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[Putin's Vision on the Road Away From Damascus](#)



Much has been written and undoubtedly more will be written about the seemingly sudden partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria. This is a partial withdrawal because Russia can and will retain forces indefinitely in its naval and air bases as provided for by its treaty with Syria. Moreover, [as Putin indicated](#), more forces could return in a few hours if necessary. We also should not doubt that Moscow achieved its objectives which had little or nothing to do with ISIS but everything to do with securing Assad's state and person, and enhancing Russia's overall Middle Eastern position and thus Putin's domestic standing. That much is already known. Neither is it justified to say Russia only partially achieved its objectives as some observers have written. Since Russia's objectives do not revolve around ISIS but about great power issues and Assad's continuation in power, even if Moscow's achievement is not complete it is more than satisfying. It is clear that staying in Syria would have led to diminishing returns and mounting costs. But there are other elements to this story that the media has typically ignored.

For example, virtually every government announced that Putin's decision surprised them. Yet [Jordan's government announced](#) that it had known since January that this would take place. Unless Jordan is lying or deluded —conclusions for which there is no evidence it also is worth asking why Moscow did not tell

Washington and why Washington and its allies with their vast intelligence capabilities were taken by surprise? The most obvious answer to the first question is that Jordan did not tell the Obama Administration because it no longer trusts it, another sign of the erosion of the United States alliance system in the Middle East, an outcome that President Obama clearly seems not to regard as serious. The answer to the subsequent questions suggests other reasons why Putin announced his decision now.

Just before the announcement of this partial withdrawal on March 14, the U.S. was publicly pressing Putin and Russia to support a political process intended to supplant Assad even if Washington has no idea how to do this by its own means and proxies. Meanwhile Assad, as many had noted, proclaimed that he would not negotiate with the insurgents and intends to reconquer all of Syria. Under the circumstances, preserving Russian combat forces in a deployed mode on Assad's behalf would mean Russia was no longer fighting for its own but for Assad's interests. No intelligent Russian leader could support such an outcome. Moreover, it would also mean that while Washington was demanding that it undermine Assad politically, Russia and its forces would be caught between Obama and Assad, and lose the means to define their own objectives.

Putin cut the Gordian knot here, essentially sticking Obama with the responsibility of producing a political settlement. At the same time, he made clear to Assad that he should negotiate a solution that preserves his government over much, if not all, of Syria, and preserves his power for some unspecified duration. Putin also cashed in his chips and is now a completely freed agent. Despite Obama's remarks that Putin would be caught in a quagmire just like the U.S. was, Putin has learned some of the key lessons of limited war in the Third World, particularly the danger of being beholden or tied to an ally or client who does not trust you and whom you do not trust. In Vietnam and Afghanistan, if not Iraq, the U.S. saddled itself with clients whom it promoted who then turned on it but could not at the same time build a viable state. This outcome helped ensure the U.S. defeat in all of these wars because it had committed itself to forces it could not control or trust, and it therefore could neither articulate nor attain its own interests in these conflicts.

As a result Washington is now committed to a political process that cannot give it the outcome it desires, i.e. Assad's removal, and for which it also will not commit the means needed to realize that outcome. Second, not only is Russia now an arbiter of equal standing in the Middle East with the U.S., it is forging a [practical coalition](#) with Iran, Iraq, Assad's Syria, and potentially the Kurds. Indeed, Moscow earlier [warned Syria](#) that no peace was possible without including the PYD (Syria's Kurdiah party) in negotiations. It has made oil deals with Saudi Arabia, and arms and energy deals with not only the states listed above but also with Egypt. And it has made its own deals with Israel at Washington's expense as Obama's disregard for his allies has caused U.S.-Israeli ties to evaporate. While there are tensions in those relationships, for example, over the S-300 air defense network for Iran, they are not strong enough to break this loose, but effective, coalition.

Bearing all this in mind, it is high time to recognize not only how fatuously uncomprehending the White House is about Russia's capabilities and interests, but also that Putin is not just a canny tactician, but a real strategist who is neither afraid to take risks for his strategic vision, nor bound by other actors' projection of their visions for Russian policy. Clearly he has made serious mistakes, overestimating support for Russia in Donbas, to name only one. But instead of dismissing his strategic acumen and Russia's strategic achievements, we must focus on regaining our capabilities for strategic action. Putin's undoubted accomplishments come at the expense of international order and security. In Georgia, Ukraine, and now Syria, Russia has helped start an avalanche that threatens to bury the international order built after 1945. Neither it, nor the other forces that are also throwing stones down the mountain of international security, like China, Iran, and North Korea, will be able to control the ensuing avalanche. Therefore, if nobody is available to erect viable barriers to that avalanche, it will bury us all. The complacency and ignorance displayed by this White House and Europe's visible weakness in regard to Syria and its now visible outcomes in Europe's refugee crisis cannot bring about greater stability or security. Neither will Putin's victories lead to Russia's stability because his regime is now as much the progenitor of Russian weakness as it is the embodiment of its strength. Consequently, Putin's regime can only stay in power by launching more adventures abroad. And, as we know from history, no strategist, however gifted, wins all the time. And we also know that it only takes one disaster or the approaching succession to Putin for Russia to fall under the avalanche that it has itself started.

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