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Russia's Military Operation in Syria: A New Stage

Anna Maria Dyner

Russian President Vladimir Putin on 14 March announced his decision to remove part of the country's military contingent from Syria. However, this step does not mean the end of Russia's military presence in that country, especially since the aims of its operation in Syria have been only partially reached. Although Russia managed to strengthen Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and increase its own role in the peace process in Syria, the weakening of the so-called Islamic State failed and the intervention increased the terrorist threat to Russia itself. In return for its commitment to Syria, Russia did not obtain any concessions from the West on Ukraine, such as the lifting of economic sanctions by the U.S. and the EU.

Russia's Main Goals and Plan. At the start of the operation in Syria, Russia's authorities set themselves plenty of political goals. The most important short-term aim was to support weakened Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in proposed peace talks. At the same time, it was seen as an instrument for strengthening Russia's position in the Middle East and in the Syrian peace process in general. The long-term aim, though, was to improve relations with the EU Member States and the U.S. so they would change their current policy on Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, especially the softening or elimination of sanctions.

Russia's authorities appear to have reached their goals in terms of domestic policy, such as the "active participation" of Russia in the war against terrorism, including the so-called Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL), the consolidation of Russian public opinion, and refocusing its citizens' attention away from its economic problems and the situation in Ukraine towards its image of a strengthened armed forces.

All Russia's political assumptions listed above were accompanied by military goals—to support and increase the combat capabilities of the Syrian government forces, testing the changes introduced during the reform of Russia's military, as well trying out new weapons systems, including command and navigation systems and coordination among its armed forces.

While the short-term goals of strengthening Assad and increasing Russia's role in the Middle East seem to have been met, its other aims, namely diminishing ISIS and improving relations with the EU and the U.S. remain open questions. Certainly unintended, it is action in Syria against ISIS has increased the terrorist threat to Russia and Central Asian states.

Be that as it may, Russia's main military goals were largely achieved. During the five-and-a-half-month operation, Russian troops trained the Syrian government's forces and supported them in their actions. Thanks to the support of Russian air forces, Syrian forces managed to recover more than 10,000 km^2 of Syrian territory and 400 villages in that area. Russia's armed forces also had the opportunity to test on the battlefield its latest weapons systems, including 3M14 Kalibr-NK, Kh-101 and Kh-35U rockets, command and navigation systems, as well as Tu-214R reconnaissance aircraft. It also became clear that without the support of the Russian forces the Syrian forces' battles against their foes, including ISIS, would have been ineffective, and thus one should expect Russia to continue to aid the government's forces.

One highly negative consequence of Russia's operation in Syria was the breakdown in relations with Turkey after the latter shot down a Su-24 bomber on 24 November 2015 in an airspace dispute. The consequences of the incident, mainly for Turkey, have included a Russian embargo on Turkish food, the abolition of the visa-free regime for Turkish citizens traveling to Russia, a ban on tourist trips to Turkey, as well as significant restrictions on Turkish entrepreneurs in Russia. The Russian-Turkish conflict also affects the political and security situation in the South Caucasus, where Armenia supports Russia, while Azerbaijan and Georgia are strengthening relations with Turkey.[1]

Reasons for the Withdrawal. The date of the announcement that Russia would terminate its operation in Syria was not accidental and coincided with the start of the second round of the Syrian peace negotiations in Geneva. It is therefore a clear political signal that, although the main person responsible for the further development of the situation in Syria should be Bashar al-Assad, the Russians do not want to be associated only with that one party in the dispute. Putin's decision is intended to show Russia's willingness to agree to a settlement of the Syrian conflict while forcing Assad to seek compromise on issues concerning the future of his country.

Despite Russia's support for the Syrian president, it also does not want to further weaken relations with Sunni states and the U.S., and during the past few weeks Russia has stepped up diplomatic contacts with all of them. President Putin spoke twice by phone with King of Jordan Abdullah II and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia (the conversations took place on 19 and 24 February, respectively), while Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov talked with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (6 March) and Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry (8 March).

By deciding to withdraw part of Russia's contingent in Syria, Vladimir Putin probably also hopes to improve the image of his country in the EU and to show that its operation was not why Europe has seen the recent larger waves of refugees.

A Real Withdrawal? According to Putin's order, only some Russian planes, mainly bombers and attack fighters, will be returned to their bases. That means it will leave in Syria its electronic warfare systems, the S-400 air defence system, military advisers, at least one battalion of marines and, in the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean seas, Russian warships ready to resume any military operation will remain on station. Moreover, on Syrian territory two bases will be maintained, the naval station at Tartus and the air base at Khmeimim. In recent months, both were significantly expanded and are ready to receive units when they are deployed from their permanent bases in Russia. Both bases in Syria also have material-technical means to enable the rapid deployment of units dispatched there.

The Russians will also probably leave equipment, especially helicopters, pivotal for further action in Syria. What's more, because the Russian air force will continue to support the offensive by Syrian government forces in the direction of Palmyra (the conditions of the ceasefire of 27 February do not include attacks on terrorist organisations, including ISIS), it is certain that the main task of Russia's remaining troops in Syria will not be simply observation and coordination of humanitarian aid.

At the same time, the decision to withdraw part of its military contingent shows that Russia does not intend to repeat the mistakes of the Soviet Union, which engaged in a long and costly—literally and politically—land military intervention in Afghanistan.

Conclusions. Russia's operation in Syria can be considered only a partial success because only some of its goals were fulfilled. However, in their propaganda, Russia's authorities will try to show that its actions in Syria have achieved the chance for at least a partial settlement of the conflict without changing the ruling regime, while comparing it to the previous actions of NATO, and particularly the U.S., in the region, arguing that they led only to instability in the Middle East. At the same time, Russia will want to use the negotiations on Syria not only as a pathway out of its partial international isolation resulting from its actions in Ukraine or to improve relations with the U.S. and some EU Member States but also to weaken the unity of the EU countries with the goal of lifting the economic sanctions on it.

From a military point of view, Russia's operation in Syria demonstrated the growing operational capabilities of its military (especially its Aerospace Forces) and its ability to conduct expeditionary operations in a difficult climatic region. The Russians also managed to restore and secure its bases at Tartus and Khmeimim. This fits Russia's modern goal of having bases in other countries—in 2014, Russia negotiated for bases with Cuba, Venezuela, Vietnam, Nicaragua and Singapore.

By leaving part of its military contingent in Syria, Russia will continue to influence the peace process in that country. Moreover, in the near future the intensification of policy actions, including the implementation of the Syria-related UN Security Council Resolution No. 2254, and especially its points connected with the creation of a new Syrian constitution and carrying out presidential and parliamentary elections, can be expected. It should also be noted that in case these talks end in failure, Russia probably will decide to resume its operation in support of the Syrian government forces in fighting both ISIS and the opposition.

[1] For more see: K. Zasztowt, "The South Caucasus in the Shadow of the Russian-Turkish Crisis," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 14 (864), 11 February 2016, www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-14-864.