



Hugo Spaulding and ISW Russia and Ukraine Team  
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Russian military intervention in Syria has forced the West to negotiate on the Kremlin's terms, granting Moscow greater freedom of action to challenge and destabilize its adversaries. President Barack Obama reaffirmed the concession of the U.S.'s demand for a Syrian postwar government without Assad and his regime, a policy shift Secretary of State John Kerry previously expressed during his December 15 visit to Moscow. President Obama called for a Syrian political settlement that would build a "bridge" to Moscow and Tehran by respecting their interests. This shift coincided with a landmark unanimous UN Security Council decision to approve a peace framework for Syria that did not address Assad's future. The U.S. and Russia also cosponsored a UN Security Council resolution increasing sanctions against ISIS's financial network while France agreed to expand information sharing with Russia about anti-ISIS airstrikes and the disposition of armed groups in Syria.

The U.S. and Europe attempted to balance their reengagement with Moscow over threats emanating from the Middle East with reaffirmed opposition to Russian aggression in Ukraine. The EU extended sanctions against Russia despite growing internal divisions over German plans to increase Russian gas imports. The U.S. also expanded its sanctions against Russia, which criticized Western sanctions related to Ukraine as an obstacle to cooperation in the Middle East. NATO also reaffirmed its support to Ukraine by agreeing to boost defense industry cooperation and revealing possible plans to expand cooperation between NATO special forces and the Ukrainian military. Russia meanwhile continued to confront the transatlantic military alliance through its conflict with Turkey, which both countries accelerated by inviting ethnic minority opposition leaders to hold high-level talks. Russia will likely seek to expand its military, economic, and political levers of influence in order to eventually undermine Western opposition to its destabilization operations in Ukraine and other vulnerable areas of the former Soviet Union.

- 1 Syria.** 18 DEC: Russian sources cited in the *Wall Street Journal* reported that heavily-armed contractors from a Russian private security firm participated in Russian operations in Syria and eastern Ukraine.
  - 2 Iraq.** 20 DEC: Unnamed U.S. officials reported that Russia was attempting to build ties with Sunni tribal leaders in Iraq by offering them direct arms supplies.
  - 3 Turkey.** 17 DEC: Leaders of the Crimean Tatars, a Turkic minority indigenous to Russian-occupied Crimea, met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and PM Ahmet Davutoglu in the Turkish city of Konya, where the Tatar leaders reportedly called for support in creating a new Ukrainian military unit near Crimea.
  - 4 United States.** 15 DEC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford held a telephone conversation with Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov to discuss Russian and U.S.-led coalition operations in Syria, the second top-level military-to-military communication in two weeks after a 15-month pause.
  - 5 France.** 21 DEC: France and Russia agreed to increase intelligence sharing about airstrikes and armed groups in Syria during French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian's visit to Moscow.
  - 6 European Union.** 18 DEC: Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and European Council head Donald Tusk criticized German plans to construct a new pipeline from Russia, which would increase EU dependence on Russian gas and deprive Ukraine of revenue and leverage as a major transit country for Russian gas deliveries to Europe.
  - 7 Ukraine.** 16, 21 DEC: President Vladimir Putin issued a decree ending free trade relations with Ukraine on January 1, 2016, when an EU-Ukraine free trade agreement will come into effect. Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev called for legal action against Ukraine following its default on a \$3 billion debt, which Kyiv described as "political bribery" previously used to persuade ousted President Viktor Yanukovich to turn down an EU association agreement in December 2013.
  - 8 Estonia.** 17 DEC: Estonia accused Russia of violating its airspace with a military transport plane off of the NATO member's northern coast, the second reported Russian airspace violation over the Gulf of Finland in a week.
  - 9 Armenia.** 21 DEC: Moscow deployed six "Hind" attack and "Hip" transport helicopters to its airbase outside the Armenian capital of Yerevan, the second Russian helicopter deployment to the base near the Turkish border this month.
- 18 DEC: The UN Security Council unanimously approved a framework for Syrian peace talks that did not indicate a timeline for Bashar Assad's departure or bar him from participating in elections.
- 20 DEC: Russia conducted airstrikes on the north-western rebel-held city of Idlib, Syria, reportedly inflicting over 200 civilian casualties. Human Rights Watch reported that banned cluster bombs had been used on at least 20 occasions since Russia's intervention in Syria, often inflicting civilian casualties.
- 21 DEC: Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed a December 23 meeting between Sergey Lavrov and the leader of Turkey's pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Selahattin Demirtas, who reportedly aims to open a party office in Moscow.
- 21 DEC: Russia's Ministry of Defense claimed that damage to the black box of the Su-24 downed by Turkey made the recorder unreadable after previously claiming flight data would prove the bomber never entered Turkish airspace.
- 17 DEC: The UN Security Council approved a draft resolution sponsored by the United States and Russia increasing sanctions that target the finances of ISIS and other terrorist groups.
- 18 DEC: U.S. President Barack Obama called for a political settlement to the Syrian Civil War that would create a diplomatic "bridge" with Russia and Iran in his end-of-year press conference. President Obama declined to express a timeline for Bashar Assad's departure and instead called for a peace deal that respected Russia and Iran's "equities" in Syria.
- 22 DEC: The U.S. expanded its sanctions against Russia for its interventions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine to include 34 new individuals and entities. The Kremlin said it was considering retaliatory measures against the sanctions, which it said ran contrary to the "need to develop cooperation."