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Obama Warned to Defuse Tensions with Russia

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A group of ex-U.S. intelligence officials is warning President Obama to defuse growing tensions with Russia over Syria by reining in the demonization of President Putin and asserting White House civilian control over the Pentagon.

ALERT MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

SUBJECT: PREVENTING STILL WORSE IN SYRIA

We write to alert you, [as we did President George W. Bush](#), six weeks before the attack on Iraq, that **the consequences of limiting your circle of advisers to a small, relatively inexperienced coterie with a dubious record for wisdom can prove disastrous.* Our concern this time regards Syria.**

We are hoping that your President's Daily Brief tomorrow will give appropriate attention to Saturday's warning by Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova: **"If the US launches a direct aggression against Damascus and the Syrian Army, it would cause a terrible, tectonic shift not only in the country, but in the entire region."**

Speaking on Russian TV, she warned of those whose "logic is 'why do we need diplomacy' ... when there is power ... and methods of resolving a problem by power. We already know this logic; there is nothing new about it. It usually ends with one thing – full-scale war."

We are also hoping that this is not the first you have heard of this – no doubt officially approved – statement. If on Sundays you rely on the "mainstream" press, you may well have missed it. In the Washington Post, an abridged report of Zakharova's remarks (nothing about "full-scale war") was buried in the last paragraph of an 11-paragraph article titled "Hospital in Aleppo is hit again by bombs." Sunday's New York Times totally ignored the Foreign Ministry spokesperson's statements.

In our view, it would be a huge mistake to allow your national security advisers to follow the example of the Post and Times in minimizing the importance of Zakharova's remarks.

Events over the past several weeks have led Russian officials to distrust Secretary of State John Kerry. Indeed, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who parses his words carefully, has publicly expressed that distrust. Some Russian officials suspect that Kerry has been playing a double game; others believe that, however much he may strive for progress through diplomacy, he cannot deliver on his commitments

because the Pentagon undercuts him every time. We believe that this lack of trust is a challenge that must be overcome and that, at this point, only you can accomplish this.

It should not be attributed to paranoia on the Russians' part that they suspect the Sept. 17 U.S. and Australian air attacks on Syrian army troops that killed 62 and wounded 100 was no "mistake," but rather a deliberate attempt to scuttle the partial cease-fire Kerry and Lavrov had agreed on – with your approval and that of President Putin – that took effect just five days earlier.

In public remarks bordering on the insubordinate, senior Pentagon officials showed unusually open skepticism regarding key aspects of the Kerry-Lavrov deal. We can assume that what Lavrov has told his boss in private is close to his uncharacteristically blunt words on Russian NTV on Sept. 26:

“My good friend John Kerry ... is under fierce criticism from the US military machine. Despite the fact that, as always, [they] made assurances that the US Commander in Chief, President Barack Obama, supported him in his contacts with Russia (he confirmed that during his meeting with President Vladimir Putin), apparently the military does not really listen to the Commander in Chief.”

Lavrov's words are not mere rhetoric. He also criticized JCS Chairman Joseph Dunford for telling Congress that he opposed sharing intelligence with Russia, “after the agreements concluded on direct orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama stipulated that they would share intelligence. ... It is difficult to work with such partners. ...”

Policy differences between the White House and the Pentagon are rarely as openly expressed as they are now over policy on Syria. We suggest you get hold of a new book to be released this week titled *The General vs. the President: MacArthur and Truman at the Brink of Nuclear War* by master historian H. W. Brands. It includes testimony, earlier redacted, that sheds light on why President Truman dismissed WWII hero Gen. Douglas MacArthur from command of U.N. forces in Korea in April 1951. One early reviewer notes that “Brands's narrative makes us wonder about challenges of military versus civilian leadership we still face today.” You may find this new book more relevant at this point in time than the *Team of Rivals*.

The door to further negotiations remains ajar. In recent days, officials of the Russian foreign and defense ministries, as well as President Putin's spokesman, have carefully avoided shutting that door, and we find it a good sign that Secretary Kerry has been on the phone with Foreign Minister Lavrov. And the Russians have also emphasized Moscow's continued willingness to honor previous agreements on Syria.

In the Kremlin's view, Russia has far more skin in the game than the U.S. does. Thousands of Russian dissident terrorists have found their way to Syria, where they obtain weapons, funding, and practical experience in waging violent insurgency. There is understandable worry on Moscow's part over the threat they will pose when they come back home. In addition, President Putin can be assumed to be under the same kind of pressure you face from the military to order it to try to clean

out the mess in Syria “once and for all,” regardless how dim the prospects for a military solution are for either side in Syria.

We are aware that many in Congress and the “mainstream” media are now calling on you to up the ante and respond – overtly or covertly or both – with more violence in Syria. Shades of the “Washington Playbook,” about which you spoke derisively in interviews with the Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg earlier this year. We take some encouragement in your acknowledgment to Goldberg that the “playbook” can be “a trap that can lead to bad decisions” – not to mention doing “stupid stuff.”

Goldberg wrote that you felt the Pentagon had “jammed” you on the troop surge for Afghanistan seven years ago and that the same thing almost happened three years ago on Syria, before President Putin persuaded Syria to surrender its chemical weapons for destruction. It seems that the kind of approach that worked then should be tried now, as well – particularly if you are starting to feel jammed once again.

Incidentally, it would be helpful toward that end if you had one of your staffers tell the “mainstream” media to tone down its puerile, nasty – and for the most part unjustified and certainly unhelpful – personal vilification of President Putin.

Renewing direct dialogue with President Putin might well offer the best chance to ensure an end, finally, to unwanted “jamming.” We believe John Kerry is correct in emphasizing how frightfully complicated the disarray in Syria is amid the various vying interests and factions. At the same time, he has already done much of the necessary spadework and has found Lavrov for the most part, a helpful partner.

Still, in view of lingering Russian – and not only Russian – skepticism regarding the strength of your support for your secretary of state, we believe that discussions at the highest level would be the best way to prevent hotheads on either side from risking the kind of armed confrontation that nobody should want.

Therefore, we strongly recommend that you invite President Putin to meet with you in a mutually convenient place, in order to try to sort things out and prevent still worse for the people of Syria.

In the wake of the carnage of World War II, Winston Churchill made an observation that is equally applicable to our 21st Century: “To jaw, jaw, jaw, is better than to war, war, war.”

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

Fred Costello, Former Russian Linguist, USAF

Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

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Robert Wing, former Foreign Service Officer

Ann Wright, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat

* In a Memorandum to President Bush criticizing Colin Powell's address to the UN earlier on February 5, 2003, VIPS ended with these words: "After watching Secretary Powell today, we are convinced that you would be well served if you widened the discussion ... beyond the circle of those advisers clearly bent on a war for which we see no compelling reason and from which we believe the unintended consequences are likely to be catastrophic."