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Putin Seeks Entente Cordiale With the West (Op-Ed)

By Vladimir Frolov

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is not the type of leader who wastes a geopolitical opportunity. This is his way of making foreign policy. As Center for Strategic and International Studies scholar Olga Oliker points out, "Russia does not have a strategy. While it has strategic goals, it pursues them primarily by seeking opportunities, rather than developing clear plans."

Faced with the need to shore up militarily Bashar Assad's faltering regime in Syria in the summer of 2015, Putin saw in this a broader opportunity to bring Russia back in from the cold, after months of Western isolation and pressure for Moscow's shenanigans in Ukraine, by casting its intervention in Syria as a valiant contribution to the war on terror.

Putin's "Syrian Gambit" aimed at transforming the relationship with the West on Russia's terms to regain Russia's rightful place as a global power. The Kremlin realized that it was getting stuck in Ukraine, where it could not re-establish Russia's geopolitical parity with the United States. For Washington to take Moscow seriously, Russia needed to reassert its role

on a stage where vital U.S. interests were at stake and where Moscow's limited capability could make a global splash. Syria was a perfect fit.

The immediate rationale for Russia's plunge into Syria's bloody civil war was to save a friendly regime in deep trouble, forestall a Western military intervention, contain instability and the threat of Islamist terrorism away from Russia's borders, while teaching the West a lesson that regime change through democracy promotion in countries of interest to Russia would no longer be tolerated and even reversed by force if necessary.

Launching air strikes allowed Moscow to muscle its way to the center of global diplomacy on Syria, while turning the conversation away from Ukraine. It won Putin a much coveted bilateral meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama at the United Nations in September, and reminded everyone that Russia was more than a "declining regional power."

Yet Putin's ambition of relaunching the strategic relationship with Washington was rebuffed by Obama. In their bilateral meeting on Sept. 28 in New York, Obama refused to accept Assad as an ally against the Islamic State, while berating Putin on Ukraine and eliding geopolitical horse-trading. The White House thought the Kremlin had deliberately misled it with talk about war against the Islamic State, all the while planning its air campaign to support Assad's offensive against the non-Islamic State opposition. Putin was bombing Syria, but was not getting the West's acceptance as a full-fledged partner. Until the terrorist attack on Paris and the downing of the Russian airliner.

The Paris attacks forced France's President Francois Hollande to call for a "grand coalition to defeat ISIS." France has limited capability to attack Islamic State in Syria and has desperately appealed for help from its European allies, but received only token support.

President Putin has seized on this opportunity for a grand anti-terror coalition, directing Russian forces in Syria to cooperate with the French as "allies." He hopes to entice Hollande and other Western leaders into accepting Bashar Assad as an indispensable ally in the war on Islamic State, thus ensuring Assad's hold on power. And he seeks to leverage Russia's war assets in Syria into improving Russia's bargaining position with the West. Moscow does not want to directly negotiate Western sanctions relief for fear of being perceived at home as capitulating on Ukraine, but it hopes to whittle away Western unanimity on sanctions by casting them as "immoral" to maintain on an essential war ally.

Significant challenges temper the optimism for Russia's anti-IS alliance with the West. Mutual trust is scarce after Ukraine and Russia's bombing of anti-Assad opposition. Moscow's alliance with Tehran makes Western intelligence sharing too risky. Military objectives diverge, as Russia's primary war effort is against the non-IS opposition to support Assad, with strikes against IS targets intensifying only last week. Obama conditioned closer cooperation with Russia on Moscow's fully redirecting its strikes against ISIS — "He needs to go after the people who killed Russian citizens," — he said of Putin.

Another problem is that Russia views Syria as a strategic opportunity to challenge the United States and to demonstrate the recklessness of U.S. support for popular uprisings against authoritarian leaders. Moscow is driving home the point that a brutal dictatorship is your best friend against terrorism. It simultaneously seeks cooperation and confrontation with the United States to achieve different objectives.

A limited collaboration against IS is possible, but a new Entente Cordiale between Russia and the West is unlikely.

Islamic State is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

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