

# Putin's Genius

by Jeffrey Steinberg

March 14—Russia's President Putin has conducted a global flanking operation in Syria, aimed at bringing the Syrian tragedy to an end through the only means available. But he was simultaneously playing on the global stage—altering the political balance in Europe, boosting sane factions in Washington who understand the urgency of a revived U.S.-Russian partnership, creating a long-overdue wedge between Turkey's Erdogan regime and Turkey's NATO partners, boosting Russian-Chinese strategic collaboration, calling the Saudi bluff and bluster, and correcting some glaring flaws in Iran's strategic thinking.

On March 5, the German magazine *Focus* published details of a leaked NATO report, acknowledging the effectiveness of the Russian military deployments in Syria, which have been vastly more successful against the Islamic State than the longer-running and larger U.S. and NATO military operations.

While the NATO paper was accurate in its characterization of the Russian operations, which began Sept. 30, 2015, a much more important truth was overlooked altogether.

Yes, the Russian Su-35 is the most advanced fighter jet in existence anywhere today. Yes, the Russians have capitalized on accurate and real-time on-the-ground intelligence to identify terrorist targets and strike them effectively. Yes, the Russians have been able to minimize civilian casualties and other collateral damage, reflecting a degree of training and care that is often missing from the Western deployments in Syria.

But the reality is that it was the genius of Russian President Vladimir Putin—who made the command decision to launch the Syrian operation at a critical moment, totally outflanking the United States and Brit-



*Russia's secret weapon: Vladimir Putin's genius. Putin is pictured here aboard the battlecruiser Pyotr Velikiy during the Northern Fleet exercise in 2005.*

ain, and other Western powers—which was the key to the potential victory. This factor of political genius was decisive in the turnaround in the entire Syrian situation.

Today, the second round of Geneva talks between the Syrian government and rebel factions backed by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other Gulf states, has begun. A two-week ceasefire has largely held, with a handful of daily violations, but with a tremendous decline in fighting, allowing humanitarian aid to get into parts of Syria that have been shut off

for as long as five years. The United States and Russia are co-managing the ceasefire, through monitoring centers in Latakia, Syria, and Amman, Jordan. The Geneva talks have the unanimous backing of the United Nations Security Council through a joint Russian-American resolution.

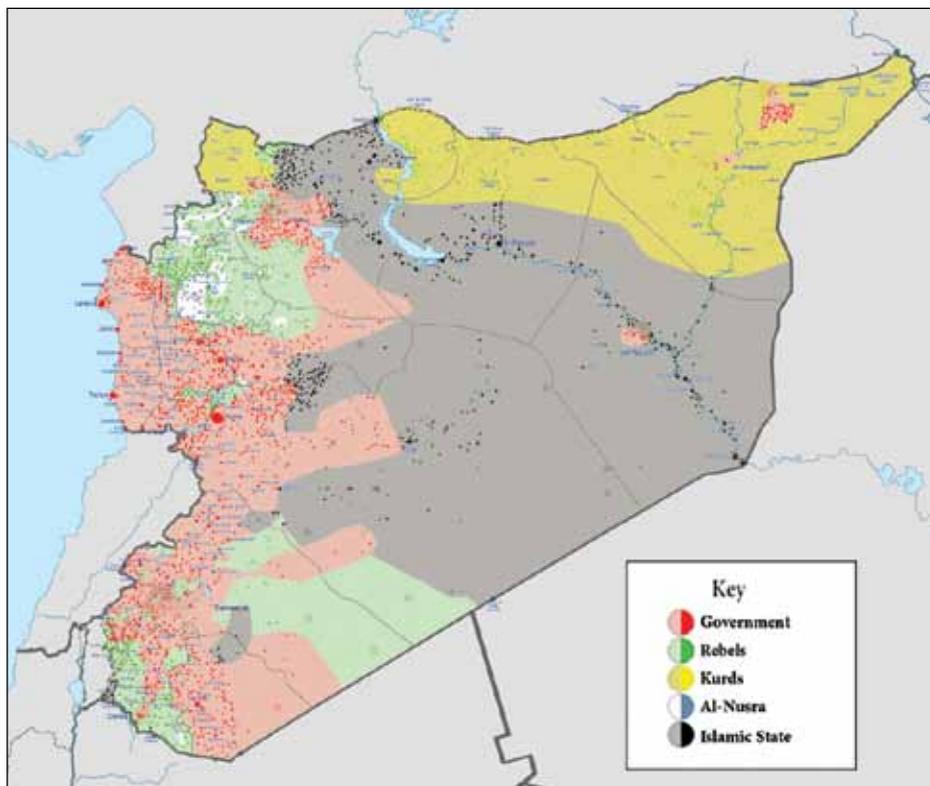
It is almost an understatement that none of this would have been possible without President Putin's decision to take decisive action in Syria last summer.

Reports that Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' al-Quds Brigade, secretly flew to Moscow early last summer to meet personally with President Putin have been confirmed by well-placed Washington sources. Gen. Soleimani urged Putin to intervene to avert a collapse of the Syrian military and potentially of the Syrian government in Damascus.

## There Is No Substitute for Victory

Prior to the Soleimani trip to Moscow, Russia had recently withdrawn 100 military intelligence advisers from Syria, because the Iranians and Hezbollah had effectively taken control of the fight against the Saudi and Turkish-backed rebels, and were making some serious strategic mistakes. They were effectively ceding

## The Distribution of Armed Forces in Syria, March 2016



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major parts of the country to the foreign-backed anti-Assad fighters and were preparing to accept the reduction of the area of government control to Damascus and the mountain areas of Latakia province on the Mediterranean coast, where a majority of Alawites reside.

Putin understood that the fight was for all of Syria and anything short of a perspective of total victory was a losing proposition. The Russian deployment was premised on just such a total victory against all of the foreign-backed terrorists, not just the Islamic State and the al-Qaeda (Nusra Front) forces.

With that concept driving the entire Russian deployment, the Russians committed some of their newest, state-of-the-art military equipment, including the already mentioned Su-35 fighter jets, as well as S-400 air defense systems, which had never before been used in combat operations.

Putin also understood that the Russian intervention was a military-diplomatic strategic intervention. Unlike the United States, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, Putin devised a top-down, integrated approach. When Putin or his Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared that the Syrian war could not be won

on the battlefield, but had to be won through a diplomatic process, they were not just delivering empty phrases. They meant it, and they had a strategy for simultaneously creating the conditions for an end to the Syrian tragedy and for recapturing almost the entire territory of Syria, except for those areas temporarily in the hands of ISIS and Nusra.

Putin also knew that Western officials, with very few exceptions, would be blinded to the Russian flanking operations—on the battlefield and at the diplomatic table—by the hatred for the Russian President that permeated official circles in Washington, London, Paris, and even Berlin.

For months the American media fixated on the fact that the Russian/Syrian combined forces were not exclusively targeting ISIS and Nusra. They

were conducting conventional warfare, aimed at cutting off the main roads leading to ISIS territory, cutting off the logistical lines running from NATO member Turkey into ISIS- and Nusra-controlled parts of northern Syria, and cutting the links between the Syrian and Iraqi territories held by ISIS.

The mainstream media joined key Obama White House officials in repeatedly denouncing Putin and the Russians for targeting Western-backed Syrian rebel forces, failing even to study the battle maps of the country to understand the Russian deployments.

It is in this domain—strategic thinking in depth—where Putin's genius, in stark contrast to the foolishness of the vast majority of political leaders and pundits in the West, stands out as the decisive factor to be understood.

The *Focus* magazine's leaking of the NATO document made clear that some Brussels military analysts have caught on to the fact that the Russians have conducted themselves professionally, have abided by the international laws of warfare, and have developed capabilities that far exceed those of NATO itself.

Putin has shown himself to be a grand strategist, and that is the ultimate message from the NATO document.