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Putin's Syria Strategy

Russian Airstrikes and What Comes Next

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As some had predicted, in late September [Russia intervened in Syria](#) <sup>[1]</sup>. In Moscow's eyes, the move reconfirmed Russia's status as an indispensable power and broke down its international isolation by diverting attention from Ukraine, winning [some applause in the EU](#) <sup>[2]</sup> and possibly creating conditions for sanctions relief. Most important, the United States [softened its position](#) <sup>[3]</sup> on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose resignation is no longer considered a precondition for settlement.

To examine what Moscow is ultimately after—its theory of victory—and how it will get there, one has to make some assumptions. First, [disputes about Russian President Vladimir Putin's prudence](#) <sup>[4]</sup> and the Kremlin's aptitude for sound national security policy are unsettled. But empirical evidence suggests that Putin, though not necessarily a chess grandmaster, does have his own systematic method for managing crises and strategic interactions. He is guided by [his understanding of Russia's past](#) <sup>[5]</sup> and his deeply held visions of its future. Not infallible, he nonetheless examines his options, changes course in response to events, and demonstrates a [judoka's aptitude](#) <sup>[6]</sup> for improvisation and exploitation of his adversaries' mistakes.

Second, the desired endgame for Moscow is presumably a stabilized Syria through which [Russia can preserve its regional presence](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. Initially, Moscow will try to secure and strengthen its stronghold on Syria's coast—in the Latakia and Tartus facilities, where it has long maintained a presence. Russia could expand its beachhead by increasing airfield capacity and equipping its docks for bigger battle and transport ships. Russia would use its optimized launching pad to supply Assad's and its own forces in their battle to stabilize and protect the borders of "little Syria," the regime's current strongholds. Meanwhile, Moscow may start to inch toward a political settlement. The Kremlin will likely first push for the restoration of Syria's prewar borders. If that seems infeasible or too risky, though, it may be satisfied with the little Syria borders. Although Moscow's preference will be for Assad to stay in control in both scenarios, it would not likely stand in the way of replacing him as long as the new government would protect Moscow's interests and enable its regional power projection.

Third, Moscow probably understands that its position in Syria is hardly strong and that intervention may become a fiasco. It is aware of U.S. regional misadventures and its own in Afghanistan, the North Caucasus, and Ukraine. If judged by Russian military and area studies

periodicals of recent years, Russian experts and strategists have a clear picture of best and worst practices during military interventions and air campaigns, although the extent to which such knowledge will translate into policy is unclear.

Strategically, Russian expert commentary has zeroed in on the limits of Russia's vast military capacity against an ideological enemy. Brute force can inflict heavy blows on jihadist fighters but not on Salafist ideas. And so strategists have debated just how to wage the battle in Syria and the appropriate risks to take on and costs to pay [8]. Moscow is mindful of the potential difficulties of sustaining public tolerance for a war in a distant country, particularly as Russia's economy declines and the hostilities in Donbass continue. Finally, the Kremlin is sensitive to concerns of business elites about the prudence of the move, especially the potential parallels to Russia's misadventures in Afghanistan.

With all that could go wrong, Putin's decision to intervene was probably fraught [9]. Wary of overextension, the Kremlin must be trying to find the exact right balance between under- and over-shooting. Here, the Kremlin is likely to adopt an approach that corresponds with the Soviet principle of reasonable sufficiency. First articulated by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, the principle originally meant fielding only the military force necessary to protect against outside threats. Applied to the Syrian context, the principle may mean limiting the scale of intervention to the minimum level that would still allow Russia to project influence in Syria. In Ukraine, Moscow learned hard lessons about the limits of force—additional military involvement has not enabled it to settle the situation in Donbass once and for all. Indeed, it has only drawn Russia further into a battle it neither expected nor desired. This time, reasonable sufficiency may prevent Moscow from crossing the culminating point of intervention—the moment after which additional application of force becomes counterproductive.

## INTERVENTION TACTICS

In its intervention in Syria, Moscow has sought the broadest possible alliance. Even so, the military core of the coalition is quite narrow: Assad's remaining units, Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Basij forces, Hezbollah, and the Iraqi government.

In this campaign, Moscow will likely try to design and oversee coalition operations and act as a force multiplier on the frontlines. In addition to diplomatic support, Russia may provide planning and logistical assistance; command, control communication, and intelligence capabilities; and of course air support. The air component of the mission could perhaps include fighter-bombers, close support jets, combat and transport helicopters, and drones—all of which would be deployed to back up the pro-Assad forces. Russia may use its interdiction jets to deter possible air strikes on Assad-controlled ground and field surface-to-air systems and advanced jets for the defense of all expeditionary components.

At the same time, in keeping with the principle of reasonable sufficiency, Moscow will likely delegate most ground warfare to its allies. It could participate in operational planning, share visual and signal intelligence, and designate targets. But it seems unlikely that battalions of Russian troops will become a regular site in Damascus. Instead, Moscow is likely to boost its programs to train and advise Assad's units, which it views and presents, for political and military reasons, as the most effective battlefield force against ISIS.

Moscow might be confident that it can design an effective coalition campaign, building on its experiences from dozens of exercises conducted with Collective Security Treaty and Shanghai Cooperation Organizations. Even so, it is likely to be concerned about coalition forces' interoperability. To be sure, on the strategic level, Iran, Russia, and Syria, and possibly Hezbollah and Iraq, have reportedly coordinated on some military efforts since summer. Moscow is familiar with Syrian forces, which it trained, equipped, and educated for decades, while Assad has deep experience with Hezbollah. And both countries have cooperated with Iran. But the group doesn't have much experience working together as a whole, and most of the parties have never conducted large-scale coalition operations before.

Russia's ability to coordinate its partners' activities will be key. According to Russian commentators, ISIS's success mostly derives from Assad's inability to concentrate his military's efforts against the group, from the previous coalition's half-measures, and from the lack of coordination among the rebels. By bringing some focus and rationality to the anti-ISIS campaign, the Russian-led coalition seeks to reverse the course of the war. Given existing Russian military theory, the air campaign is likely to take the form of strikes on the three systems holding ISIS together: the chain of command and control, supply chains, and economic centers of gravity. As air strikes try to fragment ISIS, ground operations will seek to dismantle small local groups of fighters. The campaign doesn't need to be large scale, it just needs to reverse current trends, demonstrate the strength of the incumbent regime, and facilitate conditions for a political process.

In some aspects, the campaign design may also draw from Russia's New Generation Warfare—a set of ideas about the changing character of war that has been circulating in the Russian strategic community under the current chief of the general staff, Valery Gerasimov. This notion already shaped the 2014 Russian military doctrine and subsequent operations in Ukraine. The concept minimizes the role of large-scale military operations of the industrial war era and instead combines hard and soft power across military, diplomatic, and economic domains. It capitalizes on indirect action, informational operations, paramilitaries, and special operation forces backed by sophisticated military capabilities. Done right, the concept naturally corresponds with the principle of reasonable sufficiency.

In this case, Moscow might minimize its visible presence, blurring, for domestic and international purposes, the line between involvement and intervention. This doesn't mean, of course, that Russia will send no operatives into the fray of the ground warfare. Indeed, if the "little green man" ("polite people," in the Russian parlance) of the Russian armed forces, together with Donbass field commanders and pro-Russian Chechen fighters start appearing on the Syrian battlefields, it should come as no surprise. Unlike in Donbass or Crimea, these fighters will have more issues with blending in. Given their experience and training, though, they can still act as a force multiplier. And if Russia deploys them while keeping mindful of reasonable sufficiency, it can hope to avoid a quagmire in Syria along the lines of the one in Donbass <sup>[10]</sup> and achieve something closer to the effective campaign in Crimea.

## ALL FOR ONE?

Making waves is easier than controlling them. For Moscow, the main risk in Syria is overextension. During the initial surge against ISIS, the coalition is likely to rally around their common goal. But as the campaign wears on, and especially if situation in the Assad-held parts of Syria stabilizes, the interests of coalition members may diverge. Iran and Syria may

seek to take the battle further eastward and northward, hoping to fully restore Syria to Assad. Moscow may have more limited goals and will seek to switch to settlement and stabilization as soon as possible. If Moscow is unable to facilitate a political solution and cannot impose its will on its allies, they may drag Russia deeper into fighting. The same may occur if the campaign, for whatever reason, does not progress as planned and demands more investment. The Kremlin probably realizes that its Shia coalition with Assad, Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraq may galvanize the Sunnis against them, even precipitating an alliance of ISIS and other radical armed groups. The risk is all the greater given that Moscow does not differentiate between moderate and extremist rebels and qualifies any anti-Assad combatants as terrorists—as the targets of strikes to date make clear.

The second risk is related to Israel. Jerusalem is likely to stand firm against any game-changing weapons transfers to Hezbollah, and it will not tolerate fighting spilling over its borders. Knowing this, Hezbollah, Iran, and Assad may be planning to operate within Russian areas of responsibility and as close as possible to Russian forces, turning them into human shields. Israel has routinely been conducting strikes exactly where the Russians are now expanding their foothold. Recent talks between Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on deconflicting their air, naval, and electromagnetic operations will only partially address the issue. If the tail wags the dog, Moscow and Jerusalem will face hard choices. Israel has signaled its neutrality toward the conflict, but it is unclear how the Israeli Air Force will tolerate potential jamming, cyberstrikes, and limits of its space for maneuvering or if Moscow decides to establish an electromagnetic *cordon sanitaire* and anti access-area denial sphere around the pro-Assad coalition's operational theater.

Finally, Moscow understands that there will be a persistent threat of homegrown radicalization. It knows that its activities in Syria could instigate hatred among its large Sunni population and further motivate jihadists to bring their fight back to the Russian heartland, the North Caucasus, and Central Asia. The radicalization of Muslim conscripts within the Russian military is already a concern for Moscow—and things could get much worse.

Even if Moscow is aware of the dangers and wants to avoid the culminating point of intervention, it is unclear whether the current campaign in Syria will go as smoothly as Russia thinks. Still, it is worth keeping in mind an old adage: Russia is never as strong as it seems and is never as weak as it appears [11].

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