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Three Months of Russian Intervention in Syria: The Military and Political Implications

Anna Maria Dyner

As Russia's military operation in Syria passes the three-month mark, the milestone demonstrates not only the growing capacity of the country's expeditionary forces (aviation in particular) but also highlights their weaknesses, primarily logistical problems and the lack of equipment. On one hand, such long-term actions will be a growing challenge to Russia's finances, but for its military they are an opportunity to test equipment and new types of weapons. Russia's engagement in Syria has not reduced its involvement in Ukraine. At the same time, the success of its military operations in Syria are important because they are intended to strengthen Russia's position during any peace talks on Syria, which may have a secondary effect of increasing its importance, not only in the Middle East but also in the international arena.

One of the most important challenges in Russia's security policy is the instability in Syria and the war with the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, IS). These conflicts affect not only the situation in the Middle East but also, according to the Russian government, the situation in the Caucasus and Central Asia, namely in the form of a growing terrorist threat. However, the reason for Russia's involvement in Syria, in addition to its support of the country's embattled president, Bashar al-Assad, was to strengthen its position in the Middle East, the Mediterranean region and, above all, amongst Western countries.

Military Actions. The Russian military operation in Syria started on 30 September 2015 and, as emphasised by the Russians, takes place at the express request of Syria's president. Over the past three months, the Russian armed forces have used 69 aircraft, including Su-27SM (4), Tu-160 (5), Tu-95MS (6), Su-34 (8), Su-24M (12), Su-25 SM (12), Tu-22M3 (14) and an Antonov An-30B designed for aerial cartography, as well as helicopters Mi-8AMTSz (4) and Mi-24P (12). In addition to aircraft, it has employed ships from its Black Sea Fleet, specifically the missile cruiser Moscow, a kilo-class submarine named the Rostov-na-Donu, as well as ships in its Caspian Flotilla, namely the Dagestan, a 11661K frigate and three 21631 missile corvettes (the Uglich, Grad Svijazhsk and Veliky Ustyug). In combat operations, Russia has used the rocket systems 3M14 Kalibr-NK (for the first time in combat operations by ships or submarine), as well as the Kh-101 and Kh-555; S-8 unguided rocket missiles; and bombs, including high explosive blast types such as the FAB-500M-54, guided ones such as the KAB-250L and KAB-500S, and high penetration forms such as the BetAB-500. Overall, more than 1,400 tonnes of bombs and more than 100 cruise missiles have been released. Some combat operations were conducted from airports located in Russia: some Su-34 bombers operated from Krymsk in Russia's Krasnodar region, and on 20 November 2015, two Tu-160 strategic bombers took off from Olenegorsk (on the Kola Peninsula). Between 30 September and 28 December 2015, there were more than 5,400 combat flights (about 60 per day on average), with 145 conducted by strategic bombers.

At the same time, the Russians built an air base in Khmeimim, Syria, and increased the amount of airport radar equipment, including adding a 96L6E long-range radar station, a Krasukha-4 electronic-warfare system, and the Pantsir-S1, a combined short- to medium-range surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery weapon system. Moreover, after Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber on the Syrian-Turkish border in November, Russia deployed a more advanced anti-aircraft weapon system, the S-400, to its Khmeimim base.

Russia's air operations are supported by its military intelligence wing and for missile guidance relies on its GLONASS satellite navigation system, which in recent years has been significantly developed. According to data from the Russian General Staff, Russia's forces have eliminated more than 8,500 objects belonging to ISIS or other groups defined by Russia as terrorists

(according to data from Western countries, only 10% of Russia's attacks were aimed directly at ISIS). The main targets of the attacks were concentrations of troops, command posts, bases, warehouses and lines of communication. The Russian support was used by the Syrian army to mount a successful counteroffensive against rebels and others in the provinces of Aleppo, Homs, Idlib and Latakia.

In the three-months of operations, two Russian have been killed, one the commander of the Su-24 bomber shot down by the Turkish air force, and the other a Marine who was part of the rescue operation after that incident. Russia has lost two aircraft in total, both during the same operation, the Su-24 and an Mi-8 helicopter used during the rescue.

Weaknesses. During Russia's military operation in Syria, however, numerous problems with units fighting ISIS were revealed. The shooting down of a Russian Su-24 bomber by a Turkish F-16 showed that the Russians did not assume their aircraft would come under attack. They lacked on-board passive defence systems and were carrying out combat operations without cover from fighters. It was only after this incident that the Russian authorities added fighters and delivered the S-400 system to the base in Khmeimim. Additional support came from the missile cruiser Moscow and its S-300 surface-to-air missile system.

Russian Aerospace Forces handled up to 100 combat flights a day at times, a tempo which negatively affected operating units and led to a situation in which by mid-October 2015 about 30% of aircraft in the region was unable to participate in the action due to maintenance or other issues. Moreover, the Syrian climate is not conducive for the type of aircraft and other equipment used there. The high intensity of the activities also highlighted Russian logistics problems caused primarily by a lack of experience with expeditionary operations. However, the operation in Syria probably will allow the Russian Armed Forces to strengthen this component in the future. In addition to the pace and equipment problems, non-Russian sources say the airstrikes are marred by a low accuracy rate and strikes on civilian targets, mistakes which could be eliminated by reconnaissance, more precise satellite observations or by increasing the number of guided bombs and missiles used during strikes.

However, operational costs may have become a problem. Russia is bearing the additional costs of salaries for soldiers stationed in Syria, replacing or repairing equipment (including for the strategic bombers from Russia) and use of expensive weapons such as cruise missiles. According to independent data, Russia spends about $4 million a day on the campaign, with $1.2 billion planned for 2016. Although the highest Russian authorities claim the operation in Syria does not entail additional costs and that a significant part of the funding comes from the planned training budget, the long-term Russian involvement in Syria amidst an economic crisis at home may result in important budgetary shifts.

Conclusions and Perspectives. In the military dimension, Russia's operations in Syria are a test of changes implemented as part of the country's reform of its armed forces. Moreover, the campaign allows testing new kind of weapons (especially cruise missiles), command and navigation systems (most of the activities are coordinated by the Command and Control Centre in Moscow) and coordination among the armed forces (mainly aviation and fleet groups). It also shows the growing operational capabilities of the Russian army, especially its aviation detachment (including strategic operations). Its actions in Syria also tests and will strengthen Russia's ability to conduct expeditionary operations in regions with difficult climatic conditions. It can be assumed that all of the weakness revealed by the Syrian operation (such as logistical issues) will be gradually eliminated by the Russian Armed Forces.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly evident that to conduct further military operations in Syria, land forces will be crucial. Considering the relatively very low combat capability of the Syrian army, the Russians may see the need to at least offer additional support in the form of equipment and training of Syrian troops, or in a drastic scenario, send a contingent of Russian land troops. However, any increase in engagement will mean not only higher costs but also the higher probability of a loss of troops or equipment. It will also require arrangements be made with NATO countries already there (namely, the U.S. and France), which are conducting their own operations against the ISIS. Thus, it can be assumed that the Russian authorities would take such decisions only if absolutely necessary.

Any further arrangements may also depend on advancement of the Syrian peace process, possibly based on UN Security Council Resolution no. 2254, adopted on 18 December 2015. According to this document, in January 2016 the Syrian authorities should start talks with the opposition and over the next 18 months, plan for and hold free elections. Moreover, the Syrian regime may be changed. However, one of the main points of disagreement remains the future of Bashar al-Assad, and it is likely Russia will continue to actively defend him and his interests. What is more, the peace process depends also on a ceasefire, and thus the Russians—through their military operation—would have a significant impact on whether that comes to term.

At the same time, the operation in Syria has not reduced Russia's involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, and in particular its support of separatist forces in Donbas. At the same time, it can be expected that any Russian cooperation against ISIS will be used in Moscow's efforts to weaken the unity of the EU over Ukraine and for the lifting of sanctions.

Russia will also continue to increase its presence in Central Asia (recently, its airbase in Ayni, some 30 km from Dushanbe, was strengthened), which indicates that the Russian authorities take seriously the Islamist threat in the region and want to strengthen a buffer zone between the country and Afghanistan. At the same time, the rising spending on the operation in Syria will likely decrease the number of Russian Armed Forces' training manoeuvres ; however the most important such exercise planned for the first half of 2016, in the Arctic, will be held in the planned format.