

How the Russian Military Reestablished Itself in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

Putin's forceful strategy of internal military reforms, wide-ranging naval deployments, foreign interventions, and formidable A2AD bubbles has seemingly solidified Russia's presence in the region for the long term, which could complicate U.S. freedom of maneuver.

On October 15, the Russian Navy deployed its only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, to the Eastern Mediterranean. According to IHS Jane's, the carrier is accompanied by "the battlecruiser *Pyotr Velikiy*, large anti-submarine ships *Severomorsk* and *Vice Admiral Kulakov*, and support vessels." Russian officials had first announced the plan on September 21, noting that the *Kuznetsov* would be used to strike targets in Syria.

While the deployment will likely facilitate Russian operations in defense of Bashar al-Assad's regime, it is perhaps even more important as a testament to the fact that Moscow has regained access to the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's limited but growing presence matters to U.S. policy -- the next American president will now face an extra-regional competitor that can complicate U.S. freedom of maneuver in the area to a degree not seen since the end of the Cold War. Consequently, Washington will need to deploy more military assets to the region to accomplish the same tasks, at a time when other regions are making greater demands on a thinly stretched U.S. force structure.

PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN ENCIRCLEMENT

President Vladimir Putin often interprets Western actions as attempts to encircle Russia and oust him from power, in line with his belief that the West orchestrates regime change throughout the world. He has reacted forcefully to this perceived containment over the past decade, building up his military capabilities and launching multiple interventions abroad. The 2008 invasion of Georgia marked the beginning of major military reforms, and by 2014, the Russian troops that arrived in Ukraine appeared noticeably better prepared, notwithstanding their elite status. Meanwhile, Western operations in Libya and the subsequent loss of Mediterranean ally Muammar Qadhafi in 2011 reinforced Putin's paranoia.

The outbreak of the Syria war only magnified his perception of containment, as Western nations worked to halt Russian arms transfers and resupply to Assad. In June 2012, Britain pressured insurers to stop a ship carrying Mi-25 helicopters to Syria, invoking the European Union's 2011 sanctions barring arms sales to the regime. Russia could not provide armed escort to guarantee the vessel's continued passage because it lacked naval presence in the area. As the war progressed, Washington increased its diplomatic pressure to obstruct Russia's growing military role. Following Moscow's September 2015 announcement that it would launch strike aircraft from Russian bases to support Assad, Secretary of State John Kerry surprised Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with a warning not to expand military operations. The Obama administration then urged Bulgaria and Greece to close their airspace to any Russian aircraft en route to Syria, and Bulgaria agreed.

REGAINING ACCESS BY LEADING IN SYRIA

Moscow intensified its regional presence during the Syria war by pre-positioning its naval forces in the area, developing military relationships with various governments, seizing the initiative on the chemical weapons issue, and building new operating bases. A key step in this process was to reestablish its Mediterranean fleet. The first ships arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2013, just after Britain turned back the shipment of Mi-25s; the fleet was fully established two years later.

Putin also secured a role for his military and further room to maneuver by volunteering to oversee the destruction of Assad's chemical weapons arsenal in 2013. Later, he secured basing rights in Cyprus to enable pier-side support for the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, arranged Russia's first-ever joint naval drills with Egypt, sent ships to make a port call in Alexandria for only the second time since 1992, and renewed naval access and military sales to Algeria. By mid-August 2016, Russia was conducting Tu-22M3 Backfire bomber strikes in Syria from Iran's Hamedan airbase (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-uses-an-iranian-air-base-two-essays>), demonstrating Putin's commitment to his strategy and his unprecedented closeness with Tehran. Indeed, Moscow's warming relations with Cyprus, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, and other states may mean that it has cemented its regional access for the long term, with the Syrian port of Tartus once again serving as the hub of a logistical network whose spokes radiate to Alexandria, Limassol, and potentially Algiers.

Improvements in the Russian military have likewise expanded Putin's options. His forces have conducted a high-intensity air campaign in Syria, conducted standoff strikes using ship- and submarine-launched cruise missiles, established airspace control with potent anti-aircraft systems (S-300 and S-400 missiles), and used the Krasukha-4 electronic warfare system to blind American drones. By all measures, the Russian forces that have carved out space to operate in Syria are much more capable than the ones displayed in Georgia and Ukraine in past campaigns. The military now seems robust enough to sustain Putin's new Middle East posture.

Establishing airspace control was particularly crucial -- the creation of large regional air-defense bubbles has allowed Russia to effectively lock in its freedom of maneuver and complicate any future use of American airpower. Mobile S-300 systems are now present in Algeria, Egypt, and Iran under local control, while the newest stealth-

defeating mobile S-400s have been deployed to Crimea and Syria under Russian control. The increased range and capabilities that these systems represent have increased the risk to U.S. air operations in the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and as much as 90 percent of the Persian Gulf. Indeed, the resultant antiaccess/area denial (A2AD) bubbles have created virtual buffer zones along Russia's periphery, from the Baltics to the Mediterranean. This approach is consistent with Russian history. For centuries, the Kremlin felt that Russia's expansion necessitated buffer zones, which created a self-perpetuating cycle: the more lands Russia gained, the more insecure it felt, and the more buffer territory it sought.

ENTER THE KUZNETSOV

Putin's decision to dispatch his lone aircraft carrier to the region may seem strategically insignificant at first glance. After all, the *Kuznetsov* is old, prone to onboard fires, and hardly a match for America's ten operational carriers, which have been well honed by heavy use in nearly every international conflict since World War II.

Yet the deployment matters a great deal, for both symbolic and military reasons. America's use of naval power has proven to the world that an aircraft carrier is the floating embodiment of assured access and military support for national interests. And as the Pentagon's Operation Odyssey Lightning against Islamic State forces in Libya has shown, even a single amphibious assault ship -- which carries fewer aircraft than Russia's carrier -- can create an important military advantage in the region. Once Moscow begins ordering strikes from the *Kuznetsov's* rusty flight deck, it will take its place alongside the United States, France, and Britain as the world's only projectors of significant power ashore since the end of the Cold War.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia need not be America's military or economic equal to pose a real challenge to Western interests. Presence is relevance -- by simply being in Syria when the United States was absent, Putin has complicated the operating environment in the Middle East and Mediterranean.

To earn "decision space" in a future crisis and secure its still-substantial interests in a crucial region, Washington will need to bolster its current military and diplomatic initiatives there. This means rejuvenating stagnant relationships, reassuring allies, and acting decisively to maintain relevancy in the new reality. One way to do so is to strengthen NATO and other alliances. For Putin, the Middle East and Europe are part of the same theater, so reassuring vulnerable NATO allies should go hand in hand with support for Middle Eastern allies.

Of course, the United States also has a robust force structure in the region that greatly outweighs anything Russia can bring to bear -- policymakers just need the political will to use it more assertively. For example, at the peak of its Syria intervention, Moscow was using 42 fighter/bomber aircraft and approximately 5,000 troops. And when the *Kuznetsov* arrives, Russia's Mediterranean fleet will consist of approximately a dozen warships. In comparison, the U.S. Navy had approximately 30 ships in the Persian Gulf alone as of 2014, with plans to increase that number to 40 by 2020. Moreover, around 100-125 American strike aircraft (F-16s, F/A-18s, F-15Es) are based around the region, along with at least one squadron of advanced F-22 fighters. That number grows to around 200 strike-capable aircraft when a carrier arrives on scene. And regional allies have more than 400 American-sourced modern fighter aircraft of their own.

Therefore, the United States should work harder at improving relations with regional players through security cooperation. The Navy should increase the variety of ports it visits in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East (with proper emphasis given to force protection). And the military in general should make sure to maintain the numerous exercises it conducts with allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

These steps can show allies that the United States is committed to the region while giving Washington leverage to influence any future conflicts there. In the end, Putin's power is limited, but he will continue to test the West until it

pushes back. And if Washington does not take a more active role in preserving its regional relationships, Putin will continue to degrade American influence.

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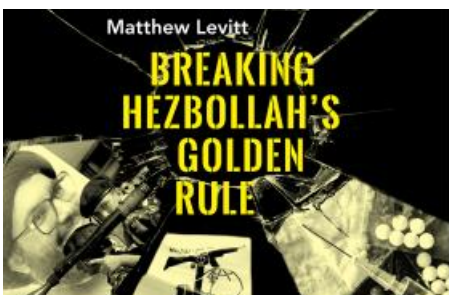
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