



Shifting Landscape

RUSSIA'S MILITARY ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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SINCE SEPTEMBER 2015, Russia's military intervention in Syria has effectively reshaped the broader regional landscape. Moscow's power-projection options are widened further by its long-term bases in Syria on the eastern Mediterranean. The United States, as a counterpoint, has been slowly reducing its role, leaving the West to reckon with the physical and psychological effects of another major power in the Middle East, and an adversarial one at that.

Moscow's Syria intervention was its first expeditionary push outside the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. Its scale is modest, but focused and sustained, and it signals ambitious intentions, even if they are unmatched by resources. The intervention took many Western analysts by surprise, and a large number rushed to conclude that Russia would get bogged down in Syria, just as the Soviet Union had in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Moscow, however, has conducted a very different campaign in Syria



than in Afghanistan. President Vladimir Putin has carefully studied the fall of the Soviet Union and at least as early as 2004 was publicly discussing lessons learned from Afghanistan.¹

In Syria, Moscow pursued a strategy that Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov recently described as “limited action.” According to Russia military expert Roger McDermott, Gerasimov “most likely” sought to signal that “the Syrian experience...may serve to guide future defense decision making.”² In other words, the Syrian experience mattered beyond the country itself.

The Russian military has worked to improve by studying other militaries at the top of their game. Russian analysts have extensively studied Western operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and especially operations in the Middle East, such as the U.S. campaigns Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. The Russian military has undergone major reforms since 2008 that have resulted in clear improvements. More broadly, Russian military activity in the region shows both continuity with the Kremlin’s historical traditions and adaptations to new realities. As Jamestown Foundation president Glen Howard and his coeditor, Matthew Czekaj, point out, Putin is returning Russia to the notion of “limited war,” employed by both Soviet and czarist leaders.³

The results of Moscow’s activities will have long-term implications. The Kremlin took advantage of what might otherwise have been a fleeting opportunity to prop up a faltering client and stick its finger in the West’s eye—but with a long-term view, which includes its own survival and deterring the West and NATO through its position in the Middle East and North Africa.

Russia’s military role in the Middle East cannot be entirely separated from its broader foreign policy and domestic developments. The Russian state historically saw military capability as a key tool for both. “From the moment the regular Armed Forces were created in Russia 300 years ago, rulers have always regarded citizens primarily as a resource for wars,” wrote Russian military expert Alexander Golts, adding: “The ideology of governing was built on the idea of the country as a military camp, a fortress under siege.”⁴ Under Vladimir Putin, Russia is increasingly following this pattern, with the state growing more militarized and in turn pushing the militarization of society. This context frames Russia’s renewed presence in the Middle East.

The U.S. position in the region remains stronger

than Russia’s, but Washington is signaling ambiguity regarding its intentions, in stark contrast to Moscow’s clarity. This study examines Russia’s changing footprint in the Middle East and North Africa. It focuses largely on Moscow’s Syria strategy and tactics in the context of the federation’s armed forces reform and state-driven militarization of society. It then examines their implications for the rest of the region and concludes with policy recommendations.

THE SOVIET MILITARY FOOTPRINT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Russian rulers historically viewed politics as a stage-managed process, meaning that surface appearances differed from underlying reality. This is why the Kremlin today is convinced that Western talk about democratization is only a pretext for regime change—it cannot take such rhetoric at face value. Indeed, the American diplomat George Kennan, who advocated a policy of containment toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War, once remarked, “Russians are a nation of stage managers: and the deepest of their convictions is that things are not what they are, but only what they seem.”⁵

The military was one of the key elements the state used to achieve its ends. Czarist Russia had longstanding interests in the Middle East, and its successor, the USSR, quickly emerged as a critical player in the region in its contest with the United States. One of the first Cold War crises took place in 1946, when Stalin briefly refused to withdraw the Red Army from Iran, showing the importance of the Middle East in the Kremlin’s broader ambitions. As one expert observed in the early 1980s, the Gulf region fell “within one of the inner rings (if not within the innermost ring) of the Soviet Union security perimeter.”⁶

In 1964, the Soviet Navy created the 5th Eskadra (squadron) in the Mediterranean, whose purpose was to serve as a symbolic display of state power (*derzhavnost*); as diplomatic support for Soviet allies; and last, but perhaps most important, as maritime forward defense. Both czarist and Soviet strategic planners believed it was especially important to protect the “southern flank” of the eastern Mediterranean. For the Soviet Union in particular, it meant protection against NATO operations.⁷

The Soviets routinely deployed military personnel to support allies in conflicts, including in the Middle East. Especially after their invasion of Afghanistan, the possibility of Soviet boots on the ground in the region often arose in discussions by Western actors. Strategic air operations became an important factor in Soviet military thinking as early as the 1920s, even as Moscow relied predominantly on ground forces.⁸ During the Cold War, arms and energy emerged as important components of Moscow's military relationship with the region. From a broader strategic perspective, the Soviet Union was a proximate and aggressive superpower with many resources and with clear intentions to spread its ideology worldwide, although resources were not without constraints even then.

Terrorist tactics were an important element of Moscow's toolkit. The KGB—the Soviet security agency—funded, trained, advised, and equipped anti-Western terrorist groups in the region. Soviet Gen. Alexander Sakharovsky, who led the KGB's First Chief Directorate, bragged in 1971 to Lt. Gen. Ion Mihai Pacepa, then head of Romania's industrial espionage department and later the highest-ranking Soviet intelligence officer to defect to the West, that "airplane hijacking is my own invention."⁹ Vaclav Havel, a Soviet-era Czech dissident who became the first president of the Czech Republic, revealed in March 1990 that communist Czechoslovakia provided a thousand tons of Semtex explosives to the Libyan government, which then sent it to terrorist groups.¹⁰

The term "hybrid war" has become popular in recent years in reference to Russia, but Moscow has a very long history of blurring the distinction between war and peace. Soviet troops often deployed in secret, without an official declaration of war. As Keir Giles of Chatham House writes, the longstanding tradition of such covert interference "is explicitly one of the purposes of special forces units and the VDV [Russian airborne troops]" during Soviet times and today.¹¹ In the same vein, espionage and secrecy have been second nature to Kremlin officials. Historically, the Kremlin had no qualms about resorting to tactics that democratic governments eschew. These themes continue playing out in Moscow's behavior in the Middle East today.

THE 1990s AND ARMED FORCES REFORM SINCE 2008

The 1990s was a unique period in Russian history on a variety of levels. Russia partially retreated from world affairs and in particular from the Middle East. The 5th Eskadra disbanded in 1992, and Russia lost a major naval asset in the Mediterranean. Yet the decade did not see only retreat. In the 1990s, according to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, Moscow "largely maintained its research and development programs for air defense equipment."¹² The emphasis on air operations reemerged in 1993, when then Russian defense minister Pavel Grachev stated that "war will begin with an offensive aerospace operation on both sides."¹³

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian military fell into disarray. Problems had plagued the Russian armed forces throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Corruption ran rampant. Poor training, understaffing, and often abysmal salaries, especially for soldiers, contributed to low morale. The widespread practice of *dedovshchina* (hazing) entailed humiliation, human rights abuses, and often death for the recruits. Indeed, Russian mothers were typically frightened by the thought of their sons being drafted. Unsurprisingly, draft evasion was pervasive. While some blamed low funding for problems in the military, "the degradation continued for most of the 2000s, when the military budget was increasing by 20 percent per year."¹⁴

Problems came to the fore in August 2008, when Moscow invaded Georgia. Russian forces prevailed over a five-day conflict, but with embarrassing difficulties, especially given that they were fighting a significantly smaller opponent. As a 2017 Defense Intelligence report notes, Russian "air and artillery strikes missed their targets, an army commander had to resort to a cell phone to contact a higher headquarters, and several aircraft were lost to Georgian air defenses."¹⁵ Russian soldiers were unfocused and at times drunk.

This poor performance spurred Moscow to begin full-scale military reforms, set to be completed in 2020. The Russian media soon began calling the reforms the "new look," but the changes were far from cosmetic. As Roger McDermott wrote in August 2009, "The extent of the changes under way is unparalleled in the history of the Russian armed forces since the end of World War II, perhaps even earlier."¹⁶

To be sure, Moscow had attempted several military reforms before. Since 1991, according to Golts, reforms had followed a pattern: the Kremlin would realize the situation was unsustainable, consider several serious reform proposals, choose one, and fire supporters of the others. Reform would fail to deliver the promised results, and the cycle would begin again. The most recent wave of reforms is part of this ongoing pattern. Nonetheless, unlike previous efforts, it has produced partial success.¹⁷

In the initial years of reform the entire process was chaotic and widely unpopular within the Russian military due to major cuts across the board, though it soon became more streamlined and organized. Other challenges included recruitment shortages and overspending, which the Russian Ministry of Finance considered unsustainable. Nor is it clear if the program will meet all its desired goals.

Yet despite setbacks, the reforms produced clear improvements. In an article published in March 2014, the month Russia annexed Crimea, Keir Giles noted that in their current form, the reforms marked “the final demise of the Soviet military, with a decisive step away from the cadre unit and mass mobilization structure inherited from the USSR.”¹⁸

An important component of the reforms has been to encourage qualities in field commanders such as flexibility and innovative thinking. Gerasimov, especially, underscored these qualities in relation to the military experience in Syria. In his view, modern warfare—as Russia and security expert Dmitry “Dima” Adamsky notes—“demands uninterrupted deception and disinformation of the adversary; enemy forces should be surprised, disorganized and destroyed; commanders should be creative, energetic, prone to initiative.”¹⁹

The reforms are incomplete. Western sanctions against the Russian military-industrial complex, such as the ban on dual-use imports, have also caused pain. Yet today the Russian military is undeniably in better shape than it was in 2008 and 2014. Indeed, one unintended side effect of sanctions was ironically a boost for the Russian military-industrial complex, which, as a result of the sanctions, came to the aid of Russian corporations by providing them with contracts.²⁰

Like its predecessor the Soviet Union, Russia is now actively pursuing hypersonic capabilities and is attempting to develop a “hyperglide,” a device that increases missile speed and range.²¹ The Russian military, at least, believes that missile technology is one area in which it is

ahead of the West. Indeed, the Russian press sometimes expresses the view that the real purpose of Western sanctions is to hinder Moscow’s missile development.²² As military expert Michael Kofman has pointed out, the Russians are focusing on long-range deterrent capabilities.²³ They are also employing them in an overlapping and mutually supporting manner: surface-to-air missiles, antiship missiles, and land-attack missiles create both tactical and strategic advantage. At the tactical level, at the very least, they limit U.S. ability to command and control forces, and on a strategic level, they restrict freedom of action.²⁴

As for the navy, Moscow has no industrial base to build large ships, and thus its blue-water ambitions are at best years away from fulfillment. However, the Russian Navy is now focused on building smaller, specialized frigates and smaller surface combatants, including for maritime border protection.²⁵ These are easier and cheaper to build than large ships. The navy has “kalibrized” its small ships, arming newly commissioned ships and submarines with Kalibr-family land-attack, antiship, and submarine missiles. This allows smaller ships, when used in greater numbers, to pose a significant threat, since they are fairly capable and harder to target than large ships. Indeed, it is harder to destroy many small ships close to land than larger ones, based upon the volume of commercial shipping in the littorals. The Russian naval doctrine, meanwhile, focuses on protection of the near abroad, including the eastern Mediterranean.

Thus, for all its many shortcomings, the Russian military is in a stronger position now than previously to shape the military landscape of the region and achieve Moscow’s broader foreign policy aims. At the same time, Moscow’s emphasis on militarizing society continues to grow.

RUSSIAN STRATEGY AND CAMPAIGN DESIGN IN SYRIA

When Russia became involved in Syria, it had many interests there. Fundamentally, however, its priorities were always less about Syria than about what it could gain there vis-à-vis the West, and also domestically, in helping project a Great Power image to enable the Putin government to survive. For the Kremlin, the intervention was primarily intended to cause an erosion of Washington’s

position in the U.S.-led global order. However, it also aimed to prevent what Moscow perceived as another U.S.-led regime change in the wake of “color revolutions” in post-Soviet states, the Arab Spring, NATO’s Libya campaign, and anti-Putin protests in Russia. Syria fit within this goal because it provided an opportunity to deter the West on the Black Sea, together with the strategically vital Mediterranean. This mattered for Moscow’s operations in Ukraine, and the Kremlin believed that it could provide a springboard for further activities. A permanent military presence on the Mediterranean appears to be a critical component of Moscow’s goal to deter the West and weaken NATO.²⁶ Indeed, Crimea increasingly plays an important role in Moscow’s plans for Syria, which range from building connections between Crimean and Syrian ports to a wide scope of commercial ties, including in energy and phosphates.²⁷

Military analyst Lester Grau has written that while other countries create and apply specific models to decisionmaking, Moscow is “allergic to ‘one-size-fits-all’ models” for conducting operations and understanding the operational environment. In Gerasimov’s view, writes Grau, “Each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own unique character.”²⁸ In the same vein, Roger McDermott argues that the Russian military first studies the context and then develops a model for the type of campaign to conduct there. Accordingly, Western analysts tend to misuse the term “hybrid warfare” when discussing Moscow’s actions.²⁹

In Syria, Moscow aimed to have a light footprint and to focus primarily on an aerial campaign with a naval component. Russian ground forces were made up primarily of special forces, which focused on training, advising, and assistant partner forces and conducting special reconnaissance missions. The military side went hand in hand with political and diplomatic goals. Moscow predicated its strategy on the idea that Tehran and its proxies would do the “heavy lifting” to keep Moscow’s costs low in terms of blood and treasure. The strategy was also based on building leverage against the West and its allies to support Moscow’s objectives. Lastly, it was designed to be flexible and adaptive so it would be easy to pivot in a different direction when mistakes inevitably occurred. Indeed, Dima Adamsky notes that Moscow’s learning process in recent conflicts “seems to be tolerant of failure and has demonstrated conceptual flexibility and dynamism.”³⁰

The goal of Moscow’s military campaign was to keep Bashar al-Assad in power. In this, the political track went hand in hand with the military. The campaign aimed to destroy, with relatively few resources, any opposition to Assad, to force the West into a choice—the Islamic State or Assad. Through coercive tactics, Moscow built leverage both militarily and politically. These tactics included information operations to test the West and create dangerous situations in order to pressure the United States and its allies and force them to cooperate. Moscow’s advantage lay in a higher tolerance for risk than the West. “Moscow’s enthusiasm for leveraging dangerous activities for policy ends created near-constant headaches for U.S. commanders,” wrote Russia expert Andrew Weiss.³¹ The perception that Russia was dangerous and unpredictable helped create fears in the West that Moscow would fight a war over Syria, causing the West to back down to avoid this war. Perception often matters far more than reality. It is highly doubtful that the Kremlin would have fought a direct war with the United States over Syria.

Simultaneously, on the diplomatic track, taking a page from its Chechnya playbook in the 1990s and 2000s, Moscow marginalized Syrian opposition that called for Assad’s departure.³² When it did engage with genuine Assad opponents, it created conditions that laid the groundwork for slow acceptance of Assad’s remaining in power. Indeed, Moscow used de-escalation zones as a tactical measure to allow Russian forces and Assad’s forces to defeat their enemies. These zones served to keep military activity in certain areas at a low level until Moscow and the Assad regime were prepared to attack them. In time, the Assad regime, with Russian support, attacked and reconquered three of the four de-escalation zones—and is currently trying to subdue the fourth. Meanwhile, Moscow’s diplomatic track reinforced this process by creating alternative tracks—the Astana and Sochi peace talks. The purpose was to keep the United States out of the resolution process and marginalize the genuine Syrian anti-Assad and pro-American opposition under a patina of international legitimacy.³³

AERIAL OPERATIONS AND ELECTRONIC WARFARE

Beyond Assad, the weaponry and equipment that Moscow brought in from the very beginning signaled a clear intent to stay for the long term. Russia's ability to sustain military operations in Syria caught U.S. government analysts off guard. "What was surprising was their willingness to stay and...have a long-lasting presence in the area," said one military source.³⁴ At least on the tactical level, government analysts were not ready for Moscow to bring the S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) into the Syrian theater.

In addition to SAMs and airspace control, Russia has tactical ballistic and cruise missiles and advanced antiship cruise missiles. Through its actions, Moscow revealed its plans to methodically create an antiaccess/area-denial (A2AD) capability, plans that quickly materialized. All the pieces of the S-400 system arrived in less than a week. This is logistically difficult and demonstrated a degree of competence. In addition, Russia continuously rotated other weaponry and aircraft, often for brief periods. Moscow has likewise been fairly open about using Syria as a training ground for personnel and a proving ground for equipment. Except for instances in which Moscow sought the attention of the United States or to "punish" it for perceived transgressions, the Kremlin has not leveraged the full capacity of the air-defense systems it deployed to Syria. For example, it kept the most powerful radars switched off, allowing Western aircraft to operate unimpeded over eastern and central Syria. This supports the idea that Moscow intended the deployment to serve longer-term A2AD goals, rather than merely to deter current Western air activity over Syria.

The Russian air-defense model in Syria also displayed greater flexibility than the more centralized system typically employed in the Soviet Union.³⁵ Moscow developed more-mobile systems and demonstrated the ability to use them outside their doctrinally defined role. For example, Moscow deployed smaller target-acquisition radars with greater mobility and is likely supplementing their air-surveillance pictures with inputs from the Syrian military. The Soviet model would have used radars and weapons at fixed sites, with landline communications to higher echelons that control the engagement authority.³⁶

The Russian military in Syria was also better equipped than in Georgia and Ukraine, where in recent memory

it had engaged in live combat. Setbacks aside, the force had experienced overall success in those previous operations, fueling confidence. Russian military actions in Syria demonstrated flexibility and the ability to learn from experience. The forces deployed to Syria—admittedly elite—were focused and prepared, unlike those in Ukraine and Georgia.

In the naval realm, the challenges in Russia's industrial base are real. Moscow has operationally offset them somewhat, however, by procuring smaller combatants. It employs these in numbers to achieve a desired capability, while deploying them in areas where they can easily maintain an advantageous posture within a larger A2AD model. When operated as part of a broader A2AD triad of S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and land-attack missiles—or under its protective umbrella—this combination of numbers with capability poses a significant challenge to Western navies and air forces.

Another A2AD component is electronic warfare (EW). Historically, Moscow invested more resources in EW than did the United States,³⁷ and it has steadily advanced these capabilities—a decision that originates at least as early as the two Chechen wars in the 1990s and 2000s. In Syria, Moscow used EW to strengthen the A2AD array to support its combat operations. Its primary role was force protection and its secondary role an opportunity to test EW capabilities in live combat.³⁸ "In the context of force protection, EW systems doubtless played a significant role in reducing loss of aircraft in combat, as well as protecting smaller numbers of ground forces deployed in support of the SAA," writes Roger McDermott, adding: "It is likely that some of the EW activity may be directed at collecting EM [electromagnetic] signature information on NATO aircraft to build [Russia's] EM database."³⁹ Experts note that Russian EW equipment is sophisticated, and close proximity to U.S. troops and technology allows the Russians to constantly test their technology and learn from observation and experience with these weapons.⁴⁰

As part of this approach, Moscow also continues to emphasize the importance of information dominance, of denying the adversary—the United States and its partners—use of information space. Thus, there are reports that U.S. troops in Syria are increasingly defending themselves from Russia's electronic jamming attacks. These can be no less serious than a conventional attack because electronic jamming can prevent effective self-defense.

Currently, Russian military doctrine underscores the strategy of aerial defense, asserting that the country can achieve a strategic objective with mass aerial strikes in the beginning of a conflict and achieve victory without seizing and occupying a territory by force.⁴¹ Russia's current long-term procurement goals also reflect this emphasis on strategic air operations and weapons focused on space, aerospace defense, and precision-guided munitions. Syria is simply the venue for their first rapid deployment outside of Russia and the post-Soviet space. Most of the systems Moscow brought to Syria were built to deter the most advanced U.S. aircraft. More to the point, Moscow seems to be balancing the short-term goal of keeping Assad in power with the long-term goal of using the A2AD platform to deter the West in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The United States will have to contend with this.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN SYRIA

Moscow achieved multiple objectives in Syria, politically and diplomatically. From a military perspective, it met a key objective—keeping Assad in power. Moreover, his departure seems unlikely, at least in the near future. In indicators such as rates of aircraft sortie generation (which were high) and aircraft re-deployed to Russia for heavy maintenance (which were low), the Russian Air Force displayed competence in conducting expeditionary operations to support the Assad regime.⁴²

Russian pilots also flew at night, something Syrian pilots did not have the confidence to do. Moscow meanwhile demonstrated from November 2016 to January 2017 that it could put Russia's only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, on the Mediterranean and fly aircraft off it, even if there were difficulties.⁴³ While many rightly criticized the vessel or even laughed at its shortcomings, the carrier occupied a vacuum left by the U.S. absence, and it showed relevance simply by being there. Moreover, this was the first time Moscow had used the *Kuznetsov* in combat.⁴⁴ Its deployment was also relatively brief: after Russia lost two aircraft during launch and recovery operations from the *Kuznetsov*,⁴⁵ it moved its air wing ashore to Hmeimim and flew it from there while the *Kuznetsov* headed home.⁴⁶ Some may also point out that the *Kuznetsov* is now being dismantled and that Russia has no industrial base to build a new carrier, but the Russian Navy is now focused on building

smaller ships to protect maritime borders, as discussed in the previous section. How much Moscow will be hampered by a loss of its carrier remains to be seen. In addition, Russia, a traditional land power, has different navy needs than the United States, for example. There are advantages and disadvantages to large and small ships. As noted previously, it is harder to destroy many small ships close to land than a few large ones. The broader point is that Moscow used all tools in its arsenal to project power and assert influence when it needed to and will continue to do so.

Moscow now controls airspace over western and central Syria. It also has a military agreement with Damascus for a presence on the Mediterranean for at least the next forty-nine years, putting it in a position to undermine NATO's southern flank—a longtime Kremlin aspiration. Indeed, Moscow's A2AD strategy is aimed at deterring NATO. In addition to expanding its naval facility in Tartus and putting it on the path to becoming a full-fledged base, Moscow also opened an air base in Hmeimim, its main operating base in Syria.⁴⁷ Hmeimim is right next to Tartus, on the Eastern Mediterranean coast, and both are a major component of Moscow's A2AD layout in Syria.

That said, Russia has military assets in several other locations throughout the country. One is the al-Shayrat Air base at Homs, which Moscow has used and expanded since 2015 to support air force operations.⁴⁸ Another is the Tiyas air base, located in Tadmur, which some reports suggest Moscow is converting to its main base of aerial operations in central Syria to provide backup for Hmeimim. It is unclear, however, how much use the Russian Aerospace Forces are getting out of this base at the time of this writing. Since Moscow has no permanent military bases, Russian forces rotate in and out.

An additional element is Iranian operations that overlap with Russia's in these locations—for example, Tadmur. Some reports have suggested that Iran is also building a base in al-Shayrat and other locations in Syria.⁴⁹ These additional operations are an important element of Russia's military activities.

LIMITATIONS

According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, overall, "Russia employs what is considered to be among the very best of modern military integrated air defense systems

[IADS].⁵⁰ In Syria, however, Moscow has been somewhat constrained in this regard because it deployed only part of its entire air-defense system, and it appears to have deployed few air-surveillance and battle-management systems to maximize the S-400's capability.

What truly determines the lethality of an IADS is air surveillance and battle management—in other words, how the radar systems track aircraft targets, and how they pass those target tracks to the S-400 battery to engage.⁵¹ Air surveillance is a complex step-by-step process, which analysts call the “IADS kill chain.” The general process involves the following steps: indications and warning, detection, identification, tracking assignment, engagement, and assessment.⁵² The kill chain is a probabilistic venture—the degradation of one step lowers the overall probability of a successful kill by the IADS. Moscow skimped on the air-surveillance radars it brought into Syria, which degraded the system's overall detection and identification capability. The Russians did not deploy dedicated air-surveillance radars—which tend to be large and difficult to deploy and sustain—so they likely depend for air-surveillance cuing on the Syrians, whose system is old and unreliable.⁵³ In addition, the S-400 is constrained by Syria's terrain. The mountain range to the east of Hmeimim and Latakia prevents Russian radars in Hmeimim from seeing the U.S.-led coalition operating in eastern Syria, and thus from optimally cuing weapons to those targets.

Some reports have suggested that Moscow has brought large radars into the Syrian theater. However, these radars, such as the 96L6, are more accurately classified as target-acquisition radars,⁵⁴ which can be used for a more-limited air-surveillance function but are not optimized for tracking targets throughout Syria due to limited range and interoperability with other weapons systems.⁵⁵

According to accounts by American pilots, Russian pilots usually have low situational awareness in the air, resulting in multiple near misses, even though Russian aircraft have advanced radars. Russian air operations are also still centrally controlled and scripted. This is not the case for the United States. As one U.S. aviation expert noted, “The way people fight in the air is a reflection on their culture.”⁵⁶ The Russian military still exerts more top-down control, even if it has moved away from the Soviet model.

None of the limitations described here detract from the reality that Moscow has strong capabilities in

detering the United States and its partners, or that it has partially succeeded in doing so. Ultimately, Moscow's major advantage has been that the West was simply not interested in getting further involved in Syria, and Putin not only fully exploited this but helped entrench this preference.

BEYOND SYRIA

Increased intervention by Russia carries a number of implications outside Syria's borders.

Implications for the Region

The Russian military bid in Syria, as mentioned earlier, entailed larger ambitions than those involving Syria alone. And its wartime activity has opened up an array of opportunities for Moscow. Russia is, for example, eyeing port access along the eastern Mediterranean and, more broadly, is looking to expand its influence—politically, diplomatically, militarily, economically, and culturally—at the expense of the United States.

The A2AD layout, even if incomplete, provides Moscow with a number of advantages. It allows for greater power projection throughout the region and creates a springboard for further activities. Moscow is in a better position to collect intelligence on the U.S. coalition, Israel, and the rest of the region and is doing just that. It also puts Russia in a better position to deter NATO and boosts Moscow's image as a Great Power and reliable broker.

As Moscow is expanding its military relationship with Egypt and increasing its presence in Libya and inside the Persian Gulf, the sale of the S-400 to Turkey is likely to go through. If more Russian military equipment and systems begin showing up throughout the region, such as the Su-35 and S-400, Moscow may gain greater control of the region's commons by proxy, in the sense that it would have more levers of influence. Control of weapons systems would enhance Moscow's regional leverage.

Russia's control of some of Syria's airspace complicates the U.S. ability to maneuver and restricts Israel's freedom of action. After the IL-20 incident, in which the Assad regime accidentally downed a Russian plane, and for which Moscow blamed Israel rather than Assad, Israel temporarily halted its airstrike operations in Syria. While it has resumed these operations, it has been

careful—and, more to the point, its dependence on Moscow remains. Indeed, this dependence is perhaps the most important aspect of the situation. Given Russia's partnership with Iran and its proxies, it is highly unlikely that Moscow will do anything to curb the Iranian presence in the region. Indeed, reports that Iran and its proxies are switching uniforms and that Hezbollah is flying under the Russian flag to avoid getting hit by Israel, coupled with Moscow's failure to prevent an Iranian presence eighty-five kilometers from the Israeli border, show that if anything, Russia is empowering Iran.⁵⁷

Implications for Russian Military and Arms Sales

Moscow's historical disregard for civilians played out in Syria and highlighted key points about its approach to warfare and counterinsurgency. While overall, Moscow's technical capabilities are improving, its approach to targeting remains fundamentally at odds with the law of armed conflict and the values of democratic societies. The United States, before contemplating military action, looks for clear proof that the person targeted is an insurgent. The Kremlin, by contrast, presumes guilt, and therefore it is easy for Moscow to view anyone who opposes Assad as an insurgent. Indeed, the targeting of civilians by Russia and by Assad and their denial of humanitarian assistance is at odds with the laws of war and the Geneva Conventions. A personal account by Robert Hamilton, former U.S. Department of Defense policy advisor to the U.S. delegation to the International Syria Support Group in Geneva, is illustrative. While serving in this position, Hamilton met with a high-ranking Russian military officer who played a critical part in Moscow's Syria efforts in July 2016. The colonel justified targeting hospitals in Syria because Russian forces believed the hospitals were treating fighters. This suggests a belief that wounded fighters are legitimate targets, a contradiction of international law.⁵⁸

A recent study published in *BMJ Global Health* found that the Syrian and Russian regimes "weaponized healthcare" by deliberately targeting ambulances.⁵⁹ These tactics highlighted a key component of Moscow's strategy to keep Assad in power: terrorizing and demoralizing the population. They speak volumes about the fundamental difference between Moscow's approach to war and counterinsurgency and that of the West.⁶⁰

While Syria has largely disappeared from Russia's domestic news in recent years, Putin has consistently

mentioned in his major speeches that Syria has been useful for testing and developing military hardware, along with training the Russian military.⁶¹

That Moscow used Syria to dispose of older munitions, and to display and test weaponry, is by now well known. What is less mentioned is that Moscow is also proving its weaponry in combat. For example, the Su-35 has flown in close proximity to U.S. aircraft. Syria has also become a way for officers to gain promotions and acquire ground troop experience, which helps with Moscow's broader goal of positioning itself as the arms supplier of choice for the region.

For the military, service in Syria is prestigious. It is a better choice than serving in Ukraine because it often results in fast-track promotion and because the chances of getting hurt or killed are lower. In addition, Moscow does not attempt to hide its military presence in Syria, in contrast to Ukraine.

In Syria, the military has used rapid rotations in and out of operating bases and is building a cadre of experienced combat officers. According to open sources, at any given time, Moscow typically had between 4,000 and 6,000 military personnel on the ground in Syria, but over time it has rotated tens of thousands—a total of 63,000, according to official Kremlin reports.⁶² Moscow has used its experience in Syria in military drills, "from limited objective attacks by landing forces down to firing and reconnaissance rules," according to Russian Col. Gen. Alexander Zhuravlyov.⁶³

The PMC Model

The introduction of private military contractors (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group in Syria raised a number of questions about further Russian activities in the region. PMCs first appeared in Ukraine, but Syria appears to have provided a useful springboard for expansion of the PMC model to the Middle East and Africa, as Russian PMCs subsequently appeared in Libya, Sudan, and the Central African Republic.⁶⁴ While it is not necessarily unusual for a state to use private military contractors, in Russia's case, these individuals do not fit within standard definitions of mercenaries or contractors as defined in the West.⁶⁵

Information about Russian PMCs remains scarce. "Plausible deniability" appears to be one of several key reasons for using them, and fits with Putin's strategy of creating confusion through information operations. Indeed, the use of PMCs fits with the line of creative

and adaptive thinking that Russian military reforms have emphasized, especially since Russia is weaker than the United States in conventional weapons.

However, as Russia scholar Kimberly Marten has argued, plausible deniability is not the whole story. Another aspect is the use of PMCs to enrich Putin's cronies.⁶⁶ PMCs are illegal under Russian law. While it is unclear whether keeping them illegal enhances plausible deniability, it seems to help Putin keep certain groups in check because criminal prosecution is always an option, according to Marten. Moreover, PMCs can be used to settle personal scores and send a message.⁶⁷ In addition, this approach deters competitors to the Wagner Group. This situation highlights that domestic elements continue to underpin Russia's foreign activities, which is very different from the situation in Western countries.

It is likely that the Kremlin will increasingly employ PMCs as a national security tool in the Middle East and Africa as they are shown to be useful. As it does, more information about them and their connections with the Kremlin will probably come to light.

Maritime Expansion

Putin is the latest in a long line of Kremlin leaders who strove to make Russia a maritime power. Russia's position in Syria (and in Crimea) helps work toward that goal. Russia's maritime and naval doctrines talk of expanding Russian naval capacities from "regional" to "global blue water."⁶⁸

At best, these ambitions are years away from becoming a reality, but they should not be dismissed entirely. Moscow is searching for port access beyond Syria in the Middle East, which would eliminate the large expense of building bases and allow the use of smaller ships.

Historically, shipbuilding has been among the most corrupt and problematic sectors in the Russian military. Moreover, sanctions have added to existing difficulties.⁶⁹ Moscow cannot afford to buy or build large-deck ships and has even had problems completing the small ones. This is due to the breakup of the USSR and to the sanctions, which have prevented purchases of turbine engines from Ukraine and Germany.

Still, the Russian Navy has made improvements since 2008, and Moscow can now deploy a permanent force in the eastern Mediterranean. In recent years, Russian officials have increasingly spoken of the Russian Navy in the context of nonnuclear deterrence.⁷⁰

For all its many shortcomings, the navy is now fairly well equipped and positioned to support an aggressive foreign policy toward Russia's neighbors.⁷¹

From a practical standpoint, the United States, unlike Russia, has a long commute to Syria and Iraq, and it also has a limited number of aircraft in Turkey. If U.S. abilities in the eastern Mediterranean are threatened, or if Moscow conducts surveillance and reconnaissance flights or increases joint training with regional actors, including U.S. allies, this will make it harder for the United States to work with its allies. Indeed, any of these situations might increase the risk of clashes and create additional opportunities for Moscow to gain access to sensitive classified information. This is not to say that Washington cannot find ways to work around these problems but that it may create complications and require greater effort to overcome them.

More to the point, Moscow's steps show its persistent perception of the threat from NATO and its desire to deter the West. This intent continues to color its Middle East activities as it works methodically to deny the West sea access on the Mediterranean and is also behind its broader deterrence efforts in the Black Sea and the Caspian.⁷²

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia is pursuing militarization both internationally and domestically. In recent years, the government, and in particular the Ministry of Defense, has focused not only on improving Russian military capabilities but also on militarizing Russian society, especially the youth. The Russian Army is now popular domestically, and according to polls, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu's popularity is second only to Putin's.⁷³ This is a relevant issue when it comes to Russia's actions in the Middle East and North Africa; it drives the overall course of Russian foreign policy, which increasingly resorts to Russia's traditional narrative that it is a "besieged fortress" in order to gain domestic legitimacy.

The United States, and the West more broadly, remains a far more powerful actor in the Middle East and North Africa. However, Western policymakers increasingly see the Middle East and North Africa as a distraction from the broader Great Power competition with China and Russia. Nor has the West crafted a clear strategy toward Russia that goes beyond sanctions. Resources matter, but so do clear intent and ambition. U.S. regional

allies, meanwhile, hedge their bets and move close to Moscow because of the uncertainty of U.S. policies, even if they may prefer to have the United States as the ultimate guarantor of security for the region.

Moscow has made clear improvements, even as it remains hampered by limited resources. The overall trajectory of Russia's domestic developments and foreign policy suggests that the West should count on an aggressive posture from Putin's Russia in the years to come. The Middle East and North Africa are too vital strategically to cede to Moscow, especially when the West lacks only the will, not the resources, to prevent that from happening.

The following are recommendations for the U.S. government to help bolster its position in the Middle East and North Africa:

- **Compete for the region.** The Russian experience clearly demonstrates the price of leaving a vacuum and projecting ambiguous intent. Moscow's military role in Syria grew in the context of decreased U.S. activity. Perceptions are important, and while the United States remains in a stronger position regionally than Russia, this matters less and less with time when Washington is signaling a retreat. The United States must instead signal its commitment to remaining in the region through security and diplomatic cooperation with allies and by showing that it will stand up to adversaries.
 - **Do not be overly fearful, and assert freedom of action.** Moscow's activities reveal its willingness to risk clashes with the United States. However, the experience in Syria overall, and the U.S. military encounter with Russian PMCs in Syria, suggests that while Moscow often engages in risk-taking and is overall less risk averse than Washington, it is not seeking a direct military engagement. Indeed, Moscow understands clear redlines backed up by force, or credible threats of the use of force. However, it likes to give impression that it can be reckless and unpredictable so that the United States practices "self-deterrence." Thus, while Washington should remain careful, it should not assume that taking a more assertive posture will necessarily lead to a military clash with Russia. The United States should demonstrate its freedom of navigation and freedom to operate in the air, for example, by having the U.S. Navy visit a greater variety of ports in the eastern Mediterranean
- and Middle East. The U.S. military in general should maintain the numerous exercises it conducts with its regional allies. The eastern Mediterranean is close to the Suez Canal, which is critical not only for Israel's security and for Jordan and Saudi Arabia, but also as the only quick path to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, stationed in Bahrain.
 - **Revisit key lessons about competition.** In the 1970s, during the Cold War, the United States learned a great deal from the Soviet doctrine and Soviet tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs). It incorporated many of the resulting ideas into its "way of war," such as air-land battle, the reconnaissance-counter-reconnaissance fight, and the operational level of warfare.⁷⁴ In this context, the 1973 Yom Kippur War also provided impetus for the United States to become more competitive. At the time, the Soviet Union had both the antiship missile advantage and a numerical advantage, and the Soviet Navy's 5th Eskadra had the tactical edge over the U.S. Navy throughout the Mediterranean. The U.S. Navy rose to the challenge and developed systems for long-range power projection and defense. These included the Harpoon antiship missile system, the Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruiser, the F-14 Tomcat, the Phoenix air-to-air missile team, and the Tomahawk land-attack and antiship missiles. By the mid-1980s, Washington had turned the tables and gained the advantage over the Soviet Union. This lesson warrants revisiting today.
 - **Accept a degree of risk and challenge Russia when necessary, including in the Mediterranean.** In a competition, one has to accept a degree of risk to gain a competitive advantage. Risk should always be managed and mitigated but cannot be eliminated entirely. Russia often makes gains simply because the United States is too risk averse to challenge it. For example, in August and September 2018, Moscow boosted its naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean and held naval drills there because it wished to deter Washington from striking the Assad regime.⁷⁵ The U.S. Navy and NATO largely failed to challenge this display of force, focused as they were on conducting dynamic force employment in the high north and within the Arctic Circle as part of the Trident Juncture exercise. The next time a situation like this arises, the United

States needs to weigh the consequences of leaving Russia's correlation of force advantage unchallenged and the message that action (or inaction) sends to allies and adversaries (including China), and manage the risks appropriately. Moreover, Russia's position in the eastern Mediterranean is weaker than, for example, on the Black Sea. Challenging the former therefore makes sense, especially given the greater difficulty of sustaining and deploying assets in the area.

- **Do not neglect information and cyber issues.** During the Cold War, the United States understood the importance of counterpropaganda. While Western analysts are now increasingly aware of Russian propaganda efforts, they have yet to produce a coherent and concerted effort to respond to them, and they remain on the defensive.

- **Above all, craft a clear strategy toward Russia.** The U.S. National Security Strategy unambiguously names Russia as a top challenger to U.S. influence in the world.⁷⁶ However, the United States has yet to spell out its strategy, its broader vision for countering Kremlin activities, and instead remains largely reactive toward Moscow and overreliant on sanctions as a substitute for broader policy. The United States should articulate a clear strategic vision toward Russia and employ all levers of national power as mutually supporting elements.

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