



By Hugo Spaulding and ISW Russia and Ukraine Team
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Russia's intervention in Syria has forced the West to reengage Moscow in order to resolve the threat more immediately posed by ISIS even as President Vladimir Putin continues to bend international norms in his favor. Secretary of State John Kerry signaled the U.S.'s willingness to not only reengage with the Kremlin but also to make strategic concessions after his meeting with Putin in Moscow, where he signaled that Washington would accept succession to Assad rather than demand full replacement of the regime. Russia's confrontation with NATO meanwhile continued to escalate as tensions rose between Moscow and Ankara. Russian warships reportedly diverted two Turkish commercial vessels alleged to be on course for collision, including firing warning shots towards a fishing boat near the Turkish Straits. Russia threatened to "immediately" destroy any target posing a threat to its military contingent in Syria and promised "disastrous consequences" for future "reckless actions" by Turkey. Russia seeks to reassert its freedom of action in and around Syria by accelerating hostilities with Turkey below the threshold of violent confrontation. Russia's conflict with Turkey threatens to spill over into the South Caucasus, a historical sphere of competition, where a frozen conflict escalated between the military allies of the two powers, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia's competition with NATO escalated in the Balkans, where several thousand pro-Serbian and pro-Russian demonstrators protested the anticipated accession of Montenegro into the transatlantic alliance. The Kremlin's pledge to take "retaliatory actions" in response to NATO's December 2 accession invitation to Montenegro raised the prospect of further Russian destabilization in Eastern Europe even if it did not play a direct role in facilitating the protests. Russia continues to posture for long-term competition with NATO with its declared prioritization of its nuclear forces and force projection in the Arctic. Russia's aggression towards NATO and aspiring alliance members such as Ukraine and Georgia has not restricted its ability to pursue renewed great power status.

- 1 United States.** 15 DEC: Secretary of State John Kerry said that he found "some common ground" with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Syrian rebel groups eligible for peace talks, paving the way for international talks including Russia, the U.S. and regional powers on December 18 in New York City. Kerry said that the U.S. was not pursuing "regime change" in Damascus but rather a political settlement where Syrians would determine the country's future, possibly signaling closer alignment with Moscow's stance on Assad. Kerry announced that the U.S. was prepared to cooperate with Russia to defeat ISIS following his meeting with Putin in Moscow.
- 2 Syria.** 11 DEC: President Vladimir Putin alleged in an annual Russian Defense Ministry meeting that Moscow was providing air support and arms to 5,000 members of the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA). FSA-affiliated groups denied coordination with Russia.
- 3 Saudi Arabia.** 12 DEC: Russia's Foreign Ministry criticized the Syrian opposition conference in Riyadh as unrepresentative after political and armed opposition groups in attendance agreed to participate in a peace process with the condition of Assad's removal at the start of any political transition.
- 4 Turkey.** 09 DEC: Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu accused Russia of pursuing the "ethnic cleansing" of Sunni and pro-Turkish Turkmen populations with airstrikes in Latakia Province, Syria.

11 DEC: President Vladimir Putin said in an annual Defense Ministry meeting that anything "threatening" Russian forces or facilities in Syria would be "immediately destroyed," likely a warning to Ankara.

13-14 DEC: The crew of a Russian destroyer launched small arms fire towards a Turkish fishing vessel in the northern Aegean Sea. Moscow claimed the Turkish vessel refused previous warnings to avoid collision and threatened "disastrous consequences" for future Turkish "reckless actions" against Russia's military forces in Syria. A Russian small missile ship reportedly escorted a second Turkish vessel in the Black Sea that a Russian energy firm claimed was on course for collision with its oil rigs.
- 5 South Caucasus.** 09-10 DEC: The Georgian Defense Ministry accused Moscow of violating Georgian airspace with a drone and transport helicopter from the Russian-occupied breakaway region of South Ossetia.

10 DEC: Azerbaijani tanks shelled the disputed Armenian-controlled breakaway state of Nagorno-Karabakh for the first time since a 1994 ceasefire. Turkey recently pledged to do "everything possible to liberate the occupied lands" of its ally Azerbaijan, referring to the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave controlled by Russia's military ally Armenia.
- 6 Crimea.** 12 DEC: Two new fast-attack ships joined the Black Sea Fleet in the Crimean port of Sevastopol equipped with "Kalibr-NK" long-range cruise missiles, which Russia has launched into Syria from the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas.
- 7 Montenegro.** 12 DEC: Several thousand pro-Serbian and pro-Russian demonstrators protested in the capital of Podgorica against Montenegro's anticipated NATO membership ten days after NATO invited the Western Balkan country to join the alliance.
- 8 Ukraine.** 08-12 DEC: Russia's proxies in southeastern Ukraine intensified attacks on government positions around the separatist stronghold of Donetsk city, opening fire with multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) and tanks. Ukrainian authorities conducted raids against a suspected pro-Russian sabotage cell in Kyiv and the northeastern city of Kharkiv.
- 9 Italy.** 09 DEC: Italy blocked EU efforts to renew sanctions against Russia, postponing the decision until a December 18 meeting of EU leaders.

11 DEC: Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni called for closer "collaboration and cooperation" with Russia to combat terrorism during a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Rome.
- 10 Arctic.** 10 DEC. Russia placed "several" long-range S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems on "trial combat duty" on Russia's northwestern border. The systems may be stationed on the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in Archangelsk Oblast where a Russian military source revealed on December 8 that S-400s were deployed at an unspecified time this year.

12 DEC: Russia launched an intercontinental ballistic missile from a submarine in the Barents Sea northeast of Scandinavia to test its maritime "nuclear containment" system, according to the Russian Ministry of Defense.
- 11 Finland.** 10 DEC: Finland reported that an unidentified helicopter crossed six miles into Finnish airspace from Russia over the Gulf of Finland.
- 12 Russia.** 11 DEC: President Vladimir Putin emphasized bolstering the "combat capabilities" of Russia's strategic nuclear forces as a priority objective at an annual Defense Ministry meeting. Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu announced that Russia would place five new nuclear regiments with modern rocket systems on "combat duty" in 2016.