



PUTIN, OBAMA, AND THE MIDDLE EAST

By Adam Garfinkle



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The latest news from what used to be Syria is that Russian pilots have undertaken combat missions on behalf of the Assad regime—but not so much against ISIS. Some Syrian rebels who have been receiving U.S. aid via the CIA since 2013 appear to be among the targets—so claimed Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, and he should know. Worse, despite U.S. efforts to deconflict the combat zone between U.S. and Russian aircraft, lest accidents happen, the Russians informed the U.S. Government of its initial actions in what Carter called a “drop by” at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad just an hour before the strikes began. Carter noted that he expected more professional behavior from the Russian military, but that is exactly why his expectations were disappointed. As body language in diplomacy goes, this “drop by” constitutes a swagger—and a bullying insinuation about who has balls and who does not.

This follows a pattern. First, of recent vintage, General Lloyd J. Austin III, the top U.S. commander in the Middle East, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 16, admitted that he and his Pentagon colleagues were “completely flummoxed” by the reasons behind Russian moves into Syria. I take the man at his word, but wonder whatever could have persuaded him that saying as much publicly was a good idea.

Then, a few days later, when the Russians announced an intelligence-sharing arrangement with Iran and Iraq, aimed ostensibly against ISIS, the White House was next in line to be completely flummoxed, judging by the tongue-tied response of the White House spokesman when asked about the matter. I would be surprised if the entirety of the U.S. government was caught as flatfooted as the White House, but this is what happens when a President arranges his highly politicized foreign policy decision-making apparatus in a manner heavily overbalanced toward White House control.

And then came the Putin and Obama speeches at the UN General Assembly confab just a few days ago. Putin was blunt and self-confident as he (mainly) lied. Obama’s was arguably the worst foreign policy speech of his presidency, despite his apparent inability to not tell the pallid truth. This led even former Democratic administration officials like David Rothkopf, the editor of *Foreign Policy*, to uncharacteristically savage the President:

Obama, for his part, is still reportedly trying to figure out what the heck his next halfway measure should be in Syria—should he dial up more tweets from the NSC or perhaps give another speech about how bad the options are in that country? Certainly, his U.N. address on Monday did not offer any clear answers—about anything. (For those of you who missed it, here is a summary of Obama’s U.N. remarks: “Good morning. Cupcakes. Unicorns. Rainbows. Putin is mean. Thank you very much.”)

(Rothkopf offered that maybe he was “being unfair,” but obviously not so unfair in his own mind that he failed to post it.) In any event, the result of the Putin-Obama UNGA juxtaposition was that, when all was said rather than done, even U.S. allies like France and Italy volubly wished the Russians well in Syria.

All the recent diplomatic dancing needs to be put in context, however. The Russians are flexing their military muscle as well as their mouths. The U.S. effort against ISIS, meanwhile, has been about as feckless a use of military force as one can imagine, leaving CENTCOM officials to lie about the utility of it in what is one of the most serious breakdowns in American civil-military professionalism in memory. It has also remained, from the start, bereft of a coherent strategy, for U.S. policy refuses to acknowledge that the key proximate cause of ISIS is the brutality of the Assad regime's campaign against the majority Sunni population of Syria. Attacking ISIS with aerial pinpricks while leaving the source of its political strength alone—whether to avoid interrupting the appeasement of Iran en route to the July 14 nuclear deal, or for some other reason—is akin to thinking that one can affect the position of a shadow by doing things to the shadow.

There is more context, of course. The U.S. training mission in Iraq has proven a failure. No one is talking anymore about the Iraqis taking back Mosul (not that a Shi'a Army beholden to a Shi's regime would be able to govern Mosul anyway), since they can't even retake and hold Ramadi or Fallujah. So has the mission to sustain the Afghan government, with the ANA incapable of holding or retaking Kunduz on its own. And even this wider context has a still-prior context that brings us straightaway back to Syria; for those in the region, the infamous August 2013 "non-strike" event for the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons is that context. (And unlike the credulous American mainstream press, no serious person in the region ever believed that the subsequent Syrian regime declaration of its chemical stocks was truthful and complete—as it certainly was not.)

One could go on: The Obama Administration's record in convening and cajoling Israelis and Arabs toward peace is the worst of any American administration since June 1967, largely due to its own serial diplomatic malpractice—not that conditions for progress were otherwise propitious, true. Even worse, in decades past the U.S. government managed to maintain considerable if not paramount influence with both Israel and several key Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt after 1972, and others further from the Levantine action) despite their being at times nearly at war with each other, and one at least one occasion (October 1973) when they *were* actually at war with each other. Today, Israel and the Sunni Arab states have the best relations they have ever enjoyed, yet somehow the Obama Administration has managed to develop bad relations with all of them simultaneously. This takes a special talent.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the most popular interpretation of Russian behavior includes a precondition: the abdication of U.S. leadership in the region, and the plummeting of its reputation for good judgment and the judicious use of power to the lowest point since the Truman Administration. Spinoza was right: Nature abhors a vacuum. The Obama Administration created one, whether deliberately or simply through serial bungling we will come to in a moment, and the Russians, with the Iranians, are filling it.

But why? Need we be as "completely flummoxed" about the reasons as the erstwhile General Austin? No, we don't.

What is Putin Thinking?

There are so many reasons for the Putin regime's behavior regarding Syria that it may safely be said to be over-determined. That doesn't mean that it is based on sound strategic thinking or that it will not come a cropper. It isn't and it very likely will, in due course. But explaining it is not a strain.

As I have indicated earlier and elsewhere [<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/09/17/russias-third-circles/>], perhaps the best way to think about Russian aims is as three concentric circles nested within each other, sort of like matryoshka dolls. The inner, most defensive and least ambitious circle, is to prevent the defeat and collapse of the Assad regime. That regime is indeed imperiled, Syria is Russia's only real ally, and Tartus is the only military base Russia has beyond its own territory. Beyond that, Russia opposes regime change—period. It does so because, as with the Libya case, it worries about a precedent leading all the way to Moscow. This makes Russian policy today about as reactionary as it was in 1848, when Czar Nicholas I considered sending the Russian army all the way to Paris to break down the revolutionists' barricades there.

The middle circle aims to put Russia in the catbird's seat when it comes to the future of Syria, even if in due course it requires some kind of post-Assad and even post-Alawi arrangement. That position would give Russia influence not only over the future of Syria but, to the extent it can coordinate its interests with Iran, over the entire Levant and even beyond.

And Russia wants a settlement to the Syrian civil war, as does Iran, because it imperils both their interests—they just want it to include Assad and the Alawis. Both Moscow and Tehran, as well as Ankara and Riyadh and Jerusalem and anyone with a brain, understand that the Assad regime's monstrous brutality is what has fed ISIS—after U.S. policy errors, in first shattering Ba'athi Iraq without a Phase IV "plan B" and then leaving post-Ba'athi Iraq too soon, set the stage. ISIS poses a serious long-

term problem for Iran; it could become the increasingly powerful nodal center of its eternal sectarian enemy. And it poses a problem for the integrity of the Russian Federation, whose hold over Ingushetia, Dagestan, and (still) Chechnya is none too solid. The Islamist radicalization of the anti-Russian ethnic nationalist movements in those regions would be disastrous for Moscow.

What neither the Iranians and especially the Russians seem to be taking sufficiently into account is that a commitment to prop up the Assad regime can easily become costly, futile, and counterproductively dangerous, because it implies a likely burgeoning of ISIS that is, as noted, a threat to both. The Turks, at least, understand that ISIS cannot readily be defeated as long as Assad rules in Damascus. The Russians and the Iranians are instead putting themselves into a kind of zugzwang, unable to move in any one direction without bringing serious harm on themselves from another. Every bomb the Russians eventually drop on ISIS is very likely to sire a dozen extremely angry young radicalized Muslims in the Caucasus. Hence it turns out that U.S. leaders have no monopoly on blundering.

The third, most ambitious circle is speculative but logical—yet, as far as I am aware, no other Western commentator has mentioned it. Just as Putin's stretch, third-circle goal in Ukraine is the destruction of NATO, in Syria it is the destruction of the European Union. Russia's order of battle in Syria thus far, joined by thousands of Iranian troops, suggests not just a defensive posture but an offensive one as well. Barracks are being built and there are credible rumors that a ground campaign is in the works—one that, according to an indiscreet (or misinformed) Russian parliamentarian is to last three to four months. Even if this campaign works as probably designed—to savage and take Raqqa—it will deepen the violence and spur more refugee movement out of the country. The Russians have to know that and Moscow could very well be intending it, whether as a fringe “benefit” or as a primary aim is hard to say, but the practical distinction is nil as far as the Europeans are concerned. Very likely, however, things will not go as planned. They rarely do. The Russians grievously underestimated what a bunch of “primitive” Afghans could do to them, and they are probably swaggering their way into a mutual bloodbath in Syria—whether first with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army (such as it is), or ISIS. Ash Carter is right to predict that “the Russian position is doomed to fail,” for its moving into a ground combat role is likely to temporarily unify the opposition, making it more effective. It may also stimulate a lot more help for that opposition from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the Emiratis. The proximate result of a Russian bloody nose, likely the product of by now very well-practiced Nusra and ISIS swarm tactics, will be to piss off the Russians and lead them to focus on killing lots of people in an effort at smash-down intimidation. Their intelligence in Syria is no better than ours, so that presages indiscriminate terror shelling and bombing, lots of collateral damage and—yes—lots and lots more refugees fleeing their homes. That will put intense immediate pressure on Jordan and Lebanon—which can ill-afford it—and on Turkey. But it will all come around to Europe, sooner rather than later.

What Else is Putin Thinking?

Is that it? No, there are three other Russian motives for their present Syrian policy. One is pecuniary, one is diplomatic in the broad sense, and one is, well, mystical. First things first.

When the “intelligence-sharing” headline popped onto the front page of the *New York Times* the other day, I read the article waiting for it to get to a main point of all this—and the point never showed up. The Russians have weapons contracts with the Assad regime worth about \$4 billion, and the contracts include Sukhoi fighters, attack helicopters, T-90 tanks, and other stuff now on or soon to be on display in the Syrian field. With the regime teetering on the skids, the Russians are naturally worried that they won't get paid—because all of this stuff has been typically handed over on credit. They have reason to worry, and they remember that not that long ago they had to eat \$8 billion in debts owed them by the Ba'athi regime in Iraq.

Remember, too, that recently the Russians agreed to sell Iran the S-300 air defense system. This is expensive stuff. But more important, the Iranian conventional order of battle is mostly rusted and unusable. With more than \$100 billion in unfrozen sanctions cash soon coming their way, they will be in the market for major arms purchases. The Iranians are very likely to pursue a Russian order-of-battle pretty much wall to wall, with embellishments here and there in Chinese and maybe in French.

And then there is Iraq. Iraq used to sport a Russian-made order-of-battle, too. Why not again, since that would be the advice from Tehran, if only for the sake of interoperability, and the Shi'a in Baghdad may be said to have fallen back out of love with all things American?

In short, part of what we're seeing is a kind of commercial air show, with a ground addenda. And why does this probably figure high in Russian motives? Because the price of oil has tanked (no pun intended), Western sanctions over Ukraine bite

hard even at their current “lite” level, and the failure to reform the Russian economy has resulted in galloping deindustrialization and a negative net productivity index. Pretty much the only thing the Russians have to sell these days, apart from timber and ore and cheap energy, is weapons. And like other major weapons producers, they need export markets to make their own domestic purchases economically viable—and they are certainly planning to buy plenty for their own use these days.

So much for the pecuniary, now for the diplomatic: Ukraine. The Russians have achieved their minimal aims in Ukraine, and reaching for more probably seems to Vladimir Putin to be too hard or too dangerous—for the moment. They have achieved another anti-contagion rubble heap (a.k.a. “frozen conflict”) designed to keep Ukraine from making real or rapid progress toward joining Western institutions, and hence keeping notions about democracy and human rights that much further from Moscow. Signs now point to a slowdown in the pace of combat in eastern Ukraine, and some naïfs think this presages a diplomatic solution. Not likely; the Russians are simply consolidating their political gains, building up for the next phase, and watching as all others’ eyes turn to the Levant.

This diplomatic ploy appears to be working very well so far. When you get French and Italian diplomats publicly wishing you well at UNGA *vis-à-vis* Syria, after all, it can only be on account of a segmented form of amnesia—which tells everyone who can read the signs just how much those governments (and others in Europe) actually give a damn about what happens in Ukraine (and not just Ukraine among those of an eastern persuasion).

Without its logic, reason, and utilitarian motives, international diplomacy would be like a play without a plot. But without its ever-present psychodrama, it would be like a plot without a soul—and hence make for very bad and strange theater. Putin revels in humiliating, surprising, and wrong-footing the Obama Administration *for its own sake*. He embodies the ego-seared personality of the fallen Soviet Union, and for him superior gamesmanship is a mark of leadership that pays off in practical dividends among the current Russian elite and, for that matter, the Russian public at large, too.

No one in Russia, Putin not excluded, thinks strategically these days. There is too much ambient panic to allow it, so that all “interests,” whether financial or otherwise, are driven down to the short term. But Putin is a consummate tactician, able to push a weak hand to its limits. For all one knows, he’s aware of the “maximalism” thesis of my friend and colleague Stephen Sestanovich, who argues that among naturally risk-averse folk in a naturally dicey environment, tremendous advantage accrues to leaders who know what they want.

If that’s so, Putin has yet another advantage *vis-à-vis* the American administration: He is an autocrat and President Obama is not. Democratic leaders become maximalists only when circumstances force it upon them, and in such circumstances the nature of democratic politics sums to a longer-term advantage. But in normal times, as Robert S. Vansittart, probably the most brilliant self-avowed “failure” of the 20th century put it curtly in *The Mist Procession* (1958), “democracy often changes its mind because it seldom knows it.” That cedes advantage to autocrats of all sorts who do know their own minds, especially in circumstances where strategic propinquity vaults the importance of interests over power as opposed to the importance of power over interests. And so we come now to the flummoxed, wrong-footed, half-measuring—and also clueless?—Americans.

What is Obama Thinking?

I am reminded of a comment, offered in private conclave but preserved in the archives, by a French diplomat to his British counterpart in 1920 or 1921 in the context of negotiations over establishing the mandatory borders between Syria and Palestine. The British at that time were hand-in-hand with the Zionist movement in wanting to gain the most beneficial hydrological borders for Palestine, and the French, seeing this coming, were either wise or cynical enough not to want to get too deeply involved in the whole business. Said the Frenchman, and I am translating from memory, “Look, if you want to blunder into the mud bog”—the verb used, I think, was *embourber*—“you can do it without us.”

How would one translate *embourber* into Russian? Because, very possibly, that is what the Russians are about to do in Syria, and the U.S. attitude, long now on offer, is “you can do it without us.” We once rushed to the aid of an embattled ally, somewhat in desperation to prevent collapse. We were mighty and the enemy was weak and highly provincial; we had the big guns and the money and they had not. We could polish off the problem quickly and send a bracing message in its wake to a host of lesser-endowed would-be troublemakers—and look where it got us. Certainly the seminal event of Barack Obama’s education in the rough-and-tumble of international politics was the Vietnam War, and if he does not see the suggestive parallels between what Lyndon Johnson did then and what Vladimir Putin is doing now, no one does.

So let us get right to the essence: Does the President, and his Administration following him, know what he is doing—strategically speaking, whether in Syria or anywhere else—or not? If one judges by the official annual strategy documents mandated by the Congress, if one talks to refugees from the NSC, and if one matches up visible behavior against past models, the answer is “not really.” As I have argued before, the most likely reality that outsiders are trying to penetrate is one consisting of several impulses or biases in the President’s mind, festooned with some academic notions brought to his attention by advisers and other communicants, but that are not tightly tethered to a means-and-ends schema one could legitimately call a strategy. Over time, of course, the President’s fidelity to his own gut instincts sum *post hoc* to certain patterns that produce a cumulative outcome that is far from random. And the reappearance of certain issues over and over again tend to reify such patterns, at least selectively. So we see strong policy lines on issues where there have been lots of PC meetings over the past seven years—Iran, say—but only faint lines where PC meetings have been few and far between—India/Pakistan/Kashmir, say.

The result of this asymmetry is to confuse academics, and other anal retentive types who have not served in government, as they go searching for the right-angled mental precisions they *know* to be present but in hiding. The result has been a kind of Rashomon-like disagreement—with apologies to Akira Kurosawa—about what “school” the Obama Administration represents. So if you focus on the President’s highly risk-averse policy in Syria and the rest of the Middle East, he looks like a cold-blooded realist, whether for good or for ill we’ll come to in a moment. If you focus instead on the zero-nukes aspiration, he looks like a wild-eyed idealist. If you mark the investments made in the United Nations and the deference given to not getting out of step with our European allies over Ukraine, say, he looks like a standard-issue liberal internationalist. And if you reckon the take-no-prisoners approach to multiplying the number of drone strikes in Yemen, Waziristan, and elsewhere—along with his reticence to really claw back NSA programs or close Guantanamo—he’s a national-interest selective-engagement hawk.

Inconsistency and double standards, so much anathema to certain kinds of excessively well-ordered minds, are not necessarily liabilities in real life. That is because the world, too—or at least the human social aspects of it we care most about—gives off a distinctive aura of the inconsistent and the multi-measured. So it matters what gut instincts and predilections lie behind the chaos to insinuate into policy whatever order it comes to have. Even short of an actual strategy, then, what are Barack Obama’s gut instincts, and how have they applied to Syria?

If we were to put the most formal face on an answer to this question, it would go like this: Obama is sold on offshore balancing. He thinks the United States is overinvested in the Middle East—a term he and several advisers have used—and underinvested in Asia. He thinks that if the United States stops acting like a control freak with a Cold War hangover, and just gets out of the way in several parts of the world, we’ll end up with a foreign policy that is less dangerous (no chain-ganging via obsolete alliances into wars in which we have no vital interests), less expensive (no need for that vast foreign basing footprint or hugely expensive defense budget), and less a distraction from vital needs for reform here at home. He thinks that other countries take us for an adversary because we support *their* adversaries, so if we distance ourselves from traditional friends and allies, then we’ll be able to engage them productively. The President has let slip for example—in reference to being reminded by Jeffrey Goldberg about Saudi discomforts in this case—that “change can be difficult” for those grown used to open-ended American protection.

The result overall has been a severe ratcheting down of what constitutes a threat to U.S. vital interests. Threats of mass-casualty terrorism, particularly if joined to weapons-of-mass destruction proliferation, constitute a category of vital interest like no other in this President’s view. Managing the rise of China is a structural concern, also deserving of concerted attention. But Ukraine, Syria, Egypt, Eurozone distempers and all the other headline soaks that pop into view from time to time are no longer vital interests, and only by “leading from behind” or not leading at all will responsible governments come to own up to their own security obligations. This is, in other words, a whole new way of thinking about burden sharing. Yes, the interregnum can be messy—it *is* messy, for revisionist powers are trying to fill the vacuum. But Germany, Poland, Sweden, Finland, Japan, India, Nigeria perhaps, and several other states are slowly but surely passing the test of stepping up to the plate, so what we need is patience and a little bit of luck.

Most commentators savvy to this picture have not been persuaded by it. Most think that this is a hopelessly ahistorical and naïve way of thinking about strategy. This gets, too, to a perennial argument of international relations theory: What’s safer, a hegemonic security system, a bipolar one, or a multipolar one? And, as usual, such arguments never reach persuasive conclusions, because they can’t in a non-right-angled, changing world. Listen again to David Rothkopf, specifically on the Middle Eastern dimension to this non-theoretical critique:

While self-described “realists” may hail the restraint and President Eeyore’s unrivaled mastery of focusing on the downside to any possible U.S. action, and while the president’s defenders will no doubt also revert to the always legitimate argument that the disastrous invasion of Iraq played a big role in getting us to where we are today, they neglect a critical fact. What’s done is done. We are where we are. Let’s stipulate that Iraq was a disaster. Let’s stipulate that the Arab Spring was largely a self-inflicted wound on the part of regimes that neglected their obligations to their people and to modernity. Let’s stipulate that we had no good options in Syria.

When an American president is left with a lousy situation and no good options, then there is still the necessity of figuring out how to best advance U.S. interests going forward. (The specter of foreign fighters, the stream of refugees into Europe, and the strategic consequences of long-term control of the Middle East all underscore that we actually do have long-term interests and the “it’s not our problem argument” is just naive and shortsighted.) “It’s too hard” and “I don’t want to play” are not acceptable answers because what they produce is precisely what we have gotten: adversaries seizing the initiative and setting in motion a potential permanent redistribution of power and influence in a strategically important region of the world.

I have been and remain largely sympathetic to Rothkopf’s plaint, as anyone familiar with my writing over the past decade or so will know. I do think the Administration has been naïve about how easy “engagement” would turn out to be, about the power of speeches to substitute for reality, and more besides. The Administration has, for example, woefully misread the nature of the security problem in the Middle East: It’s not ISIS, it’s Iran that’s the bigger threat to regional stability, and the Administration has played right into that sand trap thinking somehow that it was the 18th green. In that way it’s made the biggest potential problem in the region—a multivalent nuclear arms race, with all it implies for the security of innocent millions—more rather than less likely.

Still, the more history and memoir I read the more I incline to a longer view, and in that longer view I find islands of sympathy for President Obama’s (presumed) gut instincts. We *are* overinvested in the Middle East, and Syria was and remains a very hard problem. I have argued that we get the Fifth Fleet out of Bahrain, reposition Al-Udeid airbase out of Qatar, stop being gratuitously responsible for the security of undemocratic regimes whose futures are not of vital importance to us, and, above all, stop imagining that the better we get to know Middle Easterners the more we’ll like one another.

So when I try to stand back a bit and ask what, really, do these mistakes matter, I mostly (the botching of the regional proliferation portfolio being the biggest exception) come up with far less-than-cataclysmic answers. Let’s face it: Most Americans who are attentive to these kinds of subjects have developed deep habits of the heart over the years when it comes to global leadership. We’ve gotten used to being the biggest and simultaneously the most benign guy on the block. We’re used to our order- and common security goods-provider role. We like it and, with some good reasons, we suppose that most other well-intentioned people on the planet like it, too. It won the Cold War, foiled the bad guys far and wide, and has helped make the world more prosperous. It’s good domestic politics, too, because it makes us feel better when things get screwed up at home—as they surely are. And for many it is part and parcel of a faith-based, if long-since-secularized, dogma of American identity—and so is fairly well insulated from introspection, let alone denial.

But none of that makes it the only or the best game in town going forward. A good deal of the criticism of the Administration’s (presumed) approach stems from an aversion to change, from a reluctance to do a zero-based reassessment of the U.S. role in the world now a whole quarter century after the Cold War has been laid in its grave.

The Russians, of course, have their own post-Soviet identity problem. Putin is trying to solve it by using bluster and aggression to boost a sagging national self-confidence; by acting like a superpower even when lacking super power, he is engaged in a manipulative fantasy bound to end in tragedy, very likely in Syria and probably elsewhere as well. We look at this from the vantage point of North America and we see it clearly. But we don’t look so closely at ourselves, or often ask how the perduring psychodrama of politics influences our own sense of identity and how that sense of identity manifests itself in U.S. foreign policy behavior.

Maybe it’s best that we don’t ask too much or too often—too much naked honesty can be paralytic. Perhaps it has paralyzed the President a bit too much for our own good. But perhaps it’s also a bit too soon to judge with confidence the Obama Administration’s record in the Middle East, or in the world at large. Maybe the President is not so clueless after all. If the world of politics is a world amply decorated with irony, as we know it to be, why should this President’s foreign policy necessarily prove to be an exception?