

Russia. Syria. War.

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If there is one thing that Russian President Vladimir Putin should well understand, it's the folly of Russian military action against a predominately Muslim state. The lessons of the United States' involvement in Iraq since 2006 and, to a similar extent, Afghanistan since 2009 demonstrate the challenges of long-term action in this part of the world; despite initial successes, it is difficult to manage an exit that leaves a safe and stable country behind. Unlike others, Russian success in this part of the world has been essentially non-existent.

Ten years of Soviet adventurism in Afghanistan was an unmitigated failure, not only viewed in retrospect, but also as seen from the very first moments of invasion. Between a botched invitation from Babrak Karmal to stabilize Afghanistan and the initial use of Soviet Central Asian troops who had more in common with the local Afghans than their Russian commanders, Soviet forces quickly became bogged down, particularly in the countryside. Moreover, until 1985, Soviet citizens were repeatedly told that the army was doing its "international duty," building roads, schools, hospitals, and helping with agricultural development, never mind all the Soviet soldiers who were killed, over 14,000 in all by 1989. On a global scale, Soviet involvement cost the USSR its self-proclaimed standing in the world as a protector against colonial aggression in the third-world, as it was committing the same exact

sin; moreover, this action likely hastened the disintegration of the USSR itself. While much of this was not known until the late 1980s both inside and outside the Soviet Union, Putin certainly did know the high cost of actions in Afghanistan as early as 1982 because at that time he was training at KGB headquarters in Moscow, where discussions of these events was taking place quite openly.

While Putin no longer obsesses about Soviet failures in Afghanistan, the same cannot be said of Russian involvement in Chechnya. Chechnya, of course, represents a different situation than Afghanistan, because the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union has, since 1818, been trying to pacify and fully incorporate Chechnya into Russia proper. At both Valdai in October 2015 and in his annual address to the Duma in December 2015, Putin cited a litany of terrorist acts resulting from the inability of Russia to stem the ever-continuing tide of terrorism flowing from the Caucasus:

We know what aggression of international terrorism is. Russia faced it back in the mid-1990s, when our country, our civilian population suffered from cruel attacks. We will never forget the hostage crises in Budennovsk, Beslan and Moscow, the merciless explosions in residential buildings,¹ the Nevsky Express train derailment, the blasts in the Moscow metro and Domodedovo Airport.

¹ Conspiracy theorists and Kremlin watchers alike strongly believe that Chechen terrorists were not responsible for the residential building explosions in 1999. Rather, they believe that the FSB was involved, a belief made more credible by the discovery of suspicious activity in a Ryazan apartment block in September of that year. This discovery was followed quickly by the disappearance of all evidence and the reluctance of witnesses to continue to talk, giving these beliefs even more credence.

Unlike with Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian Republics, all Muslim-majority nations that gained their independence by virtue of their being granted republic status within the Soviet Union, Chechnya, along with Ingushetia, Ossetia, Dagestan and others, remained parts of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic). Therefore, allowing their independence would have resulted in the disintegration of the Russian Federation, something neither Boris Yeltsin before nor Putin now could or would allow. The cost, as Putin noted, has been quite high, and his pronouncements don't include the number of Russian soldiers killed in both Chechen wars (8,000–16,000) or the number of civilians killed (50,000–100,000) or displaced (500,000). All of these individuals, just as were the victims of the various terror attacks, were predominantly citizens of the Russian Federation.

With the difficulties, both contemporary and historic, in waging war in Chechnya, and the weaknesses it exposed in Russian military capabilities, it is little wonder that in the years following Russia has preferred hybrid wars followed by frozen conflicts.

Hybrid warfare, as such, is not a new concept. Most wars, from ancient to contemporary, have been fought with a wide variety of methods. In the modern concept, hybrid warfare could include 1) the use of conventional forces; 2) irregular combat operations, including special ops and covert operations; 3) sponsoring protests or other forms of political subversion; 4) economic coercion; 5) disinformation and deception; and 6) cyberwarfare. Any or all of these are used in combination.

For Russia, hybrid warfare does not derive from the ability of Russia to fight well using a variety of tools with dexterity and flexibility; rather it stems from the lack of

Russian ability to fight effectively with any single method. For Russia it is a sign of weakness: Russia is trying to hide what it cannot do; it is a signal of the lack of depth of its fighting capabilities. On the other hand, for the West, waging a hybrid war can be seen as a sign of strength, a signal as to the breadth of its fighting capabilities.

Russia today is not fighting from a position of strength. Its military is still in need of massive modernization, although there have been improvements since its venture into Georgia, where, while victorious, it did not perform well against Western military equipment; Russia is not trusted on the international stage; and Russia has few friends and even fewer allies in the world. Its military cannot compete with the United States, with NATO, or with growing Chinese military investment, and it is boxed in between these countries and their forces. Even today, Russia's chief military operation plan against Europe follows the Soviet plan: a massive use of troops, upwards of 100,000, followed by dissembling and disinformation, and the threat of using nuclear weapons, a threat seen as more acute following Putin's December 2015 directive for Russia to modernize its tactical nuclear capabilities. Today, however, the army is full of unwilling and regularly abused conscripts, who may not be willing to fight, the Russian propaganda machine, particularly after the seizure of Crimea, is simply not believed outside of Russia, and the use of nuclear weapons would guarantee pariah status.

Putin has therefore looked for targets of opportunity, preferring to muddy the waters over trying to achieve an outright victory, and he has found rather great success operating in this manner: Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are not likely to be admitted to either the European Union or NATO because no government will cede control of

Transnistria, Abkhazia, or Crimea respectively to Russia, agreement on borders being but one of the conditions for admission to either organization. The benefits of these actions, particularly in Ukraine, to Putin were greater than the costs: these countries were left in a position where they could do nothing about Russia's actions on their own, and no one would come to their defense, at least not militarily. They remained independent – Putin did not try to take them over – but substantially weakened and vulnerable. Likewise the earlier 1997 cyberattacks on Estonia were successful in bullying the Baltic nation, while not reaching the point where NATO might invoke Article 5, wherein an attack on one is an attack on all, thus threatening all-out war.

If this form of conflict, what Masha Gessen, echoed by Alexei Navalny, has termed “forever war,” has served Putin so well, and he would certainly call each of these actions a success, despite the deleterious effects on the Russian economy, that we might well question why Russia has taken a more active and aggressive stance in Syria – directly using military force rather than using “rebels,” as was done in Ukraine. To hear Putin at Valdai 2015, it's all about terrorism:

Now about Syria. You said the goal of the USA is to get rid of al-Assad, while Russia's goal is to support al-Assad, right? It may be true that the USA has the goal to get rid of al-Assad. Our goal is to combat terrorism and to help President al-Assad gain victory over terrorism

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To a certain extent, this is, of course, true. Russia has the same concerns about terrorist attacks at home as does the Western world. In particular, Russia is concerned

about fighters from the Caucasus who go to train with Daesh in Syria,² the same way French domestic terrorists have recently done to great cost to Paris. For Russia, however, it is much more than a fight against domestic terrorism.

Russia's military action in Syria is also an attempt to prop up the floundering regime of Bashar al-Assad, one of Russia's last allies in the world and, importantly, holder of its last overseas military bases: the port at Tartus and the airfield at the International Airport. Losing al-Assad, whether to Islamists or to democrats, would rob Putin of both an ally and these military bases. Therefore, ostensibly going after Daesh at Raqqa, on the first day of aerial attacks Russian forces also hit the anti-Assad (and anti-Daesh) rebels in northwest Syria. This showed Putin's true hand and put the West in a difficult position. By wiping out the Western-supported anti-Assad forces, should he be able to do so, Putin would force the West to make an unsavory choice: support al-Assad or support Daesh.

In addition, Russia's involvement is an attempt to project its military power, which has been on the wane worldwide, back into the Middle East, where it had rivalled that of the West during the Cold War. Putin believes that the West has little interest in another full-scale military conflict, evidenced by President Barack Obama's refusal to follow through on his own "red line" threat in 2013.³ Seeing the Obama administration as weak and feckless, particularly in the realm of projecting power, Putin hopes to show up and outshine the United States in this part of the world. The fact that Russia is operating in a state that neighbors Turkey, a member of NATO, is

² Regional experts and terrorism watchers believe that there are two types of terrorists rising from the Caucasus: those that wish to fight globally for al-Qaeda or Daesh and those that simply wish to fight Russia internally. Both pose a danger to Russia, while the rest of the world is generally concerned only about the former.

an added bonus, as it reminds NATO that there is another potential player in the region.

Hand-in-hand with this military projection is the opportunity to test new military equipment. Although Russia won its brief war with Georgia, the military did not fare well, just as it did not in the First Chechen War. While it has undergone modernization since then, the process has been slow. Simulations are not the same as real combat, and by engaging actively in Syria, Russia has been able to test its combat aircraft flying ability, its ability to bomb from the air, and as of 9 December 2015, its ability to launch submarine-based missiles effectively and on target. In large part, the Russian military campaign has been effective, but not without significant cost.

On 31 October 2015 a Russian passenger plane was blown out of the sky, with Daesh almost immediately taking credit. Fervently denying it was a terrorist attack until 17 November, despite all evidence to the contrary, Putin suddenly found his country at the receiving end of a terrorist strike of a level not seen since the Chechen Wars. If left as an isolated event, the West, which by previously agreed upon rules of engagement had played a relatively quiet role in Syria, might have been content to let Russia handle the fight and face the danger, despite the potential danger to the anti-Assad forces.

Two weeks later, though, on 13 November, came attacks on Paris. Russia was no longer alone in its fight and, therefore, had the potential of seeing its isolation reduced internationally.

Daesh, we should note, will not be defeated by random, uncoordinated military action. A combination of clear strategy and decisive, coordinated leadership will be necessary, but what is the cost of bringing Russia into this alliance?

Thus far, Putin's actions in Syria have been more destabilizing to a potential alliance than not. He has been trying to break the EU and NATO for some time both over sanctions following his seizure of Crimea and by threatening Poland and the Baltic States with military action, all while the alliances have stood firm. Now, however, we see fissures in both as a result of Russia's actions in Syria. Whether or not Russian involvement is also about exacerbating the Syrian refugee crisis, the results of its actions have certainly made it worse, leading to near-crisis levels in Europe and NATO. France closed its borders; a number of EU states want to turn back or refuse refugees, in part as a result of discovering a Syrian passport near the body of a suicide bomber in Paris, in part because of the economic and cultural challenges in bringing in such a large population; and American pressure kept France from invoking NATO's Article 5 over the attacks. Likewise, NATO did not invoke Article 5 after Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber in its airspace, despite Russian threats of retaliatory action. Russia has, for now, backed off of a declaration of war against Turkey.

While both sides could benefit from working with each other, it is Putin who has the most need of such an alliance. Economic sanctions and self-sanctions, most recently of Turkish goods, continue; finances are increasingly scarce as Putin demands more and more military expenditures from a Duma that has diminishing monetary reserves to spend, and the price of oil continues to fall, making it ever more clear that the

Russian economy is solely dependent upon high energy prices for growth. The Russian middle class is facing increasing economic hardship as disposable income falls, and Putin faces growing unrest at home, this time from truckers who traditionally would support him. With all this, Duma elections loom in 2016. All of these could cascade in a perfect storm, while terrorist attacks escalate, this time returning to Russia itself. Putin needs to come to an accommodation with the West sooner rather than later to lessen as many of these dangers as he can and avoid the growing chances of falling into a quagmire in Syria, much as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan. In this way, Putin needs the West and NATO more than the West and NATO need Putin. Putin and the West should both keep this in mind.



Figure 1. Russian fighters readying for action. Image Credit, worldinwar.eu

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