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Kaim, Markus; Tamminga, Oliver

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

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Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kaim, M., & Tamminga, O. (2015). *Russia's military intervention in Syria: its operation plan, objectives, and consequences for the West's policies*. (SWP Comment, 48/2015). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-455698>

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Russia's Military Intervention in Syria

Its Operation Plan, Objectives, and Consequences for the West's Policies

Markus Kaim and Oliver Tamminga

The deployment and use of Russian air forces in Syria could be a turning-point for President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Since the start of the Russian air strikes on 30 September 2015, discussion has been rife in the media and in political circles as to what intentions Russia might be pursuing with its intervention in Syria. However, if one takes into account the force package deployed to Syria, the manner in which the Russian air forces have proceeded, and the Kremlin's official statements after the Assad visit to Moscow, the main features of an operation plan quickly emerge. It has repercussions far beyond Syria.

On 30 September 2015, the Russian military embarked on a series of operations in Syria that had been prepared from the beginning of September onwards with the establishment of a base south of Latakia and the deployment of the relevant forces. However, the military and political aims of the Russian government, as well as the motives behind the military intervention, are still unclear.

The Russian government has never hidden its willingness to act against all forces fighting the Damascus regime. In fact, Moscow and Damascus view all militarily active opposition groups as terrorists that must be combated. And yet Russia has always avoided joining the US-led coalition of 60 states and international organisations that was formed to counter IS. Instead, the Russian government began early on to forge an alliance with Syria, Iran, Iraq and the

Lebanese Hezbollah, even though these actors are pursuing different interests.

Russia's military capacity in Syria

In the past few weeks, Russia has been increasing its deployment of military forces to the air base near Latakia, in the north-west of Syria.

The marines, T-90 tanks, combat vehicles and artillery deployed there mainly serve to protect the air base from attacks by IS or other opposition groups. The number of marines, between 300 and 500, is sufficient to provide lasting force protection and combat service support for a base of this kind, but too small to be used offensively.

The Su-24 and Su-34 fighter bombers, Su-25 ground attack aircraft, Mi-24 attack helicopters and reconnaissance drones that Russia has deployed to Syria are pri-

marily useful in contributing to land operations.

Their main application would seem to be guaranteeing the operational freedom of action and freedom of manoeuvre of Syrian or other troops on the ground, supporting counter-offensives and destroying, disrupting and degrading the enemy's ground forces, even the enemy's depth position in the area of operations. With their armaments and ability to fly relatively slowly, the Su-25 ground attack aircraft in particular specialise in providing close air support for ground troops. The fighter bombers can stay in the theatre of operations for a comparatively long time because of their deployable radius, waiting to be assigned potential targets. The Russian government has confirmed that the ground offensive by Syrian troops is being carried out under Russian air operations cover. This corroborates the intent behind the military capabilities that have been transferred to Syria.

However, Moscow has also relocated weapons systems into Syria that have nothing to do with the fight against IS or rebel forces, but are instead expressly intended for protecting the Syrian regime. The ostensible purpose of these radars, anti-aircraft missile systems and Su-30 multi-role fighter aircraft, as well as the means for electronic warfare, is to prevent or limit enemy aerial warfare, protect one's forces from enemy air attacks and ensure the integrity of one's air space. However, since neither IS nor any other opposition group has airplanes or the means of carrying out air strikes, these systems must have quite a different rationale: the very presence of these weapons systems acts as a "protective shield" over the Russian and Syrian forces in a specific area of western and north-western Syria, because it represents a serious danger to western combat aircraft. This form of air superiority has an immediate impact on the use of US and allied means for aerial warfare, and forces them to coordinate and de-conflict their own operations with Russia so as to avoid incidents and even accidents. Examples of the new

risks that can now be incurred are the incidents where a Russian fighter plane "strayed" into Turkish airspace; US fighter planes aborted their attacks after getting too close to Russian jets; and an allegedly Russian drone that was brought down in Turkish airspace.

Russia thus has a de-facto veto over air operations in Russian-controlled Syrian airspace. Put differently, through its military actions, Russia has gained direct leverage over the aircraft movements of the international anti-IS coalition and is effectively limiting the coalition's operational freedom.

The objectives behind Russia's actions

Viewed collectively, these elements give a preliminary picture of the situation, and the contours of an operation plan emerge. Russia intends to pursue several different goals with its military intervention.

On the operational level, Moscow is currently pursuing the goal of protecting the Assad regime from opposition members of all stripes, and not just from IS. A glance at the regions of Syria where Russian air attacks have so far taken place makes clear that the purpose is to crush opposition groups in the north of the country and on the periphery of areas controlled by Assad's troops, as well as rebel enclaves. So far, at least, the fight against IS appears to be of secondary importance, as an ingredient in the process of political legitimisation for Russia's engagement. That, at any rate, is the direction in which Russia's choice of targets for its air operations has been pointing from the start.

In an interview, President Putin declared that the goal of the intervention was to stabilise what he deemed to be the legally recognised government in Damascus, and create the preconditions for a political compromise in Syria. Until further notice, the strategic goal is therefore to preserve an Alawite "core Syria". This has been achieved inter alia by the creation of an undeclared, de-facto no-fly zone for the western anti-IS

coalition over parts of Syria, whose effect was barely lessened by the Russian-American *Memorandum on Air Safety in Syria* of 20 October.

The transfer of parts of the Russian Black Sea fleet to the eastern Mediterranean, which Moscow is considering, also serves this goal and could be interpreted as contributing to an “anti-access/area denial” strategy, whereby other military forces are prevented from invading an area of operations or else have their operational freedom in a certain territory curtailed.

On the political level, following the Ukraine crisis, Russia appears to link its military intervention with efforts to make the international community see it as a central actor in containing or even solving the Syria conflict. At the same time, Moscow is anxious to demonstrate, by building a counter-alliance with Syria, Iran and Iraq, that this alliance is more effective than the US-led coalition and that, moreover, it has greater potential legitimacy since it is based on initiatives by the respective governments and includes local partners. The advantage of the Russian position became evident on 9 October, when the US government announced that it would discontinue its programme to train and equip Syrian rebels, which had only started in December 2014. In September, Washington had been forced to admit that it had trained fewer than 50 fighters to date, and announced that it would concentrate instead on providing support for existing groups already fighting IS in Syria. Thus, while Moscow has a military partner “on the ground” in Syria, the international coalition – some parts of which are committed to fighting IS, others the Assad regime – has to forego such backing almost entirely.

Repercussions for Israel

The Russian military presence also has repercussions for Israel. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu has made it clear that Israel will not accept any restrictions on its military’s freedom of action, Jerusalem too

will have to coordinate and de-conflict its movements in Syrian airspace with Moscow. That will make it more difficult in the future for Israel to carry out air attacks, as it has occasionally done in the past with the aim of preventing Iranian arms deliveries reaching Hezbollah via Syria. On the other hand, Israel now has a powerful contact, should the future course of the war in Syria ever fundamentally affect Israeli security interests.

Conclusion

Russia’s engagement in Syria has taken the West by surprise, and substantially changed the framework for the fight against IS and for containing the Syrian civil war. To what extent this is also a setback for the fight against IS in Syria (and in Iraq) depends on the willingness of Russia and the US to cooperate with one another in the coming months.

Politically speaking, a series of assumptions underpinning the West’s Syria policy have been made void by Russia’s military intervention, or need to be nuanced or revised:

1. The premise of many western governments that President Assad cannot play any part in Syria’s future political order is no longer sustainable. Despite the countless human rights violations and war crimes, and despite his responsibility for the exodus and expulsion of millions of Syrians, Assad will have to be accepted as a provisional interlocutor by all those governments and internal opposition forces who count on the Syrian civil war being containable with Moscow’s help. Initial statements of western government representatives already point in that direction. The most recent territorial gains by IS may impose a sequence on the international crisis management: first, the international community might have to devote its attention to the fight against IS; and only thereafter could it address the other dimensions of the Syrian civil war. It remains to be seen what prospect of success the parallel UN efforts have

in bringing the domestic Syrian parties to the conflict to the negotiating table, so as to discuss the conditions for a ceasefire and prepare the political transition. In the short term, Russia's military intervention will make it more difficult to find a political solution to the conflict.

2. In this context, the second assumption – that the format and momentum of the international Iran negotiations can be seamlessly used by the West in the Syria conflict – is also questionable. Russia has offered its cooperation in the fight against IS in Syria, but it comes at a price: President Assad must remain in office for the time being. For Moscow, this appears to be less about the President's person than about positioning itself against regime change brought about by the West. Anyone who considers Russia a partner on this issue will find it hard to avoid re-prioritising accordingly (see item 1).

3. Depending on what other end-states of the war Russia might pursue, a third assumption may also become void. Given that Russia's military capabilities are effective but manageable in size (so far), there is some doubt that Russia wants – or is able – to support the Syrian government in asserting its monopoly on violence over the whole country. This would, after all, require a broad offensive deploying Russian ground troops. And most likely, it would only result in a consolidation of the already existing borders of the various territories. Against this background, it is at the very least debatable whether the West's Syria policy should continue to be orientated towards maintaining the country's territorial unity.

Admittedly, the Russian leadership is hardly in a position to contain the Syrian civil war on its own and also defeat IS. Nor does that seem to be Russia's goal: continuing instability in Syria and a comparable situation in Iraq would enable Moscow not only to present itself as the alternative to the West, but more importantly as a kind of veto power in the future configuration of the Near and Middle East.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Tom Genrich

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 88/2015)