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Bad Idea of the Day: Bomb Syria to Save Ukraine

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April 24, 2014



It's not every day that you see a writer assert that the way to solve a crisis in one country is to conduct military strikes in a different one. However, that is precisely the argument that Anne-Marie Slaughter makes at *Project Syndicate* regarding Syria and Ukraine. According to Slaughter, the problem now is that Russian president Vladimir Putin feels as though he can act virtually without constraints in Ukraine. And so the answer is to use military force against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, as "shots fired by the US in Syria will echo loudly in Russia." In her words:

It is time for US President Barack Obama to demonstrate that he can order the offensive use of force in circumstances other than secret drone attacks or covert operations. The result will change the strategic calculus not only in Damascus, but also in Moscow.

Leave aside the fact that Obama has done exactly that on more than one occasion: in the 2009 “surge” in Afghanistan, and in the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya. The more basic flaw is that there is no reason to think that bombing Syria would do anything to meaningfully change Putin’s calculus in Ukraine. Slaughter never even clearly describes the causal mechanism by which she thinks that it would. The closest that she comes is when she says:

Putin may believe, as Western powers have repeatedly told their own citizens, that NATO forces will never risk the possibility of nuclear war by deploying in Ukraine. Perhaps not. But the Russian forces destabilizing eastern Ukraine wear no insignia. Mystery soldiers can fight on both sides.

The argument appears to be that the point of striking Syria would be to try to convince Putin that the United States and its Western allies might actually be willing to send troops to Ukraine. There are two problems with this. First, a military campaign against Assad would be overwhelmingly unpopular with the U.S. public (based on the polling last fall), and it would serve to divert American attention and resources toward Syria. This would make the leadership in Washington even less inclined to take an aggressive stance in Ukraine, not more.

Second, unless Slaughter actually supports using force in Ukraine—a position she does not take in this essay—she is essentially recommending that the United States strike Syria as a sort of bluff directed at Moscow. The problem is that it would be a rather transparent bluff. The facts of the situation in Ukraine are that America has relatively limited interests there, and that to use military force to defend Ukraine would be to risk war with another nuclear-armed power. Under these circumstances, Washington would be unlikely to come to the defense of *any* country with which it did not have a collective-defense treaty. Bombing Syria would change exactly none of this—and Putin knows that. This doesn’t mean that he will necessarily choose to conduct an overt invasion of eastern Ukraine. But it means that his calculations are likely to be based on actual, observable facts that inform his perception of what America’s stake in Ukraine is, not on what the United States has done in any other crisis around the world.

In closing, it’s worth zooming out and looking at the broader implications of Slaughter’s argument. At a basic level, she is proposing to go to war with one country in order to send a message to the leadership of another one. This is reckless, dangerous stuff. Slaughter also supports striking Syria on its own merits (and has for some time), but what’s important is that the argument she makes here doesn’t even require one to believe that doing so would have any beneficial effects in Syria at all. It could even have negative effects for Syria and the Middle East, as long as they were outweighed by the positive effects in Russia and Ukraine. The end result is to lower the bar for what constitutes an acceptable justification for war to the point where the bar almost no longer exists. And whatever your personal views on Syria or Ukraine might be, that is not an outcome anyone should endorse.