



## **What Is Russia's Intervention in Syria All About?**

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There's been a lot of speculation in the press recently about Russia's motives for its military intervention in Syria, and many are quick to attribute the intervention to a desire to – metaphorically speaking - poke America in the eye. Surrounding this speculation are images of Vladimir Putin as a strategic genius, playing geopolitical chess at the grand master level.

Nothing could be further from the truth. It's certainly convenient for Putin to make the United States look bad in any way he can. But there are a variety of other reasons for Russia's involvement in Syria. And though Putin may briefly look like he is in control of the situation in Syria, the intervention is likely to end badly for him.

It's notable that while many reports are portraying the Russian intervention in terms of U.S.-Russian relations, and intimating that Russia is in some way 'winning', Russia specialists are more likely to point to other factors, and to view the intervention as ill-fated.

Politico recently published a compilation of interviews with 14 Russia specialists on Putin's goals in Syria. All but one pointed to a couple of key factors to explain Russian intervention: 1) Russian domestic concerns; 2) a desire for diplomatic gain; or 3) a desire to prevent other authoritarian regimes from falling. More tellingly, the vast majority also expressed the opinion that Russia's actions are reckless, and will end badly.

The first of these motivations – domestic political concerns – is likely the key reason for Russia's intervention in Syria. It's an excellent opportunity for Vladimir Putin to distract domestic attention from his ongoing failings in Ukraine, and to present an image of Russia as a great power.

The campaign is television gold for a regime which relies heavily on state media and propaganda to maintain popular support at home. Russia's most recent escalation – the use of cruise missiles fired from ships in the Caspian Sea against targets in Syria – was announced by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in a live TV interview with Putin. A cynic would suspect that the strikes were strategically incidental and intended mostly for a domestic audience.

The United States plays some role in the second motivation. But rather than seeking to directly confront the United States in Syria, it's likely that Russia is seeking a diplomatic bargaining chip. Though Putin has strongly supported the Assad regime for some time, it has been unable to move the diplomatic needle on Western and Gulf state demands that Assad must go.

Direct intervention in the conflict gives it a larger stake and greater bargaining power in negotiations. And Russia's intervention not only distracts from its involvement in Ukraine, it enables it to reengage with the international diplomatic community after a period of relative isolation.

The third of these motivations is Russian hopes of preventing the fall of a friendly authoritarian ally. Yet even this has some roots in Russian domestic politics. President Putin has long feared so-called 'color revolutions,' the popular uprisings that swept a number of post-Soviet dictators from power, which Russian media often attribute to U.S. meddling.

By intervening in Syria, Putin not only hopes to save an allied regime, but to undermine the idea of a successful popular uprising against an authoritarian leader. It says far more about his paranoia and insecurity than about Russian strength.

Ultimately, U.S. policymakers would be wise to remember these factors. Putin isn't a strategic genius, matching up against the United States in some geopolitical game. Instead, he's making a gamble in Syria, hoping for diplomatic and domestic gain. It's likely he'll regret his decision.

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