
Russia's Syrian Campaign

STRATEGIC GAMBIT OR REGIONAL ZUGZWANG?

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The Russian military campaign in Syria has been a major military and political event with significant regional and global consequences. It is post-Soviet Russia's first openly-conducted full-scale military operation abroad. Russia's operation in Syria also deftly exploited the element of surprise, as in Ukraine, catching its counterparts in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East off guard.

It remains to be seen, however, whether Russia's Syria intervention can become anything more than a reckless gamble. Ongoing military and political developments will establish whether the "Syrian gambit" will be a regional zugzwang² for Russia or its hour of triumph, laying the groundwork for achieving a "new normal" in its relations with the West.³ Either way, Russia risks a long-term entanglement in the conflict, including the possibility that Russians will have to be active in ground operations.

Showcasing the Russian Military

The Syrian campaign demonstrated Russia's increased capacity to project military strength beyond its borders. Such far-flung Russian military power has not been seen since Soviet deployment of troops to Egypt (1970-1972) and Syria (1983-1984). Russia has flown a record number of sorties, pushing aircraft to their capacity. Russia has also used Syria to battle-test post-Soviet conventional weapons.

Much of its equipment is either completely new or has been significantly upgraded. Su-30SM and Su-35S fighter jets flew in combat for the first time, as did Su-34 bombers equipped with new smart armaments, including satellite-guided aerial bombs and

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² A chess term for when a player is obligated to make a move that puts them at a severe disadvantage.

³ This memo elaborates on an argument initially put forth by the author in "[The Syrian Gambit](#)," *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 6, November–December, 2015.

guided missiles. Even the most advanced Russian intelligence and surveillance aircraft, the TU-214R, was deployed at the end of February to the Hmeymim airbase in Latakia.

At the same time, Russia's air operations have revealed certain problems with surveillance and precision-guided weaponry. Older Su-24M and Su-25SM planes, and even advanced Su-34 bombers, have tended to go on missions with free-falling bombs rather than guided munitions.

Russian aircraft have also staged operations from outside Syrian bases. In November, supersonic Tu-22M3 (Backfire) bombers for the first time flew from the North Caucasus to hit targets in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Tu-95MS (Bear) long-range strategic bombers and Tu-160M (Blackjack) missile-carrying aircraft have also fired cruise missiles at targets in Syria from Iranian airspace.

After the Turkish shootdown of the Russian Su-24 fighter jet, Moscow reinforced its air task force with more advanced air defense systems. This involved deployment of the S-400 long-range air defense system for the first time in combat operations, as well as the Krasukha-4, a new long-range radar and communications jamming system. With these systems in place, Russia was effectively able to create its own no-fly zone over the western part of Syria.

The Russian Navy has also been involved in the operation. In October 2015, the navy launched cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea that flew over Iran and Iraq. In December, Russian non-nuclear submarines launched cruise missiles from the Eastern Mediterranean for the first time. In both cases, the military impact of the strikes was coupled with political messaging: they demonstrated, respectively, the shared strategic goals of Russia, Iran, and Iraq and Russia's long-range capacity to the West and to certain Middle Eastern regional powers.

Such "messages," delivered through the use of conventional weapons, were arguably combined with a hint of nuclear coercion toward Russia's regional rivals. After the cruise missile launches and submarine salvos, Putin [said](#), "We now see that these are new, modern, and highly effective high-precision weapons that can be equipped either with conventional or special nuclear warheads," while caveating that "of course, this is not necessary when fighting against terrorism, and, I hope, will never be." Despite the allusion to the Islamic State, Putin appeared to address this nuclear reference more to Turkey and its regional allies, much in the same way that Russia effectively invoked the nuclear threat during the Crimea crisis.

The Turkish Factor: A Complication Becomes More Complex

A key factor leading to Russia's decision to intervene militarily in Syria was Assad's loss of territory in Idlib, Palmyra, and several other strategic locations. Moscow needed to

take action before the U.S.-led coalition and its regional allies, primarily Turkey, could create a no-fly zone over Syria, which Moscow believed would be followed by coalition air strikes and, probably, the fall of the Assad regime. An offshoot of Russian direct military involvement, however, was that it completely overturned Turkish President Recep Erdoğan's Syrian strategy of the last four years, pushing Turkey to take more active steps of its own.

These steps have complicated the conduct of Russia's military operations. First, Ankara proved determined not to sit quietly as Russia engaged in military activities in Turkey's "near abroad." Russia tried to establish some coordination with Ankara before launching its military operations, but this did not pan out. At first, Turkey watched quietly as Russian ships sailed through the Bosphorus Straits to deliver weapons to Damascus. Once Russian air operations began, Turkey had to give up on the idea of any kind of no-fly zone over northern Syria. Nonetheless, Turkey soon responded militarily, shooting down the Russian Su-24 bomber in November, and in early December Turkish troops entered Mosul in northern Iraq (Russia's ad hoc ally) for "[routine training exercises](#)."

Pressure on Turkey to get more involved in Syria only increased. Turkey's primary motive for shooting down the Russian jet was likely to coerce Russia into halting its attacks on Syrian Turkmen rebels in northern Latakia, as well as Sunni fighters around Aleppo. However, its action had the opposite effect, as Russia drastically increased the level of its air attacks and the Syrian army initiated new offensives in the area. This further reduced Erdoğan's non-military options for influencing the situation inside Syria.

The possibility of greater Turkish involvement in Syria again rose in February 2016 when Assad's army conducted its most successful military operation since the start of Russia's air campaign. Cutting the land corridor connecting rebel-held Aleppo to the Turkish border, the Syrian Army was able to link up to the Syrian Kurdish enclave and put pro-Turkish rebels in a difficult situation. In addition, Turkey had to reckon with the growing military capabilities of the Kurds, who seized control of new areas along the Syria-Turkey border. The February terrorist act against Turkish military personnel in Ankara, attributed to a radical Turkish Kurdish organization, further ratcheted up the pressure on Ankara to act.

Many observers have sought to find parallels between Russia's Syria intervention and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, taking the Turkish factor into consideration and given a hypothetical escalation, a more appropriate analogy may be the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). This is due to the limited combat capabilities and supply constraints of Russia's "Syrian expeditionary corps," the possibility of restricted access through the Bosphorus Straits, and the quantitatively superior conventional military capacity of Turkey (and potential regional allies). In the event of a direct

military clash between Turkey and Russia, the latter's bases at Latakia and Tartus could very well become new "Port Arthurs."

The analogy need not be taken so far, however. Obviously, Russia's military presence is a major deterrent against Turkey considering greater military engagement in Syria. The costs of direct confrontation are high, and NATO would provide only political support at most since NATO's Article 5 collective defense commitment would not apply to actions taken on Syrian territory. The increased threat of Turkish intervention only reinforces Russia's commitment to stay militarily involved, as Moscow knows that Assad's regime will crumble if left alone against external forces.

Even in the absence of direct military confrontation between Russia and Turkey, the military logic inside Syria tends to dictate continued Russian entanglement. However, the level of Russia's future engagement mainly depends on the results of the Russia-Syria combined air-land operation (includes against the Islamic State and non-moderate rebels) as well as the prospects for achieving a sustainable ceasefire regime under the auspices of the international contact group on Syria.

The Prospects of War and Peace in Syria

Ultimately, the Syrian civil war will be resolved on the ground, not by air (or remote) operations. It is an axiom that air power alone cannot win a civil war or an asymmetric conflict. Such has been the case with Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq.

Even with Russia's help, until February, Assad's offensive was not proceeding as expected. The Syrian army was taking ground too slowly, and losing weapons and troops. The largest losses came from modern antitank missiles fired by insurgents, leading some to predict these might have as devastating an impact as Afghan mujahideen Stinger missiles once had on Soviet aircraft and helicopters. While Russian and Iranian training and massive arms supplies have led the regime to growing military efficiency (as seen by the recent successes around Aleppo and northern Latakia), military success for Assad is likely defined as solidifying control along the Damascus-Homs-Hama-Aleppo line.

If Assad's offensive goes no further or stalls, Russia may have to either wind down its operation in Syria or increase its involvement. In case of the latter, reinforcement of the Russian Air Force may not be enough. Russia might have to activate artillery rocket systems with crews on the ground, while supplying more weapons to the Syrian army, including Smerch multiple-launch rocket systems, Tochka-U short-range ballistic missiles, T-90 tanks, and other arms. The number of Russian military advisers could rise, and Russian elite and special operations forces may have to go into action. There are already reports from the battlefield of the involvement of Russian military advisers and personnel on the ground providing support behind loyalist forces.

In a promising turn, under the auspices of the United States and Russia, a fragile ceasefire between the Assad regime and moderate opposition forces was established in early March. At the moment, it is not clear whether this ceasefire is a true prelude for a long-term sustainable peace process and the beginning of civic reconciliation in Syria, or just a symbolic short-lived respite. The contradictions between internal and external actors are too many to envisage any easy compromise on Syria's future.

If current international attempts to achieve a ceasefire fail and fighting resumes, an escalation of the Syrian civil war may grow dramatically. External actors such as Turkey and some Gulf monarchies may increase their military involvement which would force Russia to step up its ground presence. The result could be that Russia's abrupt strategic gambit in Syria becomes a long-term regional zugzwang for Moscow in the Middle East.