

# Russian counter-offensive in the international arena has lost momentum - Pavel K. Baev



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One of the key goals for 2024 that President Vladimir Putin had apparently set at the end of the second year of the Ukraine war was to execute a sustained foreign policy counter-offensive to reduce Russia's international isolation to irrelevance. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tries to claim success in achieving this goal and strengthening Russia's ability to influence the transformation of the world order, while noting that he [cherishes no illusions](#) regarding the prospects for 2025. There is indeed scant food for illusions as the efforts that Moscow invested in upgrading its positions have yielded thin results, while the final stretch of the turbulent Year 2024 has delivered serious setbacks.

The necessary condition for gaining a positive momentum in foreign policy is scoring a sequence of victories in the kinetic battlefields, and the Russian high command has thrown every available reserve for keeping the offensive going. The [territorial gains](#), nevertheless, are meagre, and the casualties are mounting so high that the recruitment cannot compensate for the losses. Whether Putin, as the Commander-in-Chief, is fully informed about this depletion no expert can guess, but he did [negotiate a deal](#) with North Korea on “importing” some 12.000 elite troops. The performance of this infantry in the pitched battles in the Kursk region has been at best [mediocre](#), but the close ties with the rogue regime in Pyongyang have definitely damaged Russia’s reputation among the prestige-conscious states in the so-called Global South, and particularly in the [South-East Asia](#).

The proposition that Russia is winning the war is dubious indeed, but its foreign policy has employed every propaganda resource for spreading it far and wide, targeting in particular [India](#). The central stage for promoting the image of victorious and confident Russia was the BRICS summit in Kazan, and [Moscow experts](#) duly trumpeted it as the pivotal event in dismantling the West-dominated global governance. The summit was organized with great fanfare, but its real impact was limited at best, and the idea of creating a new currency, which [invited the ire](#) of US president-elect Donald Trump, remains squarely in the far-fetched category. One certainty is that Putin [will not be able to attend](#) the 2025 BRICS summit in Brazil, for the same reason (abbreviated as the ICJ) he wasn’t present at the 2024 and 2025 G20 summits.

In Moscow’s perspective, international clout can only be built if Russia demonstrates capacity for dominating its immediate neighbourhood. Significant resources were, therefore, expended for influencing the outcome of [elections in Moldova](#), but the vote of numerous diaspora has granted President Maia Sandu a new mandate for continuing the pro-European course. Even greater efforts were aimed at pulling Georgia closer to Russia’s centre of political gravity, and the carefully [manipulated elections](#) indeed secured the victory of the party controlled by the Russia-corrupted oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Massive protests in Tbilisi, culminating in the [spectacular New Year feast](#), have asserted that every deviation from the pro-European orientation involves the risk of triggering another “colour revolution”.

Georgia may be perceived in Moscow as the key state in the South Caucasus, but presently it has to face a deep crisis in relations with Azerbaijan caused by the [missile strike](#) on the aircraft performing the flight J2-8243 from Baku to Grozny. It was the instruction to the damaged plane to go across the Caspian Sea to Aktau, Kazakhstan that caused such outrage in Azerbaijan that President Ilham Aliyev felt compelled to take a [tough stance](#) and demand from Moscow a full admission of responsibility. Putin was obviously taken aback by such bluntness and issued only an [elliptic apology](#), but the limits of Russia's influence and its new dependence upon the neighbours that maintain channels for circumventing Western sanctions are suddenly exposed by this [still unfolding crisis](#).

The "black swan" that delivered the most consequential and entirely unexpected blow to Russia's foreign policy is the swift collapse of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorial regime in Syria. Putin tries to [deny the fiasco](#) and to argue that Russia has fulfilled all its obligations, but the failure to support the client-in-distress is plain obvious. [Moscow pundits](#) keep trying to explain away this fiasco by pinning the blame on Israel or Turkey, but the main worry is obviously about [preserving access](#) to the Khmeimim airbase and the Tartus naval facility, crucial for sustaining mercenary deployments to Africa. Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's new leader, has experienced too many Russian airstrikes on the Idlib province to tolerate the presence of [these bases](#) and hardly needs any prompting from the French and German foreign ministers, who paid a [joint visit](#) to Damascus, adding to Moscow's [irritation](#).

What makes the loss of position of power in Syria more grievous for the Kremlin is the expected expansion of the US influence as the provisional guidelines charted by the forthcoming Trump administration will translate into a pro-active policy. Anxiety about the forthcoming zigzags in the US decision-making is even higher in Moscow than in Brussels or Beijing as the expectations of deeper divisions in the Western coalition are mixed with worries about crude pressure for ending the Ukraine War. Seeking to pre-empt this peace-making, the Kremlin reinforces the message on setting the [terms for peace](#) at the expense of Ukraine, while Lavrov argues that a ceasefire is a "[path to nowhere](#)". This demonstrative militancy doesn't appeal even to China, not to mention other states that attempt to advance peace initiatives, and it [certainly irks](#) the yet to be confirmed appointees in

Washington D.C. President-elect Trump may be prone to posturing and bluffing, but he has [low tolerance](#) for others performing such acts and tends to take rejections of his ideas as personal insults.

Putin excels at pretending confidence and at the start of 2025, he may indeed feel that his international rankings [have improved](#). Sober self-evaluation has never been his forte, but the denials of accumulating problems in Russian war-distorted economy and the dismissals of such setbacks as Syria as inconsequential can work only that far. Russia's irrelevance in addressing most problems of crucial importance for the Global South, from investment to environment, is obvious and increasing, and Moscow's propensity to conflict manipulation with diminishing set of instruments is disturbing for many stake-holders in stability in various conflict-rich regions. The irreducible ambition for the status of a major "pole" in the imaginary rules-free multi-polar world, which drives Russian foreign policy, rests on a diminishing resource base and a damaged reputation. Putin's urge to play a central role in global affairs is set to be frustrated, and it can make his behaviour more erratic and dangerous.

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