

Russia seeks regional buy-in for its Syria plans

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Moscow is using calibrated military firepower and complex diplomacy to persuade Syria's neighbours to back its solutions

Human rights campaigners in Moscow on April 2 released a report aiming to enlighten Russians about their country's part in the Syrian conflict and related abuses. More conventional statements coming out of Moscow last week warned that Western policies designed to contain Damascus could drive more refugees into Europe and accused the United States of deliberately fostering instability in north-east Syria. Such statements reflect the mix of military engagement and diplomatic leverage that Moscow is using in pursuit of a settlement that keeps President Bashar al-Assad in power.



Russian military police on patrol near Qamishli, 2019 (Baderkhan Ahmad/AP/Shutterstock)

What next

Russia will intensify diplomatic efforts to secure regional acceptance of Assad as a legitimate actor and to direct discussions on humanitarian aid to give Assad more control of aid distribution. Diplomacy will be backed by military might, helping Assad to subdue the last rebel stronghold in Idlib. Russia's continued advantage depends on whether Western states avoid prioritising Syria.

Subsidiary Impacts

- Russia will do little to mitigate the humanitarian situation in Syria but will use it as a political weapon against the West.
- Success in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean will bolster regional perceptions of Russia as a great power at the expense of the West.
- Russia will avoid making the same level of military investment in Libya, the Central African Republic and any other zones.

Analysis

Calibrated use of military power is essential to Russian strategy in Syria.

Holding the north-east

From late December 2020 into January this year, Moscow began to increase its military presence in north-eastern Syria, which is divided into territory held by the US-supported, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), lands mainly along the border dominated by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and areas where Assad's forces are present.

In December and January, 300 Russian military police arrived in Hasaka and more units appeared in Qamishli and Ain Issa (see SYRIA: North-east frozen conflict will erode security - February 12, 2021). These are all areas with a strong SDF presence.

Russia uses air power in some regions, non-combat military police in others

Such deployments of non-combat troops served multiple purposes, practical and political:

- Military police in the Ain Issa area established posts to form a barrier between the advancing SNA and Kurdish combatants.
- In Hasaka and Qamishli, they policed an uneasy truce between SDF and Syrian government

forces.

- Their presence was a warning of the limits Russia would place on Turkey's territorial ambitions, but also the conditionality of its protection for the Kurds.
- It additionally sent a signal to Washington that Moscow would not concede this sphere of influence, as a new president entered the White House and following clashes between Russian and US units in 2020.

Robust action in Idlib

The military stand-off between Russian- and Turkish-backed forces in the north-western Idlib province continues. There have been indications that Damascus is building towards a new offensive against the rebels (see SYRIA: Damascus may launch the next Idlib offensive - February 23, 2021).

Whatever the timing of this, Russian armed forces have stepped up the level and nature of their engagement:

- March 5 air strikes on an oil transport facility near the Jarablus crossing with Turkey and makeshift oil refineries, both controlled by the Ankara-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA), appeared to be the result of Russian short-range missiles (see SYRIA: Damascus will target oil diversion - March 8, 2021).
- Russian aircraft and missiles were identified as the perpetrators of several attacks around March 20 that hit a natural gas facility and various civilian targets, including a parking lot near another border crossing with Turkey, Bab al-Hawa (see SYRIA: Turkey-Russia ties will contain escalation - March 22, 2021).

The attacks signalled an intention to eliminate rebel control of fuel movement, even at the risk of angering Turkey because of the proximity of missile strikes to its frontier.

Airspace and maritime postures

The Hmeimim air base and Tartous naval port are essential to Russian operations in Syria and power projection beyond it.

Satellite footage seen by The Drive web resource indicates that Russia is lengthening a runway at Hmeimim. This would accommodate heavy freight aircraft such as the Antonov An-124.

In December, a Russian frigate held air defence drills in the Eastern Mediterranean, consolidating Moscow's enhanced military posture in this region. Russia's naval presence contributed missile power to the war in Syria and has reshaped the eastern Mediterranean, described last June as "one of the most kinetic areas in the world" by Admiral James Foggo, head of US Naval Forces Europe and Africa (see RUSSIA: New missiles to maximise navy's limited reach - October 1, 2019).

Regional diplomacy

Increased military activity has gone hand in hand with high-level diplomatic moves.

When Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov toured Gulf states in March, Syria was a high priority. At a press conference in Doha following a meeting with his Turkish and Qatari counterparts, Lavrov suggested that Syria's return to the Arab League would play a "stabilising" role in the region.

Moscow is trying to persuade regional governments that, despite their past backing of Syrian rebels and antipathy towards Assad, they should look forward, accept a Russian-devised political settlement and grant the Syrian leader legitimacy again. Some Gulf countries are showing significant interest.

These messages are likely to be repeated when Lavrov visits Egypt and Iran on April 12-13.

In Moscow, Lavrov last month received a delegation from Hezbollah, the Lebanese group that has provided Assad with important combat units during the conflict. Ongoing political and economic turmoil in Lebanon may give Moscow greater leverage over Hezbollah.

The Hezbollah meeting overlapped with Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi's visit to Moscow.

High-level meetings with all key regional players, including those that disagree with one other, exemplify Moscow's multifaceted approach in pursuit of its desired outcome in Syria, at the expense of the West.

Moscow wants Syria's neighbours to back its vision, and pay for it too

Moscow ultimately hopes to persuade Gulf countries to fund reconstruction in Syria. It lacks the resources or the will to finance reconstruction projects with uncertain returns, although Russian companies will seek advantageous contracts (see SYRIA: Reconstruction prospects may weaken further - March 3, 2021).

Sanctions

Moscow continues to push for the lifting of Western sanctions against Assad, arguing that they stand in the way of humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts. Russian officials consistently portray refugee flows to Europe as the direct consequence of actions by the West, not Damascus or Moscow. Even some Western commentators are taking the view that sanctions, rather than Assad, bear prime responsibility for death and suffering in Syria.

If sanctions were lifted, that would help Moscow legitimise Assad and facilitate reconstruction on its terms. Both would create a stronger domestic Russian narrative of victory in Syria.

Border and aid control

In Doha, Lavrov spoke of "the importance of providing urgent humanitarian assistance to Syrians" -- but Moscow's higher priority is to define and direct this process.

The UN Security Council will soon begin negotiating Resolution 2533 on cross-border assistance. Informal diplomatic moves began when Secretary of State Antony Blinken chaired a UN Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Syria on March 29.

Last year, Moscow forced the UN into a painful compromise closing all border crossings except those under Assad's control. This year, Moscow set out proposals to open three crossings from Assad-controlled territory into Idlib. If this is accepted, it will allow Moscow to argue, as it has done in the past, that the internal aid route from Damascus to Idlib is functional and there is no need for cross-border aid. Control of aid would further empower Assad to subdue Idlib and assert control over more of Syria.