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Russia and Syria: Let Czar Vladimir Putin Overextend Himself

By Peter Eltsov

Synopsis

Vladimir Putin is increasingly acting like a czar. The Russian autocrat's move into Syria is reminiscent of Romanov overreach. He will come to regret it.

Commentary

VLADIMIR PUTIN says he is not a czar, but increasingly he is behaving like one. So why not let him go the way of Russia's last czar—and sink himself by overextending militarily? Indeed, despite the risk that a weak or dithering response by the West to Putin's new advance into Syria will only encourage the hardliners around him, it may well be that Washington and NATO's best response is to let Putin fight.

Russia's leader has imperial ambitions, but he does not have the economy to support them, especially as a decade of high oil prices recedes into the past. The rouble now costs about three times less of what it was before the financial crisis of 2008, and it does not help that politically Russia is isolated. Even China and India—the two countries that traditionally take the side of Russia's foreign policy and whose economies are in much better shape—are unlikely to make any substantial contributions to Putin's mission in Syria; to do so might jeopardise their relations with the United States and the European Union.

Forcing himself into rank of major powers

By sending tanks and equipment to Syria and declaring forthrightly that he supports Bashar al-Assad, Putin is seeking to move past Ukraine, and he wants readmission into the councils of the major powers, which are themselves edging towards an acknowledgement that simply calling for Assad's ouster is neither workable nor wise at this juncture. It was little surprise that in Putin's address to the United Nations, he barely mentioned Ukraine while blaming the US and NATO for instigating the chaos in the Middle East; he was even drawing a direct parallel between the attempts to export socialism by the former USSR and attempts to export democracy by the West.

In Putin Russia has not seen such a tremendous concentration of power since the Romanovs of the czarist era. Autocratic and secretive, the Kremlin's current decision-making is reminiscent of Byzantine and Roman politics, not even of the good old Soviet days. In a recent interview with CBS's

60 Minutes, Putin told Charlie Rose that he is not a czar but in reality, even in the USSR, key foreign policy decisions took more time and were made more collegially. It took more than a year and many heated discussions for Brezhnev's Politburo to dispatch the Soviet 40th army to Afghanistan—the last time the Kremlin seriously overextended itself. It took only a few days or maybe even hours for Putin to make up his mind regarding the future of Crimea.

Putin seems to have defined his new Middle East strategy just as fast. Officially, Russia's president claims that his goal is to build a new coalition to fight Islamic State, as he indicated in his UN address, and the terrorist group does indeed pose a serious threat to Russia, as Sunni Muslim communities in Central Asia and the Caucasus provide fertile recruiting soil for terrorists. However, on the grand chessboard of Eurasian geopolitics, Putin's motivation for the Russian military action in Syria goes far beyond ISIS.

Machiavellian in its complexity, it pursues multiple goals aimed both at domestic and international audiences. Philosophically, Putin and his cronies have embraced the ideology of Russian exceptionalism and messianism, favouring the autocratic forms of government. Russia's president likes to quote from Russia's most conservative religious philosophers. His favorite thinker, Ivan Illyin (1884-1953), praised Hitler and Franco.

Philosopher Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), whom Putin also quotes, favoured monarchy and juxtaposed Russia's civilisation to that of the west. And now, by condemning Western failure in the Middle East, Putin is extending his domestic creed into a foreign-policy doctrine—forthrightly embracing dictators and autocrats as the only answer to Islamist terrorism.

Disastrous political consequences awaiting?

What we cannot do under any conditions is to forget about Ukraine, the Baltic States, the Caucasus and other areas of Eurasia that may at some point become the targets of Russia's aggression. By pushing outward, Putin is only extending a very old Russian tradition that Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin were the exceptions to, rather than the other way around. Since the reign of Ivan the 4th in the 16th century, an inherent element of Russia's political identity has been to expand its empire over the vast territories of Eurasia, comprising Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe.

Historians still argue about the origins of this crucial trait of Russia's political culture: Is it national character, geography, the legacy of the Byzantine Empire and Genghis Khan, or Russia's religious messianism? Syria may first appear insignificant to Russia's traditional spheres of influence, but instability in the Middle East presents a major threat to what Russian perceives as its buffer zones: the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Overextending its power, Russia is likely to face disastrous political consequences. This happened to the Russian empire at the beginning of the 20th century when Russia stretched from the Pacific Ocean to Poland and from the Arctic Ocean to South Asia. In 1904, Czar Nicholas the II provoked a Russo-Japanese war by overextending in the Far East: this war turned out to be a disaster. In 1914-1917, the same czar Nicholas ignored Russia's deteriorating economy and the success of revolutionary movements. This political blindness eventually led to the Bolshevik coup d'état of October 1917.

Likewise, in December of 1979, Leonid Brezhnev's politburo ignored the deteriorating morale and economy in the Soviet Union and the countries of the Warsaw Pact. They launched a military campaign which buried the USSR.

The current Russian presence in Syria may seem minor when compared to the aforementioned historical events. Located north of Damascus, the Russian air base at Latakia nonetheless may be just the beginning of the further move of Russia's troops and arms to the Middle East. When Russian soldiers begin to return home dead or even beheaded, it is going to be much more difficult for Putin to justify his war. Putin's Syrian campaign may become the beginning of the end of his autocratic regime.

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