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Russia's policy in the Middle East imperilled by the Syrian intervention

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Executive summary

The military intervention launched by Russia in Syria in September 2015 has altered the character of this protracted civil war and – quite remarkably – has both advanced and jeopardised Russia's positions in the Middle East. This risky experiment in power projection constitutes a continuation of traditional Russian policy in this rapidly transforming region, but is also a departure from the strategy of careful manoeuvring aimed at exploiting the confusion in U.S. and European policies. Quite possibly the main drivers for this proactive move were either domestic factors or issues related to the confrontation with the West caused by Russia's conflict with Ukraine. The present analysis, however, deals only with the Middle Eastern contexts, aims and consequences of this enterprise.

Background

The Middle East is the only area where Russia can try to prove that it is not just a regional post-Soviet power with a revisionist agenda, but a global actor able to make a difference in managing crucial conflicts. A key reference point for President Vladimir Putin in this regard is the success of his September 2013 initiative to dismantle the Syrian chemical arsenal and prevent U.S. missile strikes against government targets. Syria has also become a central battleground in the ideological struggle against the threat of revolutions, which Putin elucidated in his address to the UN General Assembly on September 28th 2015.

Several shifts in the Middle Eastern political landscape during 2015 propelled Putin toward a direct use of force. The conclusion of the difficult negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme in the P5+1 format has produced the prospect of Western sanctions being lifted and the Iranian economy being opened for international business, which could reduce the usefulness of Russia's special relations with Iran. The Russian strategic partnership with Turkey, which was shaped by the personal rapport between Putin and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had been significantly eroded, so Moscow was less restrained by the risk of upsetting this relationship. The forces of the Asad regime in Syria had suffered several defeats in the summer battles with opposition groups of various persuasions, so that Latakia province (the home base of the Asad clan) had come under threat – and Moscow saw an urgent need to strengthen the grip on power of this key ally in the struggle against revolutions.

The intervention

The ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine has only been in place since the start of September 2015, and by orchestrating this pause in hostilities, Moscow has created for itself an opportunity to execute a limited intervention elsewhere, even if its army's most combat-capable battalions are tied up inside or near the Donbass war zone. The character of operations in this "hybrid war" has been such that the Russian air force was not engaged, so several squadrons of tactical aircraft were available for deployment in Syria. The decision to establish an air base in the reasonably safe vicinity of Latakia was taken in early September (perhaps immediately after Putin's return from a military parade in Beijing). The working assumption was that the capacity of the naval facility at Tartus was sufficient for delivering supplies and that the road connection (about 75 km) between the port and the base was quite secure, so the bulk of weapons, equipment and supplies for making the airbase serviceable were shipped in the following three to four weeks.

The active phase of the intervention started on the last day of September and was justified in Russian statements as part of the implementation of Putin's initiative to build a broad international coalition against the Islamic State (IS). In fact, however, Russian air and missile strikes have been

primarily targeting the forces of other opposition groupings (ranging from the al-Nusra Front to the Free Syrian Army), which were surprised but not badly hurt by these attacks. Bombing other "terrorists" was the only way for Russia to make a difference against the background of the relentless (if not that successful) air campaign of the U.S.-led coalition. The composition of the Russian air regiment in Syria (including a squadron of Su-25SM light fighter-bombers and a squadron of Mi-24 attack helicopters) indicates that it is best suited for close air support. This high-risk mission can only be performed in support of an offensive by government forces aimed at securing Latakia province from attacks from the north, where the al-Nusra Front had been gaining ground. Several attempts at launching such an offensive were indeed made, but the results were miniscule.

A key condition for any serious offensive is for the situation around Damascus to be stablised – the capital city remains the centre of gravity in the deadlocked civil war. Government forces are only able to control this battleground with the help of Hizbullah troops, but Russian squadrons dare not fly missions there while Israel continues to carry out airstrikes on Hizbullah targets.

Regional responses

During summer 2015 President Putin engaged in unprecedented high-level networking in the Middle East in an attempt to promote his initiative to organise a broad anti-IS coalition that would include the Asad regime. The meetings with King Abdullah II of Jordan and Saudi defence minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan confirmed that there was broad support for an active Russian role in the region – but also that nobody (with the obvious exception of Iran) was ready to make Asad a part of any solution for the Syrian disaster. Putin was aware that his address to the UN General Assembly would not change this attitude, but had reason to believe that a forceful intervention would compel regional leaders to take the Russian initiative seriously. The most important of these reasons was the obvious failure of international efforts to manage the Syrian crisis, which produced a major threat to global security in the form of IS – and a major spillover in the form of the wave of refugees arriving in Europe.

While the confusion is profound indeed, Putin has seriously misconstrued this opportunity. Russia has become a party to the Syrian calamity, but hardly a contributor to a solution. Russia's hard-gained rapport with Arab leaders has been lost as a result of their feeling misled by Putin and upset by his disregard for their opinions. They are dismayed by Russia's choice of closer cooperation with Iran in Syria and tend to agree with U.S. president Barack Obama that the intervention is a "recipe for disaster" (Bloomberg, 2015). Israel – which has cultivated its own dialogue with Moscow – is particularly concerned that large amounts of modern weapons could fall into the hands of Hizbullah, which to all intents and purposes has become Russia's military ally. Turkey found itself exposed to new security risks when Russian aircraft deliberately violated its airspace, so President Erdogan initiated a joint statement with Qatar and Saudi Arabia (as well as Western coalition partners) condemning Russian airstrikes on Syrian opposition forces.[1] Erdogan was so offended by Putin's betrayal of trust in their special relationship that he threatened to cut gas imports from Russia and cancel Rosatom's contract to build the Akkuyu nuclear power plant.[2] Public opinion on Russia in the region, which showed high levels of disapproval at the start of 2015 – 80% expressed unfavourable views in Jordan, 74% in Israel and 64% in Turkey (Stokes, 2015) – might turn even more aggressively negative.

Prospects and consequences

Sustaining the air campaign at an intensity of 30-50 sorties a day is difficult, given the low preparedness of the Hmeymim base and stretched lines of sea/air communications. Setbacks of various sorts, from technical accidents – the Russian air force has a dismal record of crashes (Baev, 2015) – to terrorist attacks on the perimeter of the base, are certain to happen. It is possible that the arrival of Russian forces will promote cooperation among feuding opposition groupings that could combine to defeat the "infidels". Expanded support to the Free Syrian Army by the U.S. and Turkey and the overstretch of Syrian government forces, which have to defend several major cities, primarily Damascus, could lead to a rebel victory in Aleppo and advances in the north of Latakia province, which Russian airstrikes will not be able to check.

Such developments would push Russia into the "mission-creep" trap typical of many ill-conceived interventions. Keeping the air war going means wasting the initial effect of the initiative and waiting for troubles sooner rather than later; expanding the intervention by deploying two or three tactical battalion groups (of about 1,000 troops each) to Latakia would stretch Russian strategic mobility capabilities to the limit and increase domestic concerns; and a withdrawal would mean a humiliating loss of face. One way of escaping from this trap could be created by the recently opened Vienna talks.

Moscow seeks to present the expanded format of these talks – and in particular the engagement of Iran – as a major diplomatic victory on its part. In fact, however, the gathering of 19 delegations has little in common with Putin's "broad coalition", firstly because there is no place for Asad around the table, while even Iran is more inter-

1 Erdogan requested and obtained a statement of support from NATO in this regard; see <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-russia-idUSKCN0RZ0FT20151006#xRDegr0BItJLrW8m.97>. For the Saudi and Qatari warning to Russia, see <http://saudigazette.com.sa/saudi-arabia/kingdom-turkey-warn-russia-over-big-syria-mistake/>.

2 See <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/10/08/uk-mideast-crisis-turkey-russia-idUKKCN0S20JA20151008> in this regard.

ested in ending its long isolation than rescuing the dictator-in-distress. The Vienna talks could constitute a step toward shaping a more coherent U.S. and EU policy, but this would reduce Moscow's opportunities to play on the confusion inherent in the Syrian situation.

Regional stakeholders in the Syrian crisis were perhaps impressed by Russia's boldness in launching an intervention with minimal coordination, but after six weeks of bombing they have made reasonably good assessments of the limits of this projection of power. Russia's attempt to expand the scope of its air campaign in response to the IS-planted bomb that destroyed Metroject Flight 9268 over the Sinai on October 31st 2015 by using its strategic bombers to launch cruise missiles has not changes these assessment in any significant way. Initial reactions were mixed, but as the air war has reached its capacity, the balance of opinion has shifted to the negative, not least because of Moscow's total disregard of civilian casualties in the targeting of air strikes. Some voices (particularly in Egypt) are still arguing for the further integration of Russia into the joint work on stabilising and reconstructing the Syria-Iraq war zone, and Moscow has indicated readiness to contribute to a negotiated solution. The only real contribution it could make to such a solution would be to help peacefully dismantle the Asad regime, which would hardly signify a strengthening of Russia's authority and influence in the wider Middle East.

By intervening militarily in Syria the Russian leadership has abandoned its policy of cautious opportunistic manoeuvring in the Middle East and engaged in a risky gamble with a short-term horizon. Arab leaders (as well as Israel) are increasingly inclined to agree with U.S. conclusions on the lack of strategy in President Putin's enterprise (Schleifer & Scott, 2015) and recognise that he is far more interested in scoring geopolitical points than in solving the Syrian problem and has a propensity to covering one mistake with another blunder. Whatever the fate of this Russian intervention, however, it has succeeded in increasing the pressure on Western stakeholders to stop temporising and produce a feasible plan for rebuilding Syria.

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