The solution to the crisis in Ukraine lies in part in Syria. 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, not to mention Beijing and Tokyo.

Many argue that Obama’s climb-down from his threatened missile strikes against Syria last August emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin to annex Crimea. But it is more likely that Putin acted for domestic reasons – to distract Russians’ attention from their country’s failing economy and to salve the humiliation of watching pro-European demonstrators oust the Ukrainian government he backed.

Regardless of Putin’s initial motivations, he is now operating in an environment in which he is quite certain of the parameters of play. He is weighing the value of further dismemberment of Ukraine, with some pieces either joining Russia or becoming Russian vassal states, against the pain of much stronger and more comprehensive economic sanctions. Western use of force, other than to send arms to a fairly hapless Ukrainian army, is not part of the equation.

That is a problem. In the case of Syria, the US, the world’s largest and most flexible military power, has chosen to negotiate with its hands tied behind its back for more than three years. This is no less of a mistake in the case of Russia, with a leader like Putin who measures himself and his fellow leaders in terms of crude machismo.

It is time to change Putin’s calculations, and Syria is the place to do it. Through a combination of mortars that shatter entire city quarters, starvation, hypothermia, and now barrel bombs that spray nails and shrapnel indiscriminately, President Bashar al-Assad’s forces have seized the advantage. Slowly but surely, the government is reclaiming rebel-held territory.

“Realist” foreign policy analysts openly describe Assad as the lesser evil compared to the Al Qaeda-affiliated members of the opposition; others see an advantage in letting all sides fight it out, tying one another down for years. Moreover, the Syrian government does appear to be slowly giving up its chemical weapons, as it agreed last September to do.

The problem is that if Assad continues to believe that he can do anything to his people except kill them with chemicals, he will exterminate his opponents, slaughtering everyone he captures and punishing entire communities, just as his father, Hafez al-Assad, massacred the residents of Hama in 1982. He has demonstrated repeatedly that he is cut from the same ruthless cloth.

Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Assad has fanned fears of what Sunni opposition forces might do to the Alawites, Druze, Christians and other minorities if they won. But we need not speculate about Assad’s behavior. We have seen enough.
A US strike against the Syrian government now would change the entire dynamic. It would either force the regime back to the negotiating table with a genuine intention of reaching a settlement, or at least make it clear that Assad will not have a free hand in re-establishing his rule.

It is impossible to strike Syria legally so long as Russia sits on the United Nations Security Council, given its ability to veto any resolution authorizing the use of force. But even Russia agreed in February to Resolution 2139, designed to compel the Syrian government to increase flows of humanitarian aid to starving and wounded civilians. Among other things, Resolution 2139 requires that “all parties immediately cease all attacks against civilians, as well as the indiscriminate employment of weapons in populated areas, including shelling and aerial bombardment, such as the use of barrel bombs….”

The US, together with as many countries as will cooperate, could use force to eliminate Syria’s fixed-wing aircraft as a first step toward enforcing Resolution 2139. “Aerial bombardment” would still likely continue via helicopter, but such a strike would announce immediately that the game has changed. After the strike, the US, France, and Britain should ask for the Security Council’s approval of the action taken, as they did after NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

Equally important, shots fired by the US in Syria will echo loudly in Russia. The great irony is that Putin is now seeking to do in Ukraine exactly what Assad has done so successfully: portray a legitimate political opposition as a gang of thugs and terrorists, while relying on provocations and lies to turn non-violent protest into violent attacks that then justify an armed response. Recall that the Syrian opposition marched peacefully under fire for six months before the first units of the Free Syrian Army tentatively began to form. In Ukraine, Putin would be happy to turn a peaceful opposition’s ouster of a corrupt government into a civil war.

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.

Putting force on the table in resolving the Ukraine crisis, even force used in Syria, is particularly important because economic pressure on Russia, as critical as it is in the Western portfolio of responses, can create a perverse incentive for Putin. As the Russian ruble falls and foreign investment dries up, the Russian population will become restive, giving him even more reason to distract them with patriotic spectacles welcoming still more “Russians” back to the motherland.

Obama took office with the aim of ending wars, not starting them. But if the US meets bullets with words, tyrants will draw their own conclusions. So will allies; Japan, for example, is now wondering how the US will respond should China manufacture a crisis over the disputed Senkaku Islands.

To lead effectively, in both the national and the global interest, the US must demonstrate its readiness to shoulder the full responsibilities of power. Striking Syria might not end the civil war there, but it could prevent the eruption of a new one in Ukraine.