

Russia's Overstretched Military Faces Challenges from Syria to Ukraine

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Articles & Testimony

The West should move quickly to exploit Moscow's long series of bad strategic moves.

Syrrian opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a radical Sunni group, continue to make lightning advances against the Assad regime (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/06/bashar-al-assad-must-pay/>) as his chief backers—Russia, and Iran (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/06/think-trump-and-joe-biden-are-old-wait-for-irans-next-supreme-leader/>) and its proxies—are distracted and weakened.

This remarkable change on the Syrian battlefield calls for taking a broad view of Russia and what would happen in the days and months ahead.

Russia the Great Middle East Destabilizer

Russia has played a destabilizing role in the Middle East and Europe for years as part of its wider war against the West. However, the weakness of Russia's strategy is now becoming more apparent. Vladimir Putin's Russia is resource-constrained due to its all-consuming war on Ukraine and has few moves left other than continual escalation with the West and stoking regional crises.

Now is the time for Western policymakers to think strategically about how to take advantage of this moment and send a message to Putin that he is losing across the board, to push him to reconsider his escalation strategy.

Putin views using escalation in each conflict as part of his global war with the West. After invading Ukraine (<https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/dragon-drone-ukraines-flying-flamethrower-attacks-at-4000-degrees/>), Syria became especially important for this strategy. The Kremlin used its position in Syria to harass the US and distract its attention from Ukraine. In the summer of 2023, Moscow horizontally escalated

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deterring-russias-horizontal-escalation-syria>) with the United States, at a time when [Ukrainian forces \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/ukraines-t-84-oplot-tank-explained-in-3-words/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/ukraines-t-84-oplot-tank-explained-in-3-words/) were slowly regaining [\(https://thehill.com/policy/international/4138170-under-pressure-in-ukraine-putin-lashes-out-at-us-in-syria/\)](https://thehill.com/policy/international/4138170-under-pressure-in-ukraine-putin-lashes-out-at-us-in-syria/) territory captured by Russia.

Outside Syria, Moscow's fingerprints were all over [empowering hostile forces \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-russias-strategy-arming-anti-american-proxies\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-russias-strategy-arming-anti-american-proxies) in the Middle East, especially after the Oct 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, in the context of Russia's growing relationship with Iran. Chaos in the region has been to [Putin's benefit \(https://jstribune.com/borshchevskaya-russian-policy-and-hamas-assault/\)](https://jstribune.com/borshchevskaya-russian-policy-and-hamas-assault/) because it distracted the West, forced it to expend resources, and undermined US credibility when it could not resolve crises. Outside the Middle East, Russia's strategic shift towards China, [North Korea \(https://www.npr.org/2024/11/15/nx-s1-5188400/russia-north-korea-treaty\)](https://www.npr.org/2024/11/15/nx-s1-5188400/russia-north-korea-treaty), along with [Venezuela \(https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/11/08/russia-signs-security-energy-deals-with-venezuela-a86944\)](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/11/08/russia-signs-security-energy-deals-with-venezuela-a86944) shows that this is a global battle with the West.

Ukraine Is the Test Case

Ukraine, of course, is a prime example of Russia's escalation tactics. Most recently, Russia's use of the experimental Oreshnik nuclear-capable missile in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro was a significant escalation. This was meant to scare the West into concessions on Ukraine in response to Biden's decision to permit Kyiv to fire [US-supplied ATACMS \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/11/ukraine-needs-much-more-than-just-atacms-to-fight-russia/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/11/ukraine-needs-much-more-than-just-atacms-to-fight-russia/) missiles into Russia, on the heels of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's call with Putin for the first time in nearly two years, ending his isolation from the West. [Putin \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/06/want-to-end-the-ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-needs-to-go/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/06/want-to-end-the-ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-needs-to-go/) uses overtures of peace for further escalation to press for more significant advantage for himself.

[ATACMS \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/11/was-joe-bidens-atacms-call-the-right-move/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/11/was-joe-bidens-atacms-call-the-right-move/) do not pose a critical military threat to Russia, so to resort to a nuclear-capable missile was a significant escalation. If anyone had any doubt, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov [explained \(https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-signals-readiness-use-any-means-ukraine-conflict-2024-12-06/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-signals-readiness-use-any-means-ukraine-conflict-2024-12-06/) why Moscow did this, "The message is that you, I mean the US and the allies of the US, who also provide these long-range weapons to the Kyiv regime – they must understand that we would be ready to use any means not to allow them to succeed in what they call a strategic defeat of Russia."

Question: How Long Can Russia Keep Escalating?

How long can Russia sustain this global strategy of escalation?

At present, Moscow has not exhausted its ability to escalate horizontally (geographically), vertically (intensity), and laterally (by domain), well short of a nuclear threshold, and we shouldn't expect the Kremlin to give up anytime soon.

Rather than wait for Russia to punch itself out, Western policymakers should consider all options to gain leverage and look to undermine Russia's position.

Putin Must Help Assad

The Kremlin is unlikely to give up Assad and [said \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/04/moscow-claims-external-forces-seeking-to-escalate-violence-in-syria\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/dec/04/moscow-claims-external-forces-seeking-to-escalate-violence-in-syria) as much. Still, Moscow's primary interest was always a position in Syria rather than Assad himself, and if the situation were to turn too dire, the Kremlin may calculate Assad is no longer worth saving. Syria offers Moscow too many strategic benefits. In addition, Putin's

prestige is on the line if he cannot help Assad now. In 2015, Putin saved him, at a low cost, from an eminent fall and established a strategically vital position for Russia on the Eastern Mediterranean that it used as a springboard to project power into southern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The Middle East saw Russia as a great power it had to contend with and one that does what it says it will do—unlike the West that, in previous years, kept saying Assad must go but did not make that happen.

But Russia has now shown itself missing in action at a critical moment of the latest rebel offensive, which cost dramatic losses for Assad, most notably the second largest city of Aleppo, whose original capture in 2016 by the Assad regime along with Russia's help became a turning point in the war in Assad's favor.

What Should the West Do?

Russia's most recent [firing \(https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/03/russia-says-test-fired-missiles-in-eastern-mediterranean-drills-a87218\)](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/12/03/russia-says-test-fired-missiles-in-eastern-mediterranean-drills-a87218) of hypersonic missiles during naval and air forces drills in the Eastern Mediterranean, as [Russia \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/the-u-s-military-has-a-problem-russia-and-china-are-spending-on-arms-like-crazy/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/the-u-s-military-has-a-problem-russia-and-china-are-spending-on-arms-like-crazy/) had been carrying air strikes to counter the rebel offensive, is a signal to the West to stay out of Syria. The irony is the West is not doing enough. The West could take advantage of this moment and increase operations in the Baltic, the Black Sea, and in the Mediterranean, as well as in the Pacific, to force Russia to improve its operational tempo and thus raise logistical costs for Moscow. In theory, Moscow has enough aircraft to give to Syria but can get bogged down in logistics.

Another option to consider is cratering the runway at Al Assad airport—deliberately damaging a runway, rendering it unusable for aircraft landing and taking off, which is typically done in a military context to disrupt the enemy's air operations. Such a step doesn't strike Russian aircraft nor destroy anyone's military equipment but would prevent the bombing of civilians.

The West could also take better charge of the information narrative with an eye towards discrediting Russia, especially outside the West, in a more coherent way to show that Moscow is a proliferator of conflict rather than the mediator it portrays itself to be. This approach could also entail highlighting both Russia's current incompetence in Syria, such as the loss of Aleppo and the recent use of Oreshnik. The latter may have appeared intimidating on the surface, but in practice, it carried inert warheads, meaning it lacked explosives and caused only limited damage.

There's also a question of cost and Russia's ability to create a large stockpile of these weapons to serve as a credible deterrent. The West could emphasize that if Russia aimed to show it had more significant and more powerful missiles than the US, the message was unconvincing.

The West Must Move Now Against Russia's Bad Strategic Moves

In short, now is the time to look for opportunities to undermine the Kremlin. The West could do more to increase the costs of Putin's imperial overreach. Otherwise, he will continue hiding his losses, blackmailing and manipulating the West.

Losing in Syria would represent a strategic defeat for Russia that could reverberate far beyond [Syria \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/its-nagorno-karabakh-all-over-again-in-northeastern-syria/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/its-nagorno-karabakh-all-over-again-in-northeastern-syria/). It could impact other countries' support for his war in [Ukraine \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/the-ukraine-war-is-becoming-a-massive-drone-war/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2024/12/the-ukraine-war-is-becoming-a-massive-drone-war/) if Putin is no longer seen as a winner.

A complete reversal and fall of the Assad regime would undermine Putin not only in Ukraine but in Georgia, Moldova, and across North Africa by both encouraging and providing hope for nascent democracies as well as sowing seeds of doubt within Putin's cabal of autocrats as to whether Russia will come to their aid in their own time of need.

It is not enough to sit back and watch. [Russia \(https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/06/could-a-nato-vs-russia-war-start-in-the-baltic-sea/\)](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/06/could-a-nato-vs-russia-war-start-in-the-baltic-sea/) has a history of turning losses into future victories if left uncontested. The West should not cede the playing field to him.

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