

THE FOURTEEN EXPLANATORY POINTS OF PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN'S SYRIA ACTION

Wolfgang Danspeckgruber
Director, Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University
Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

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Following the deployment of ground troops and the launch of airstrikes by Russia in Syria in September 2015, the key questions for many were “why?” and “what for?” This query intensified in the aftermath of the recent downing of the Su 24 Ground Attack aircraft by the Turkish Air Force. This analysis represents an attempt to summarize the possible reasons, considerations, and effects of why Russian President Vladimir Putin might have decided to launch the Russian military support operation for the Syrian Government—on the invitation from President al-Assad—and what President Putin might have hoped to achieve, following so soon on the heels of Russia’s military operations in Ukraine which began in February 2014.

The possible ramifications of Russia’s Syria Operations—independent of their eventual outcomes—are being felt in many more places than Syria and the region, and affect many more dimensions than the fight against terrorists there, ranging from the general regional security situation, to humanitarian considerations, to economics, and the international diplomatic realm. It is therefore crucial to put President Putin’s military operations in Syria into an appropriate strategic, regional, and diplomatic context, as well as to see it within the history of Russian relations with Syria and the region.

According to balance-of-power theory, powerful states in the international system seek to exploit a perceived vacuum in a given region as long as the costs seem acceptable. The situation in the Middle East—around Syria—has been under US hegemonic stability for decades. Russia’s influence has been deep and extensive in Egypt and the region until 1992 and in Syria from the Cold War until today. It is important to note that whenever an actor in the international system perceives that the benefits of change outweigh the costs for change, that actor will try to push for change until the costs of that change exceed the benefits. This is true from the perspective of domestic as well as international (financial, political, strategic, etc.) costs and rewards, and also what it means in terms of relations with allies, adversaries/competitors, and in international organizations.

President Putin clearly perceives the various domestic and international benefits outweighing the potential costs of the current Syria operation. The following Fourteen Points shaping and explaining the Russian military operation in Syria ought to be understood from this perspective.

- 1) ***Demonstration of the efficiency and capability of Russian weapon systems***: The firing of the current volleys of ship-surface SLCMs from the Caspian Sea onto Syrian territory demonstrate the advanced power—which many find surprising both in terms of availability and capability—of the new Russian military and navy. The ability to launch Sea Launched Cruise Missiles, SLCM, and long range KH101 cruise missiles from submarines and small surface ships in the Caspian and the Mediterranean Sea to engage targets in Syria hundreds of miles away has been surprising and impressive. The significant Russian bombing air raid on 11/17 with more than 25 bombers—including some of the world’s largest planes—created quite a unique and forceful impression. This constitutes a welcomed advertisement for Russian defense industry sales. Furthermore it seems proven that Russia has sent sophisticated T-90 main battle tanks into combat in Syria in order to mitigate the Syrian government’s losses provided by foreign supplied TOW anti-tank missiles.
- 2) ***Demonstration of Russian force projection capability***: Russian force projection capabilities have been in doubt since the end of the Soviet Union, certainly as they extend effectively beyond the regions of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the Bosphorus. The above described air attack with more than twenty-five bombers on 11/17, as well as the use of sea and air launched cruise missiles for long distance targeting, has surprised other great powers and certainly actors in the Middle Eastern regions. This behavior also appears to be an attempt to equalize the projected images of strategic power between Russia’s capabilities and those of the United States. The bombing attack followed two days after the official publication of the cause for the downing of the Russian Metrojet airline Airbus A321 by an explosive device allegedly planted by ISIS. The Kremlin sent the attacking planes from places like Ossetia/Georgia to Syria. And even if not all bombs were dropped accurately, the sheer display of an air raid of such a magnitude and combined air power offers a significant force projection capability which few considered hitherto possible. Power projection capabilities, of course, also include Spetznaz and intelligence operations in which The Kremlin has had considerable assets since a while and had learned from problems during the War with Georgia 2008.
- 3) ***Strategic Loyalty to “friends in need”***: Russia demonstrates that she is simply acting, supporting (its friends and allies), and taking the initiative, very much in contrast to other powers—such as the United States in particular. This demonstrates to others and foreign leaders Russia’s reliability to “assist friends in need” and also embattled allied leaders, even in seriously difficult situations. (Again, contrasting what happened to long-term allies of the United States, like President Mubarak of Egypt; and the issue of Georgia being beaten in war August 2008 without effective U.S. Support). Among the first examples of such supportive actions by Russia was the provision of Russian SU-25 ground attack aircraft to Iraq in the late summer of 2014 – a response that presented a stark contrast to the reactions of the United States, which did not offer any support. Apparently, these aircraft in Iraqi airspace are now being flown by Iranian pilots. In addition, in view of the more than 50,000 Russian women, married as wives to Syrian officials and military personnel and many other Russians living in Syria, this Russian military operation in Syria has been for many reasons much different than an intervention and much more capable to build upon old alliances than generally acknowledged.
- 4) ***Backing an embattled Syrian President Assad***: This Russian (and Iranian) military support has been critical to the Assad Regime’s survival—which was very much struggling for sur-

vival in spring 2015. Assad's fight against "terrorism"—as he labels all domestic opposition "terrorists," very much in line with the Kremlin dictum—and illegitimate foreign intrusions has been marked by excessive violence and a responsibility for certainly more than 70% of all the casualties and millions of refugees and IDPs in Syria. Russia's enhanced supportive role is to maintain the sovereignty in Syria and the livelihood of an embattled regime, while also reaffirming the inviolability of sovereign boundaries. An important additional consideration for the Kremlin in this context is the stabilization and potential expansion of Tartus, the Syrian seaport, as the key Russian Naval Base in the Mediterranean Sea outside the Black Sea and the Bosphorus.

- 5) *Acting as the **defender of Christianity**—Orthodox communities and non-Orthodox alike—in Syria and the Middle East:* Russia's actions are apparently also serving the defense of Christians, of minorities in Syria, and the interest of the Russian Orthodox Church. It follows that age old tradition of Russia as the defender of Christians, the Orthodox in the Balkans in the 19th century. The fight over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher started the Crimean War, 1854 with Turkey and England. Today, while having to be aware of potentially explosive effects on the relationship between Sunni and Shia within Russia and in its near abroad, Russia also managed to create a Russian-Shia axis from Russia to Iran, Syria, to Lebanon, and Iraq. The Kremlin has to take pains to alleviate the Sunna in Russia, who represent the majority of Muslims there. Nevertheless, this all serves the Kremlin very much for domestic Russian use: supporting the defense of the Third Rome idea, return to *Cesaro-Papism* of the Tsars, stabilizing influence against subversion and binding the Churches to the Kremlin.
- 6) *Manage to neutralize and eliminate all those **radical elements** who came in (or were lured in) from the North **Caucasus**:* Reports indicate that there are special efforts under way by Russian and other forces on the ground to find and attack also those units in Syria which harbor fighters and radicals from the Caucasus—Dagestan or Chechenia. Interestingly, it had been made easy for all those from the North Caucasus wanting to fight in Syria to receive documents for travel from Russian territory.
- 7) ***Breaking-out of (post-Ukraine/Crimea) diplomatic isolation** and bringing oneself/Russia back into the (respectable) diplomatic international realm:* One of the most brilliant elements of these actions lies in the result that Russia has been catapulted back into diplomatic center stage—in dramatic difference to her role in the international system some months ago, up until spring 2015. Without having to give in on any grounds concerning Ukraine, etc. President Putin has become a potential and important ally now being courted by several heads of state and government—even more so now, in times of serious terror challenges for many in Europe.
- 8) *Moving Russia into a key role and the pole position for any **diplomatic solution of the Syrian War** and beyond.* Despite the good personal rapport between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov for that matter, President Putin managed to wrest the initiative away from western powers who had been since 2013 rather restive and reluctant to further engagement in Syria. Today, post Paris terror events, the presence of Russian air and ground forces in Syria—as well as the presence of Iranian military—will shape the outcome of the Syrian diplomatic negotiations. President Putin has acted most decisively

in Syria in recent months, enhancing his initiative now even in collaboration with President Hollande of France, and hence has presumably become the key foreign player in Syria—on whom President Assad is personally dependent for his own survival. In addition, it seems that the current international Syrian Peace process in Vienna is rather attuned to the perspectives of the Kremlin—and that UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura enjoys Moscow’s full and critical support.

- 9) *Demonstrating that Russia is now again a **major player in the Middle East**, even if not to the pleasure of all within Russia proper and/or among regional actors:* Due to all the before-mentioned points and the significant Russian presence now in Syria, plus the various Russian overtures also towards Egyptian Pres. Gen. Sissi, Russia has managed to put itself again into the forefront of key players in the Middle East—for the first time in 40 years and very much in a time of perceived American retrenchment and withdrawal from that region. Hence ready to fill that perceived strategic vacuum. Interestingly, there are now for the first time public demonstrations on behalf of the “reliable friend Russia” in Syria, which make clear that there seems to be some welcoming of this new reality. Russia’s enhanced new/old strategic role has been forcefully underlined by the Russian-Turkish tensions over the incidence in which Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Suchoy 24 Fighter after an apparently brief intrusion into Turkish airspace on November 24. Though, to remain with reality, repeated Russian air space violations over Turkey have happened before. This dispute now, however concerns the fundamental issue of who is the “Master of the House”—President Putin or President Erdogan? However, the Kremlin and Pres. Putin, cannot loose that quarrel—neither internationally nor domestically—and has to clearly demonstrate that any attack against any Russian asset, military plane or ship, is simply inadmissible. (Much speaks for the fact that President Putin really never even expected such an armed defense resulting in the downing of one of his planes.)
- 10) *Making **Russia’s role critically relevant in solving the causes of the unprecedented refugee crisis in Europe**—at least in the perceptions of many in Europe if not in reality, positioning Russia as indispensable for the solution of this key crisis:* This raises an interesting perspective: for the EU, i.e. western and Northern Europe, the plight of the Syrians and the resulting refugees represents an unprecedented challenge. It is generally accepted that only stabilization of Syria and the region can effectively stem the flow of refugees from there north. Since Russia arguably tries to effectuate such a positive impact it can be argued that Moscow plays a key role in the international efforts to calm the refugee crisis. This will very much affect some political circles in Europe—not to the advantage of their attitude towards the United States.
- 11) *The de facto termination of the European debate about **Russia’s annexation of Crimea in Europe**—now apparently a fait accompli:* Clearly, it now appears that, for many, the Russian annexation of Crimea is no longer an important issue—with the entirety of the recent developments in the region and the terror attacks in Paris even less so. Russia is viewed as a potent potential ally in the fight against terrorism and in bringing stability to Syria. Some warn, however, that this could set a dangerous precedent and that leaving Crimea off the table now and forgetting about the Russian armed intervention in eastern Ukraine could amount to an invitation to further illegal and aggressive operations by the Kremlin. This point could be-

come of *critical relevance for the future* of the relationship between the Kremlin under Vladimir Putin, the region, and the West.

- 12) ***Calming the fighting in Ukraine, by choice and necessity, by employing arms and soldiers from there in Syria and, coincidentally, the possibility of the gradual lifting of the (Ukrainian) EU sanctions as a result:*** By default, this implicitly proves Moscow's critical and extensive influence in Eastern Ukraine. Employing men and material originally destined for Eastern Ukraine in the fighting in Syria via transport ships from Novorussia and Sevastopol on the Crimea implicitly makes the rebels in Eastern Ukraine hostage to the new Syrian operation, with all the implicit meaning of loss of relevance at this critical juncture before another cold winter.
- 13) ***Offering citizens in Russia and abroad another testimony of a new forceful Russia and its important role in the international system under a decisive, action-oriented President Putin:*** President Putin thus has managed to change his image—both at home and abroad, by presenting himself as “a doer” who means business and takes matters into his own able hands.
- 14) ***Showing off to and surprising the Obama Administration and the United States:*** These Fourteen Points raise far-ranging questions not just about Syria, but also about the situation in and around the EU, the relationship between European states and Russia, and the Russia-USA relationship. Russia's apparent readiness and increasing willingness to deploy hard force and military means abroad raises questions of leadership in Europe, and highlights the ripple effects from the war in Syria ranging from humanitarian suffering and the refugee crisis, to radicalization, cultural-religious tensions, and terrorism.