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Putin Is Achieving His Goals in Syria (Op-Ed)

By Josh Cohen

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As Russia's bombing campaign in Syria drags on, Western commentators increasingly portray President Vladimir Putin's Syrian campaign as a disaster. Many suggest that military engagement could trap Russia in an Afghanistan-style quagmire.

The U.S. Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, added that Putin is "winging it" in Syria, questioning "whether he has some long-term strategy or whether he is being very opportunistic on a day-to-day basis." Meanwhile, longtime Russia hawk Edward Lucas writes that Putin's Syrian intervention is a lost cause anyway, since "the likelihood of restoring the Bashar Assad regime in control over a stable and united Syria is minimal."

These assertions all overlook a key fact though: Putin is well on the way to achieving the majority of his objectives in the Levant. What are Putin's objectives in Syria and how are they being met? To start with, it's important to understand that what Putin fears most is chaos, noting in his recent United Nations speech that the American focus on regime change had produced "destruction of national institutions," and created a power vacuum "which

immediately started to be filled with extremists and terrorists."

However, the Russian intervention is not about restoring Syrian President Bashar Assad's control over a "stable and unified" Syria, but rather to preserve a functioning Syrian state — preferably one that can also protect Russia's interests in Syria.

For this reason, during the first several weeks the Russian air strikes concentrated on preventing insurgents from making further inroads in key regime areas of control, notably the Alawite coastal heartland plus the key corridor along Syria's M5 roadway linking Damascus to Homs, Hama and Northern Syria. As it so happened, these areas are besieged by non-Islamic State rebels, and as a result, the majority of Russian air sorties did not target the Islamic State.

While Assad's forces and their Shiite allies have not re-conquered large amounts of territory, at a bare minimum they have stopped the bleeding and stabilized the regime's position. In this respect, the Russian military campaign has — at least for now — achieved its first objective.

The second objective of Putin's Syrian campaign is to reassert Russian power in the Middle East. Again, there are early signs of success. The Russian military has established a number of bases in the Alawite heartland, preserved the Black Sea fleet's access to the Syrian port of Tartus, and now has the ability to project power throughout the Eastern Mediterranean.

More broadly, Russia has also succeeding in cementing a military relationship with the leading Shiite powers in the Middle East — namely Iran, Iraq, Hezbollah and the rump Assad regime. The parties established two command centers — one in Baghdad and one in Damascus — and now constitutes a potentially formidable Middle Eastern axis. For the first time since Egyptian President Anwar Sadat booted Soviet forces from Egypt in 1973, Russia is firmly ensconced in the Middle East.

Putin's message to the U.S. is clear: We are again a Middle East power to be reckoned with and we're not going away.

Putin's third objective has been to use Russia's Syrian intervention to move the conversation away from Ukraine and force the West to again engage with him. Once again, Putin is seeing early signs of success.

After long demanding that "Assad must go," the Obama administration now appears willing to countenance some kind of transition period where Assad would remain in place. In addition, Russian diplomats in Vienna are locked in negotiations with their counterparts from the United States and other countries discussing Syria's future. Meanwhile, senior Russian and American defense officials are once again speaking to each other in order to avoid an unforeseen clash between their respective air forces in the skies above Syria. The U.S. may not like Putin's Syrian intervention, but Washington and Moscow are once again talking.

While it may be a stretch, the possibility exists that Putin could use his Syrian campaign to force the West to end its Ukraine-related economic sanctions. The U.S. is unlikely to countenance a direct Syria for Ukraine trade-off, but it's not beyond the realm of possibility that Europeans might at least consider this scenario, albeit not explicitly.

European Union countries are increasingly split on sanctions anyway, and a desire to mitigate the refugee crisis plus European business interests could push EU countries to find a face-saving way to wind down the sanctions regime. While this is more a Russian "stretch goal" for now, Putin succeeded in using his Syrian campaign to pierce the diplomatic isolation imposed on Russia by the West.

To be clear, the Russian military intervention is in its early innings, and when it comes to war many things can go wrong. In particular, the recent plane crash in Egypt could sour the Russian public on Russia's Syrian intervention, and the Assad regime could resume losing ground to rebel forces.

Nevertheless, six weeks after the Russian air force struck its first targets, it looks like Putin's bold Syrian gambit has begun to achieve its goals.

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