

ASSIGNMENT: Vladimir Putin Response

You have now read both articles and learned how international law can be both used and abused of world leaders. Now it is time for you to demonstrate your learning. In a 400 words respond to the following prompt:

Vladimir Putin used international law to condemn a potential American strike. What specific arguments did he make? What aspects of international law did he cite? Are his arguments hypocritical given the recent situation in Ukraine? How can Vladimir Putin's own arguments be used to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Your response should:

- Point out the specific points made by both authors
- Express your own opinion on the matter.
- Make reference to specifics from both articles.
- Use proper spelling, grammar, and sentence structure.

In this lesson we are going to be looking at some issues in international. We are specifically going to be examining an editorial published in the NY Times in September of 2013 written by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The context that brought about the op-ed, the language used in the piece, and subsequent events in geopolitics all shed some light on the complexities of International Law.

The Context: The Syrian Civil War

In 2010 much of the Middle East and North Africa was swept by massive protests which became known as the "Arab Spring". The Arab Spring led to civil war and revolution in many of the countries in this region including Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Bahrain. In Syria the government brutally and violently cracked down on the initial protests which led to violent reprisals from a number of rebel groups in the country. The result has been a complicated and deadly civil war that has displaced hundreds of thousands and killed thousands more.

The situation further deteriorated in the summer of 2013 when it appeared as though gas attack had taken place in a suburb of the Syrian capital of Damascus. Poisonous gas and other chemical weapons are banned by a number of international treaties. The use of these weapons would be an obvious breach of international law. President Obama had previously stated that the use of chemical weapons was "red line", and if it crossed it could provoke American intervention in Syria.

In September of 2013 it looked very likely that the United States military was going to strike against the Syrian government (the Assad regime). The strike was being justified as the United States upholding international law, and the ban on chemical weapons. It was in this context that Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote this opinion piece in the *New York Times*.

Vladimir Putin Article #1

A Plea for Caution From Russia

What Putin Has to Say to Americans About Syria

By VLADIMIR V. PUTIN

Published: September 11, 2013 [1622 Comments](#)

MOSCOW — RECENT events surrounding Syria have prompted me to speak directly to the American people and their political leaders. It is important to do so at a time of insufficient communication between our societies.

Relations between us have passed through different stages. We stood against each other during the cold war. But we were also allies once, and defeated the Nazis together. The universal international organization — the United Nations — was then established to prevent such devastation from ever happening again.

The United Nations' founders understood that decisions affecting war and peace should happen only by consensus, and with America's consent the veto by Security Council permanent members was enshrined in the United Nations Charter. The profound wisdom of this has underpinned the stability of international relations for decades.

No one wants the United Nations to suffer the fate of the League of Nations, which collapsed because it lacked real leverage. This is possible if influential countries bypass the United Nations and take military action without Security Council authorization.

The potential strike by the United States against Syria, despite strong opposition from many countries and major political and religious leaders, including the pope, will result in more innocent victims and escalation, potentially spreading the conflict far beyond Syria's borders. A strike would increase violence and unleash a new wave of terrorism. It could undermine multilateral efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and further destabilize the Middle East and North Africa. It could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance.

Syria is not witnessing a battle for democracy, but an armed conflict between government and opposition in a multireligious country. There are few champions of democracy in [Syria](#). But there are more than enough Qaeda fighters and extremists of all stripes battling the government. The United States State Department has designated Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, fighting with the opposition, as terrorist organizations. This internal conflict, fueled by foreign weapons supplied to the opposition, is one of the bloodiest in the world.

Mercenaries from Arab countries fighting there, and hundreds of militants from Western countries and even Russia, are an issue of our deep concern. Might they not return to our countries with experience acquired in Syria? After all, after fighting in Libya, extremists moved on to Mali. This threatens us all.

From the outset, [Russia](#) has advocated peaceful dialogue enabling Syrians to develop a compromise plan for their own future. We are not protecting the Syrian government, but international

law. We need to use the United Nations Security Council and believe that preserving law and order in today's complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos. The law is still the law, and we must follow it whether we like it or not. Under current international law, force is permitted only in self-defense or by the decision of the Security Council. Anything else is unacceptable under the United Nations Charter and would constitute an act of aggression.

No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria. But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists. Reports that militants are preparing another attack — this time against Israel — cannot be ignored.

It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States. Is it in America's long-term interest? I doubt it. Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan "you're either with us or against us."

But force has proved ineffective and pointless. Afghanistan is reeling, and no one can say what will happen after international forces withdraw. Libya is divided into tribes and clans. In Iraq the civil war continues, with dozens killed each day. In the United States, many draw an analogy between Iraq and Syria, and ask why their government would want to repeat recent mistakes.

No matter how targeted the strikes or how sophisticated the weapons, civilian casualties are inevitable, including the elderly and children, whom the strikes are meant to protect.

The world reacts by asking: if you cannot count on international law, then you must find other ways to ensure your security. Thus a growing number of countries seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction. This is logical: if you have the bomb, no one will touch you. We are left with talk of the need to strengthen nonproliferation, when in reality this is being eroded.

We must stop using the language of force and return to the path of civilized diplomatic and political settlement.

A new opportunity to avoid military action has emerged in the past few days. The United States, Russia and all members of the international community must take advantage of the Syrian government's willingness to place its chemical arsenal under international control for subsequent destruction. Judging by the statements of [President Obama](#), the United States sees this as an alternative to military action.

I welcome the president's interest in continuing the dialogue with Russia on Syria. We must work together to keep this hope alive, as we agreed to at the Group of 8 meeting in Lough Erne in Northern Ireland in June, and steer the discussion back toward negotiations.

If we can avoid force against Syria, this will improve the atmosphere in international affairs and strengthen mutual trust. It will be our shared success and open the door to cooperation on other critical issues.

My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a

case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is "what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional." It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.

Vladimir V. Putin is the president of Russia.

Analysis

In the end the United States did not attack Syria, opting instead to have the United Nations destroy Assad's chemical arsenal (with the consent of the, still at war, Syrian government). This solution had been engineered by President Putin himself.

A few months after Putin's Op-ed appeared the situation in Ukraine began to deteriorate. After an unpopular trade decision led to violent protests and eventually the ouster of the current president by the Ukrainian parliament, fighting between ethnic Russians and Ukrainian nationalists intensified. Although it was denied by the Russian government, many sources reported that the Russian army was assisting ethnic Russians living in the Ukraine in their fight. This came to a head when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula (formerly held by the Ukraine) after a potentially illegal referendum.

All this led many commentators to re-evaluate Putin's original arguments about international law. The following is a rebuttal to Putin's op-ed written in the wake of events in Ukraine.

Article #2

Lesson 3: Vladimir Putin and Issues in International Law

Re-visiting Putin

· March 2 at 3:30 pm

Russian President Vladimir Putin. (Mikhail Metzel/ Presidential Press Service via RIA Novosti and AP)

It all seems a little like ancient history now, but last year Vladimir Putin was at the center of a very different geopolitical tug-of-war. The Russian president was facing the possibility of American military action in Syria, and, to voice his opposition to it, he decided [to write a New York Times op-ed](#).

"Recent events surrounding Syria have prompted me to speak directly to the American people and their political leaders," Putin, or perhaps his ghostwriter, began. "It is important to do so at a time of insufficient communication between our societies."

The Russian president went on to explain how "decisions affecting war and peace should happen only by consensus," and that an American-led strike against the Syrian regime "could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance."

"We need to use the United Nations Security Council and believe that preserving law and order in today's complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos," Putin wrote. "The law is still the law, and we must follow it whether we like it or not."

Rereading those words after the events of the past few days is jarring. On Saturday, Putin [received authorization for the use of Russian troops in Ukraine](#), following a series of protests that led to the ousting of Putin-ally Viktor Yanukovich. Reports [from Crimea](#), a largely autonomous region within southern Ukraine that has a sizable ethnic Russian population, suggest that troops have already taken over key government buildings.

As [Steven Lee Myers of the New York Times has pointed out](#), Russia hasn't sought U.N. approval yet, nor suggested they ever will. Additionally, Russia [seems to be flouting the 1994 Budapest Memorandum](#), also signed by the United States and Britain, which saw the states agree to recognize the territorial integrity and political independence of Ukraine in return for Kiev destroying its nuclear arsenal.

The big worry is that if Crimea is annexed, other parts of eastern Ukraine will be next. War is beginning to look like a grim possibility. "Conflict in Crimea must be averted," Swedish Foreign

Minister [Carl Bildt tweeted Friday](#), before spelling out the legal implications. "All must fully respect territorial integrity, international agreements and rule of law."

What explains Putin's apparent about-turn on the subject of international law? Again, we should revisit his New York Times op-ed, but this time look to his discussion of "exceptionalism."

Putin was talking about American exceptionalism, which is a very real thing and has allowed the United States to flout international law in the past. But we should also think about other forms of exceptionalism. Putin's justification for intervention in Ukraine is to protect Russian speakers and those of Russian ethnicity. It's a similar argument Russia made to justify intervention in South Ossetia and Transnistria. For Putin, apparently, the interests, or rather, perceived interests of those people are enough to flout international law and dialogue. It's Russian exceptionalism, you could say.

Of course, the fact that there are so many Russians outside of Russia is a relatively unique legacy of empire and Soviet expansionism, and it's not always a very pretty picture, as the Crimean Tatars deported from Crimea after World War II would tell you. But it is a legacy Putin apparently wants to revisit, as can be seen in his plans for a "Eurasian Union," a concept designed not only to rival the European Union but also give Russia back the geopolitical clout it presided over before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Few analysts predicted Putin's actions over the last few days, and there are [still some good arguments](#) that, for all the noise and commotion, Putin is ultimately just saber rattling and has no desire for the scale of conflict that a war with Ukraine would require. Others have suggested that economic measures from the United States and/or the European Union [could sting far more than Putin expects](#). When Putin wrote his New York Times op-ed in September, he was warning that exceptionalism could easily lead to overreach. It's a fair point, but Putin, apparently, can't take his own advice.

Still, Putin's op-ed is a useful reminder for the next time that the Russian president talks about "international rule of law and the order of balance" – it's one rule for you, and a very different one for me.