crash of the airliner in Egypt was an act of terrorism, for fear of a public backlash. But even if that is confirmed, President Vladimir Putin will most likely decide to escalate Russia's campaign in Syria.

The tragic crash of the Russian airliner over Egypt put the Kremlin in an awkward position. Moscow first downplayed the possibility of a terrorist attack, then suddenly decided to suspend flights from Egypt. This confusing official response suggested that, for the first time since he launched a military campaign in Syria at the end of September, Putin is unsure of how to proceed.

Now that terrorism is beginning to look like the most likely cause for the deaths of the 224 Russian air passengers, Putin must take a stand. And he may decide to use the crash to rally support for his Syria operation, just as he did in the past with incidents of terrorism linked to Chechnya.

Putin's initial cautious and non-committal reaction to the tragedy on Nov. 2, two days after it occurred, limiting himself to expressions of condolence and technical issues, indicates that the Kremlin was caught off guard.

Then alarming statements coming from Britain and the United States that terrorists might have brought down the plane put Putin in hot water both at home and internationally. We can only guess what happened next, but after Russia suspended flights to Egypt, Putin made a dramatic about-turn.

In a telephone conversation with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on Nov. 6, Putin spoke of "the need to ensure the highest security standards for Russian citizens in Egypt."

Even though Putin's spokesman still insisted there was "no convincing evidence" of terrorism and Russian officials said the flight suspension was a precautionary measure, the decision proved that the Kremlin was inclined to believe terrorists had indeed attacked the plane.

It is unlikely that the Kremlin would have gone to such lengths to evacuate more than 45,000 Russian tourists from Egypt if it did not believe that the threat was real. The fact that the luggage of vacationers returning to Russia is being transported separately by the Emergency Situations Ministry is also very revealing and suggests that security experts believe that a bomb was planted in a suitcase in the hold of the plane.

The Kremlin is now evidently trying to work out how to save face in this very uncomfortable situation.

Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov initially insisted that the air disaster in Sinai had nothing to do with Russia's military campaign in Syria. "They're completely different cases, different issues, and there's no need to connect the two," he said.

Evidently, both Moscow and Cairo would prefer to avoid the inconvenient truth of having fallen victim to a terrorist attack. But if that turns out to be the case, the Kremlin will very likely use the occasion to publicly announce new goals in its Syrian operation.

As cruel as it sounds, if the Sinai plane crash proves to be the work of terrorists, it may benefit Russia politically and improve its standing in the political talks on Syria. International media coverage of Russia's airstrikes has characterized them as being directed more against moderate rebels and Sunni civilians than against the Islamic State.

Yet a bomb attack on a Russian airplane and a claim of responsibility by Islamic State affiliate Wilayat Sinai changes the story. It suggests that the Islamic State is retaliating against Russian air strikes — something the Russian media will be keen to report.

A terrorist attack would also give Putin the justification to widen Russia's military presence in Syria. Thus far Russia has justified its military intervention there by saying only that it is responding to an official request by the country's government.

For ordinary Russians, going to war against the Islamic State has not had the same resonance as it has for the United States and Britain, whose citizens have been brutally beheaded by the organization. A terrorist explanation for the Sinai crash changes that. The tragedy has struck

a deep chord in Russian society, which may now be more willing to get behind the bombing campaign.

There are parallels here with terrorist attacks earlier in Putin's presidency and just before it. In 1999 a series of apartment bombings in several Russian cities claimed more than 300 lives and were the justification for Putin, who was then prime minister and heir apparent to the Russian presidency, to launch a second war in Chechnya.

In similar fashion, now that Russia's aerial campaign in Syria seems to be changing little on the ground, an act of terrorism in Sinai could be the impetus for Moscow to further boost its contingent at the military base at Latakia.

Putin may now feel less constrained by the need to finish the Syria campaign quickly. Initially, the Russian government said that air strikes may continue for up to a year, but now the Russian air force may be allowed to stay in Syria longer — for as long as it takes to avenge the innocent lives lost in Egypt.

This is a remarkable turnaround. In effect, the future of Russia's Syria operation may now depend on the outcome of the investigation into the Sinai plane crash rather than on the military situation on the ground in Syria.

Without doubt when the Russian government decided on a military intervention in Syria, it considered the risks of many scenarios, including large-scale loss of life of Russian servicemen. Now it is potentially dealing with the mass killing of civilians. Normally, that would be cause for a public backlash. And yet the Kremlin may still manage to win more popular support by declaring it is waging a war of retribution on terrorists.

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