



CONNECTING THE DOTS: RUSSIA AT THE CROSSROADS



Over the past six months, Wikistrat has conducted five crowdsourced exercises (simulations, wargames and forums) focused on Russia. While each of these had its own theme, additional insights can be gained from “connecting the dots” between the various drills from a bird’s-eye perspective.

WHAT WE DIDN'T SEE

Analysts noted Russia’s increasing tendency to simultaneously engage on multiple geostrategic fronts, allowing it to “pick and choose” its interventions. However, analysts did not focus on Russia’s potential to play a disruptive role in East Asia, either through its military presence in the Kuril Islands, or through a North Korea–related diplomatic initiative. These are areas in which Russian policy has remained broadly consistent since the end of the Cold War – and apparently of less immediate interest and concern when compared with recent Russian activity in Europe and the Middle East.

THE “BIG EVENT”

It is very clear from the analysis that Russian overcommitment anywhere would be a game-changer. This could most plausibly come about if an adversary with comparable will and resources chose to escalate a confrontation in order to compel Moscow to back down. Such scenarios include:

- » The EU responds to an aggressive Russian move with truly comprehensive sanctions.
- » The U.S. responds to a situation in Ukraine with a major security assistance package.
- » The Saudis deploy ground forces into Syria in an effort to undo the effects of Russian military operations there.

In such cases, Moscow would no longer be in the advantageous position of choosing between doing nothing or a limited/decisive use of force, but rather between a humiliating drawdown or escalation that would force it to dispense with its strategy of selection. Russia has not yet had to face this dilemma; if it did, it would be an enormous economic, political and diplomatic decision with profound domestic policy consequences.

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A second game-changer would be if Russia was presented with a “too-good-to-be-true” opportunity. Russia’s military ventures have heretofore been aimed at beating back a tide of adversity – e.g., compliant regimes that are fading or creeping chaos encroaching on its borders. Russia has essentially been playing **not to lose**.

By contrast, a change in the international circumstances that offered Russia a **chance to win** would be monumental. Such a situation is hard to imagine, but if one were to posit that the next U.S. president moved to embrace a regional realignment in the Middle East – e.g., embracing Iran and distancing America from Saudi Arabia and the GCC – then

one could imagine enormous opportunity for Russia to move into the region based upon a new commonality of interest. For instance, with the exception of their Syrian differences, Moscow and Riyadh share interests that include:

- » High oil prices
- » Political stability in the Middle East
- » Rejection of externally imposed demands for greater democratic accountability, human rights and rule of law
- » Aggressive counterterrorism

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COUNTERING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

A Multilateral Russia

So much contemporary analysis of Russian military actions builds upon the notion that Moscow is rebelling against the NATO world order that the U.S. has sought to construct since the end of the Cold War. This automatically places Russia in the role of an antithetical outlier, which suggest that its actions are unilateral in nature. Yet a key takeaway from the simulations is that Moscow is engaged in an almost constant search for partners. After the start of the Ukraine crisis, Russia sought out China, with whom it moved to finalize a gas deal that had been in negotiations for months. In Syria, it was the Assad regime, Hezbollah and Iran. It is clear that Moscow is seeking to break out of its diplomatic isolation, and sees its military as an instrument it can use to cultivate friendly relations with a host of other actors.

A Cautious Russia

One common element to most of the analysis is that there is no single factor that can explain Russian activity. The West tends to see Moscow’s behavior as being very direct – i.e., the aim is X, the means are Y. Yet Wikistrat analysts highlight that Russia has acted only when the cost-benefit indicators all point in the same direction. For instance, very cogently argued reasons for the intervention in Syria included:

- » Keeping Assad in power
- » Preventing militancy from spreading to Russia
- » Securing its naval base
- » Showing competence before the Russian public in order to improve popularity
- » Testing new weaponry in a theatre already witnessing conflict
- » Securing parity with the U.S. in international circles

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- » Introducing air defenses into the region to prevent future U.S. efforts at regime change
- » Forging a coalition of likeminded states and actors (e.g., Iran, Syria, Hezbollah)

This, perversely, shows that Russia has actually been quite cautious. Only when there were multiple potential advantages and few drawbacks did the Russians choose to act. This is in keeping with Putin's comment that he could "take Kiev within 72 hours." At the time, it was seen as threatening, but it was actually a testament to how unwilling Moscow was to utilize all force available to it, instead only prepared to take action given a very high likelihood of success and obvious benefit.

A Stable Russia

Most Russia analysis tends to oscillate between extremes: Either the Russians are about to put NATO off-balance with a brilliant initiative, or the Putin regime is about to collapse. Our analysts, however, highlighted some useful nuances. As one analyst noted, "Russia is never as strong as it wants to be and never so weak as it is thought to be." Analysts noted that the degree of political centralization created over the last fifteen years lends itself to stability rather than shock. The system in place is built around Putin. Mainstream Western analysis tends to see this as a weakness for the system as a whole, but Wikistrat's exercises indicated it actually creates a self-perpetuating stability because it is almost impossible to imagine an alternative.

Likewise, analysts pointed out that foreign ventures (such as Syria) bolster the political support which Putin enjoys. Too often this was framed in terms of the "diversionary theory of war" – i.e., Putin is "distracting" the Russian population from its domestic woes. This actually overcomplicates the issue: Simply put, successful foreign operations are popular in Russia.



Vladimir Putin

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