

Russia in Syria: Hybrid Political Warfare

Anthony H. Cordesman

According to reliable press reports, Putin has already made major changes the Russian military role in Syria. No one can yet estimate how many more forces and weapons Russia will provide, but so far Putin's major actions include:

- Expanding Russian port facilities in naval base at Tartus and expanding an airfield south of Latakia into an air base
- Deploying 3-4 Su-27 fighters, 12 Su-24 strike fighters, 12 Su-10 close support fighters, and Pchela-1T UAVs
- Providing R-166-0.5 (ultra) high-frequency signals (HF/VHF) vehicle with jam-resistant voice and data communications which have been seen driving through Syria
- An unknown number of new artillery weapons, reportedly 152mm systems.
- Deploying six or more T-90 main battle tanks, 35 or more new BTR-82A/B wheeled AFVs with 30mm cannon turrets , and an unknown number of Russian Humvee equivalent
- Deploying prefabricated housing for up to 2,000 troops
- Deploying an unknown number of SA-22 land-based air defense systems
- Possibly deploying 200 marines and housing for as many as 1,500 personnel at the airfield near the Assad family's ancestral home

These actions need to be kept in context. Russia first acquired a small naval base or facility in Syria back in 1971, in the days of the Soviet Union the Cold War. At one point, it based elements of the 5th Operational Squadron of its Mediterranean there. Since 1991, however, Russia has not deployed a meaningful fleet in the Mediterranean, and the port facilities have never been expanded to berth or support Russia's largest ships. In any case, Russia's naval forces cannot not play a meaningful role in Syria's civil war.

There also is nothing new about Russian arms transfers to Syria. Almost all of the weapons in Syrian government forces are Russian, and Russia has backed Assad with weapons and military support ever since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. While Russia arms transfers to Syria helped keep the Assad regime alive, they too had limited impact. Syrian forces were already far better equipped than the rebel forces, but this scarcely kept them from steadily losing ground during most of 2014.

What has grabbed the world's attention is that Russia seems to be building up an active Russian air base, and is deploying strike and close support aircraft it can use again any mix of rebel forces. This gives it the capability to intervene actively in the Syrian civil war at a time Assad has been badly losing ground, and the potential capability to challenge U.S.

and other Coalition aircraft flying missions against ISIS and other extremist rebel force from Turkey and the Gulf. It also creates a major potential barrier to U.S. or allied no fly or security zone in Syria and forces every rebel faction to consider the risk of engaging Russia.

Putin and Russia have played this game before. In 2008, Russia talked about a major expansion of its naval forces and naval base in Syria as part of the hardline it took with the US and West over the deployment of missile defenses in Poland and in defense of its invasion of Georgia. In 2011 and 2012, it deployed ships to Syria to show its support of Assad, and there again was talk of turning its decaying naval facility into a real base. The difference is that this time the Russian presence could really matter. It could have a major impact in keeping the Assad regime alive, and limiting further rebel gains, and forcing the U.S. and its allies to be much more cautious about their use of air power.

What it already has shown, however, is that Putin can and will exploit the use of military forces as political weapons in hybrid or asymmetric political warfare. Like the Chinese construction of air facilities on reefs and small islands in the South China Sea, Putin did not have to fire a shot to assert Russian power, focus the world's attention, and counter U.S. influence.

In fact, Putin will be much better off if Russia does not use its forces in Syria, carefully limits them to the direct support of Assad, or uses them as a political tool to assert Russia's role in the Middle East, pressure the U.S. to limit its military actions, or uses them to push for negotiations that favor Assad and again highlight Russia's role in the region.

Putin can also use his forces to show that Russia will back a local strong man, and is countering what he had called the U.S. support of "color revolutions." This is part of a far broader Russian effort to say that the U.S. has deliberately used its power to destabilize regimes in the developing world, and its military actions in Iraq and Libya were part of a U.S. effort to control such countries – not one to create new liberal and democratic regimes. He can also quietly exploit the situation to show Iran that Russia is again a potential counterweight to the U.S.

There is, of course, the risk that Putin will miscalculate, or will go further and some military incident will occur with U.S., allied, Israeli, or U.S.-backed rebel forces. Putin could also continue his present build-up to make Tartus into a real Russian naval base, and create a major Russian military air and land-based air defense presence. This history of limited political warfare often escalates into more serious tensions or conflict.

At the same time, the U.S. needs to rethink some of its perceptions of both Russian and Chinese power. It is obvious that both states not only have the ability to conduct complex political warfare, but are willing to do so. The U.S. needs to be ready to react accordingly, make its own political moves and do so with sufficient innovation and decisiveness to both deter such moves by Russia and other states, and minimize the risk of any serious military incident or escalation. So far, the White House has tended to error on the side of inaction – rather than caution – and the U.S. military has focused on the actual use of forces. No every hybrid "war" has to involve little green men, or even fire a single shot.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C.

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