



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

CASE ANALYSIS

Russia's Shifting Strategy in Syria: Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy

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Series: Case Analysis

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	1
Background of Russia's Intervention in Syria	2
Reasons behind Russia's Intervention in Syria	3
1. Changing Military Dynamics in Syria	4
2. The New International Set-up After the P5+1 Agreement with Iran	5
3. Russia's Desire to Put its Military to the Test in Syria	6
Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy	7
Conclusion	10

Abstract

Russia's intervention in Syria has changed both political and military balances in the Middle East. Though in the past Russian support for the Syrian Baath regime was limited to technical capacity and political maneuvers, sending its jets to Syria marks a shift in policy. This analysis argues that the main factors driving Russia's intervention were: the changing military dynamics in Syria that began in spring 2015 and saw a real challenge posed to regime forces, the shifting balances in the international system after the P5+1 agreement, and Russia's desire to flex its military muscle in the Middle East. The paper then goes on to examine the implications of Russia's military intervention for Turkish foreign policy. This begins by arguing that the risk of military confrontation in the air between Turkey and Russia necessitates the creation of new channels between the states in order to avoid the risk of diplomatic and military escalation. Avoiding such escalation would also ensure that bilateral cooperation in the economic sphere would not decline. Finally, the analysis suggests that, given the new realities Russia has created on the ground, Turkey will be forced to revise its policies on the Syrian conflict.

Introduction

In the autumn of 2015, Russia made the decision to directly intervene in the Syrian conflict. This decision has dramatically changed the political landscape at three levels. At the local level, the balance between the armed groups in Syria was turned upside down; initial results of Russian involvement show Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces have, following the strikes, gained morale as well as an important advantage against anti-regime forces. At the international level, a new debate has been sparked at amid the effort to grasp Russia's new strategy. At the regional level, Russia's intervention has caused a number of short-term spats between Ankara and Moscow. Following an analysis

of the power shifts at these three levels, this paper will outline the factors that lead Russia to its current intervention, and then go on to explore the implications of this development for Turkish foreign policy.

Background of Russia's Intervention in Syria

After the occupation of Mosul by ISIL militants in June 2014, the Western world took an active stance in the Syrian conflict. Forming a coalition with its Arab and European allies, the United States kicked off a military campaign against ISIL that would become active primarily in the north of Syria. Moreover, cooperating with Turkey and Jordan, the US introduced what it called a “train and equip program,” for which it recruited Syrian militants from the ranks of anti-Assad groups. This active stance and the efficiency of coalition forces in influencing the outcome of the Syria arena have now been discussed for more than a year. Throughout this period of debate, the possibility of the establishment of a safe zone or no-fly zone in the north of Syria have been tabled by different actors, among which we can also count Turkey. In spite of the West’s engagement in the Syrian conflict—as debates have pointed out—ISIL continued its expansion in Syria. At the same time, throughout 2015, Kurds consolidated their control in the north, while opposition forces could only manage to preserve their position with minor gains. Furthermore, the power and capacity of Assad’s forces to defend the territories under their control came into question, as their performance began to decline.

Each of these issues shifted rapidly with Russia’s September 2015 decision to become directly and militarily involved in the Syrian crisis. Before officially engaging, however, Russia forged ahead with a serious military pile up in the country, seeking to strengthen its foothold in Syria by sending crates of weapons and equipment to the Khmeimim airbase near Latakia. In addition to its air support, the Russian Military also deployed artillery units, T-90 tanks, and aircraft within the country.

During his interview with Charlie Rose on 28 September 2015, just before he was set to address to the UN General Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the Russian presence in Syria according to international law. He said that Russia was acting:

...Based on the United Nations Charter, i.e. the fundamental principles of modern international law, according to which this or that type of aid, including military assistance, can and must be provided exclusively to [the] legitimate government of one country or another, upon its consent or request, or upon the decision of the United Nations Security Council. In this particular case, we act based on the request from the Syrian government to provide military and technical assistance, which we deliver under entirely legal international contracts.

By framing the issue as one of international law at the very outset of the intervention, Putin not only aimed to preemptively eliminate possible criticism of the Kremlin. He sought to highlight that Russia's presence in Syria was and would be legal, and that the same would also hold true for any measures taken against anti-Assad groups.

Following his speech at the UN where Putin negotiated concerns at the international level, Russian supersonic jets commenced airstrikes in Syria, thus complicating the situation in the country, both on the ground and in the air.

Reasons behind Russia's Intervention in Syria

Considering the scale of Russia's current operation, the early deployment of its military equipment, and the discourse employed by Russian authorities, it can be argued that in spite of Russia's already existent military presence at the Tartus base in Western Syria, the decision to intervene in the conflict was the result of at least six to nine months of logistical preparation. One can deduce from this that Russia had made the decision to intervene in the spring of 2015.

While analyzing this decision, three main factors can be scrutinized: the changing military dynamics in Syria, the new international set-up after the P5+1 agreement with Iran, and Russia's desire to test its military equipment in Syria.

1. Changing Military Dynamics in Syria

Since the outbreak of the Syria crisis in 2011, the Assad regime has taken an offensive position in Syria. The Syrian Military did not and has not hesitated to use its heavy weapons against civilians, but even this has not ensured control over the nation or its population; indeed, the Baath regime began to lose control. As of the summer of 2015, the regime only had control of the coastline and a portion of the country's southwest. During this same period, experts from Russia started to speak of the difficult position that the Assad forces found themselves in, while also pointing to the possibility of limiting the regime's sovereignty to only 4-6 provinces, including Damascus, Hama, Homs and Latakia. These suggestions made sense for Russia because Moscow believes the maintenance of the Assad regime's sovereignty some parts of Syrian territory is preferable to extremist or terrorist control over the whole country. As Moscow reached this conclusion in August and September, crates filled with military equipment and arms were being transferred from Russian ports to Syria.

Russian airstrikes have so far taken place along a geographical axis that runs from the north to the south of the country, clearly corresponding to the front between the Assad forces and other groups on the ground. In other words, Russian jets are bombing armed groups in Hama, Homs, Aleppo and Damascus; effectively creating a safe zone for Assad forces and paving the way for them to regain control over the territories they have lost, and particularly those that they lost in 2015. Russian airstrikes are assisting Assad forces in consolidating their current position, and furthering efforts to take back certain territories from opposition control. However, it is still beyond the reach of this coalition to gain control over the whole of Syria under today's circumstances. While a full regaining

of control is unlikely, the strikes are also allowing Russia to preserve its precious foothold in Syria.

2. The New International Set-up After the P5+1 Agreement with Iran

The conclusion of an agreement between the P5+1 and Iran on the nuclear issue was a critical development in the summer of 2015. After the agreement was reached, the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine became more visible, just as global and regional balances of power became more liquid. Talking at the Crans Montana Forum in Geneva, Russian Ambassador to the UN in Geneva Alexey Boradavkin drew attention to the interlinked nature of political issues in the globalizing world; if Russia and the West were to achieve a settlement in Ukraine, Boradavkin intimated, this might pave the way for another deal in Syria, or vice versa. However, the Russian diplomat also ruled out the possibility of a deal that would interconnect a resolution to both of these conflicts under one package, at least for the time being.

Russia's intervention in Syria and the open declaration from Moscow that it is ready to assist the Iraqi government in its fight against ISIL can be interpreted in two ways. First, Russia is underlining its global power status and wants to emphasize the impossibility of any solution to the issue that excludes Moscow. Secondly, if the Kremlin manages to play its cards right in Syria, this will force the West to sit down with Russia, and when the negotiations start, Russia may use its higher hand to achieve a more favorable solution to the Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, Moscow has found common ground with Tehran in defending the Assad regime, which helps both parties to continue their dialogue in a well-engaged manner, while intervention in Syria also gives the signal to Russia's partners that Moscow is a reliable friend in times of crisis.

3. Russia's Desire to Put its Military to the Test in Syria

The collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with its military defeat in Afghanistan. In the years to follow, Russian Military faced serious challenges in the first Chechen War in the 1990s, and even though it prevailed during the second Chechen War, the five-day war with Georgia in 2008 revealed once again the weakness of the Russian Federation's conventional military capacity. Since 2008—and indeed because of the failures of the war with Georgia—the Russian Military has undergone an extensive phase of modernization. The percentage of Russia's GDP allotted to defense expenditures jumped from 3.3% in 2008 to 4.5% in 2014, and while billions were being poured into equipment and training there was no opportunity to test its new capabilities in active combat.

Syria is not only a good testing ground, but it also offers a chance for Russia to showcase its military technologies to the world. It also marks a safe testing ground because the opposition groups possess no real air defense systems, and there is little risk to Russian jets operating in Syrian airspace. Not only is involvement in Syria a chance to hone skills, but it is also a chance to show the international community what Russia is capable of. The firing of 26 cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea, and the use of guided missiles by Russian jets can both be seen as chances to show off new capacities.

As the military doctrines of conventional armies change, and the Western world develops the capacity to organize operations between multiple air forces and armies has been tried and tested. Observing this change, Russia is also aiming to develop its co-operational counterinsurgency and counterterrorism capacities. As Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu observed, the military exercises conducted between 14 and 20 September 2015 were carried out while keeping in mind the tactics of terrorist groups operating in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Russia's real-time attacks first started to take place in Syria at the end of September. Looking at the recent combat strategy employed by Russia in Syria, it can be seen that the country is engaged in an effort to design and carry out

airstrikes in coordination with Syrian and, according to some reports, Iranian ground troops.

By testing its military in Syria, Russia seeks to send a strong message to the world: that it has learned from its past and is well-prepared for any threat. Additionally, it represents a chance for Russia to advertise its military technologies and equipment on the global defense market.

Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy

Russia's military operations in Syria have two main implications for the Republic of Turkey. Firstly, they mandate the creation of new channels between Turkey and the Russian Federation in order to avoid the risk of diplomatic and military escalation. Such channels would also stem any decline of bilateral cooperation in the economic sphere between the two countries as well. Secondly, Russian intervention has created a new reality on the ground, and this forces Turkey to revise its policies on the Syrian conflict.

Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict is the first serious trans-frontier operation for the Russian Military since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Syria does not share a border with Russia, and this poses certain limitations as well as logistical and security risks for the operation. Here, keeping the operation within the borders of Syria is the most important restraint; otherwise Russia risks violating international law and the sovereignty of Syria's neighboring states.

Before the Russian intervention, border security measures had changed in Syria with the redeployment of air defense systems from their positions along the Mediterranean coast up to the Turkish border in the north. In the very early stages of the intervention, Russian aircrafts violated Turkish airspace twice, during which time one Russian jet, then a non-flagged Mig-29, radar locked on a fleet of Turkish F-16s. These were dangerous

developments, which lead to the escalation of tension on the border when Turkey shot down a Syrian jet in March 2015 after it violated Turkish airspace.

To avoid further escalation with Russia, Ankara summoned Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov to Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to ask for an explanation of his country's repeated violations of Turkish airspace. At the same time, Turkey's president and prime minister reiterated the fact of well-established relations with Russia, and underlined the fact that these developments put the future of good relations at risk, particularly in the energy sector. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan even said that Turkey might seek out natural gas from other sources, and threatened to find another partner to help build the nuclear power plant in Mersin Akkuyu, a project in which Russia has already invested 3 billion dollars. These statements were meant to remind Russia how much good relations with Turkey were worth. This was instead of reacting with threats, and was pragmatic given that it would not be feasible for both sides to shift the character of their relations overnight.

Putin followed these remarks by comments of his own, reiterating the good relations between the states, saying:

Turkey is one of our priority partners and good friends. We have had very good relations with Turkey for many years now; this is one of our major trade and economic partners [...] We need to understand how we can develop relations on the anti-terrorism track [...] Even now, we have contacts between our military agencies. I hope they would lead to better coordination between us. We have to arrange this work on a political level, just as with the United States.

Indeed, following this ordeal, on October 15, 2015, a delegation from Russia led by Major General Sergey Dronov arrived in Ankara to clarify the recent violations on the Syrian border. Proposing high-level coordination between Moscow and Ankara, Dronov cited bad weather and navigation mistakes as the reasons for the violations.

The issue was discussed at the NATO level as well, with Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg emphasizing the solidarity present within the alliance when it comes to defending its members. He said, "NATO is ready and able to defend all allies, including Turkey, against any threat." Nevertheless, the withdrawal of previously deployed US and German Patriot surface-to-air missile systems from Turkey was an item of concern brought up by Turkish representatives at NATO's Defense Ministers Meeting. This brought into discussion the possibility of strengthening Turkey's air defense with the deployment of French and Italian systems, though Spain continues to debate the fate of its own batteries in Turkey.

It is not only the international level that necessitates a shift in policy, but the day-to-day realities within Syria following Russian intervention are also having an impact on future strategy. The Turkish government has been defending a solution to the Syrian Civil War that leaves Assad out of the equation, and it has also pushed for a possible military option that would see the creation of a safe zone or no-fly zone. However, after his visit to Moscow to attend the opening ceremony of the Moscow Cathedral Mosque on 23 September 2015, President Erdogan signaled the possibility of a transition process in Syria that included Assad. This marked a "U-turn" in Turkish foreign policy.

The Russian intervention in Syria complicated the situation in Syrian airspace, making the establishment of a safe zone or no-fly zone all the more unlikely. In this regard, the new reality has forced Turkey to adopt a new position vis-à-vis Syria, as Assad has gained an important advantage with the Russian intervention. Some reports in the Turkish media even claimed that Turkey might be a part of negotiations that would see Assad maintain power.

The crucial question here for Turkey is whether or not the transition process will be able to pave the way for the territorial integrity of Syria. If Syria is divided into several parts, radically new realities may appear for Turkey, which shares 910 kilometers of border with what we know today as Syria. The possibility of a formation of a Kurdish entity in the

north of Syria has been discussed for an extended period of time, and Turkey has some concerns with respect to the policies followed by the Kurds.

The path that the transition process follows will thus largely determine the tendencies of Turkish foreign policy in the months to come, despite parallel efforts to open channels of dialogue with the Kurds in the region over the last six-year period, and continued talks with different groups on the ground.

Conclusion

Russia's intervention into Syria marked a critical juncture for Russian foreign policy and has had several implications at the local, international, and regional levels. Until September 2015, Moscow chose to avoid direct intervention in favor of diplomatic channels and support for the Baath regime through weapons and logistical supplies. However, changing dynamics on the battlefield that were to the disadvantage of Damascus forced Moscow to make the decision to intervene more directly.

This shift in Russia's was also made possible by the new liquidity of international and regional balances in the wake of the P5+1 agreement with Iran. By raising the stakes in Syria as the West failed to adopt a decisive position on Assad's future, Russia is not only trying to remind the West that it is still a global power, but it is also sending the message that it is ready to escalate its role in global politics. Considering the recent interactions between the US and Russia, it seems that the intervention has further worked to bring the parties around the table to discuss the mechanisms that might prevent further possible crises. This sort of ongoing dialogue and a possible agreement on Syria might also pave the way for further diplomatic steps to be taken in repairing European-Russian relations and resolving the Ukrainian conflict.

Still, Russia is taking a big risk by inserting itself into the mix of the ongoing war in Syria. This is an open test for the Russian Military. Any mistake on the ground, or in the air, will

call Russia's capacity to deal with counterinsurgency and to conduct trans-frontier operations into question. Furthermore, even though the majority of Russian attacks target non-ISIL groups, by intervening, Russia has increased the possibility that it could become the target of extremist groups at home.

All of these developments have implications for Turkish foreign policy as well. The Turkish public does not believe that Russia's violations of Turkish airspace were done with "good intentions." Following the incidents, Russia and Turkey reiterated the importance of their bilateral relations in terms of mutual economic interests, and it seems that, for the time being, tensions decreased. This ability to de-escalate the situation by opening channels of dialogue over a short period of time was crucial, since both parties have not only developed good economic relations but succeeded in creating a stable environment in the Black Sea region; a region that has even weathered the storm that is the crisis in Ukraine. In order to preserve the existing level of dialogue between Russia and Turkey, it is important to further invest in mechanisms of institutional dialogue that will be able to tackle the political crises that could await both of the countries in the future.

Russia's direct support of the Baath regime has undermined Turkey's position on a safe zone or no-fly zone, and it seems that a transition process in which Assad maintains power is now being discussed out loud in Turkish politics and among the country's public. In the upcoming period, the Syria's future will continue to be a subject of debate, but the nature of the transition will be definitive for Turkish foreign policy. Even though Russia stepped into the crisis, the possibility of Assad regaining full control over the whole of Syria seems impossible by military means alone. Thus, it will be political initiatives that determine the trajectory of Syria's future.