

The West Needs a Strategic Pause before Working with Russia

Written by Robert W. Murray and Joe Varner

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ROBERT W. MURRAY AND JOE VARNER, NOV 19 2015

What a difference a year makes.

Recall that not so long ago, Canada and other Western states were united in their condemnation of Russia's Vladimir Putin after Russia not-so-secretly invaded Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, shot down a commercial airliner full of innocent civilians, supported Iran's nuclear program, oppressed LGBTQ Russians, eliminated his political opposition at home and in NATO countries, and remained the primary obstacle to substantive action in addressing the civil war and humanitarian crisis in Syria.

At this week's G20, Putin has been working hard to reinvent himself and to come in from the cold among great powers and Western states. Putin has stunned many by putting forward a proposal to repay Ukraine's multi-billion dollar debt to Russia and by offering to proactively work with the West, particularly France, to coordinate military operations against ISIS in the wake of the Paris attacks. Putin has been very open about his desire for better relations with the West and it appears that Western states are warming to the idea of working with Russia in the Middle East and to integrating Putin into plans to combat ISIS in Syria. It looks like the Western sanctions imposed on Russia by a lukewarm Europe are about to evaporate. This is especially troubling as the Ukrainian War has cost about 8000 lives to date and the ceasefire was only partially implemented due to Russian intransigence.

For Western states, working with Putin to present a common front against ISIS is making more and more sense given how porous Western strategy in the region has been to date. Military air strikes from Western states have been marginally effective, and there seems to be little appetite in the West for escalation in Syria and Iraq, even in the wake of the Paris attacks. Further complicating matters is Canada's announcement that it will actually end its air strikes and focus more on training of local assets and special forces deployment, despite a clear intention on the part of the French to intensify air strikes. The strategic vacuum the West has been operating in has not only allowed Putin to move Russian military assets into the region, but is now looking more and more as if the West is willing to delegate the necessary military aspects of combating ISIS to Russia. This has had the effect of boosting his regime at home from sagging oil prices and Western sanctions. In a sense, it gives Russia de facto control over the NATO agenda in the Middle East just as unwillingness to take a stronger line gave Russia a veto on NATO expansion in Europe. This has also allowed Putin to realize an old Russian strategic dream in that Syria gives Russia a 'warm water' port on the Mediterranean to exert influence into the region. There are currently about 20,000 Russians and others from the former Eastern Bloc living in Syria and aiding the Syrian regime, and at least a brigade's worth of combat troops have been stationed in Syria over the last several months.

There are a number of reasons why empowering Russia in the Middle East is a dangerous idea, and should create serious pause for Western states. Firstly, while Putin has been trying to appear magnanimous at the G20 and as a possible ally against ISIS, he has simultaneously escalated Russia's military aggression in Eastern Ukraine, showing quite clearly that his agenda differs greatly from that of the West. It is important to note that in March of this year Russia formally withdrew from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty which placed limits on tanks, artillery, armoured personnel carriers and armed helicopters. Secondly, Putin's interest in Syria has less to do with ISIS and more to do with protecting its own national interests in the area, including Assad. While Russian rhetoric in recent weeks has focused on a possible transition plan in Syria, bear in mind Putin has talked about such transitions numerous times in the past while doing everything possible to prevent Assad from leaving power.

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Thirdly, by legitimizing Russian behaviour in Syria and in the Middle East, Western states are in essence giving up on Ukraine and acknowledging that the West is completely unable or unwilling to stand up to aggressors on the international stage. This has put a chill on NATO member states in central Europe and potential future member states and could have the strategic effect of splitting the alliance.

Beyond the above reasoning, Putin will most certainly want a series of concessions on the part of the West in return for taking a lead or playing a significant role in coordinating strategy against ISIS. These can possibly include provisions such as re-entry to the G8, a formal partition of Ukraine and recognition of Russia's claim to Crimea, or lessening or eliminating crippling economic sanctions. It is clearly Russia's belief that the West's inability and unwillingness to devise a coherent strategy to combat ISIS has created possible space for Russia to benefit particularly in the Middle East and Central Europe.

It is time to take a strategic pause and step back as a great deal rides on our next policy choices. Putin is watching and plotting his next move to his benefit and at the West's peril. Before any talk of working with the Russians, escalating military strikes, withdrawing military assets, or anything else, Western states need to take a hard look at why their strategy to date has been a failure and how to best move forward.

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