

RUSSIA IN SYRIA: A PIPE TOO FAR?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Russia's decision to be militarily involved in Syria. Fresh out of the annexation of Crimea and a clandestine campaign in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Putin launched another foreign policy venture propping up the Assad regime. It has been suggested that Putin's motivations behind this decision ranged from attempting to distract the public from economic woes to securing Russia from extremist terrorist threats. However, this paper argues that these do not fully account for Putin's decision. Firstly, Putin's grip on power in Russia is tight and there has been little threat to his standing from public disaffection. Secondly, Russia's military strikes have not targeted extremist elements in Syria and the action has only increased the likelihood of terrorist attacks. We, therefore, must look to Russia's geopolitical motives and economy. This paper argues that Russia is using Syria as a stage to improve its international image, secure its economy, and cement itself as a great power - all under the cover of national security. Central and Eastern Europe's (CEE) attempts to diversify their energy supplies threatened both Russia's political dominance of the region and intensified its economic woes. As Russia has gained control of construction and energy rights in Syria, CEE states have no other energy transit routes to explore, thus securing Russian domination. Additionally, Russia hopes to challenge US hegemony in international relations in pursuit of a multi-polar world. Finally, the Syrian campaign has made it harder for Western governments to reject increased Russian involvement in international relations and to maintain economic sanctions since they appear to be working towards the same objectives.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will analyse Russia's decision to be involved militarily in Syria. There are many factors that would explain Russian involvement in Syria, ranging from domestic pressure to Russia's pursuit of 'great power' global status. Firstly, I will provide the background information regarding the Russo-Syrian relationship and give a brief outline of Russia's military campaign. Secondly, I will explain why economic and geopolitical factors are the most likely reasons for Russia's military campaign in Syria. Finally, I will argue that the domestic and security motives do not fully account for Russian involvement.

RUSSIA AND SYRIA

Russia and Syria share a long and consistent diplomatic history dating back to the end of the Second World War. In 1946, Russia and Syria signed a secret agreement in which Russia would provide military and political support to Syria (Ginat, 2000) which continued throughout the Cold War, with Syria receiving \$294 million from Russia between 1955 and 1958 (Kreutz, 2007). Russia had a great interest in an ally within the Western-dominated Middle East to challenge US hegemony and the country continues to pursue this policy today. When Assad seized power in Syria in 1970, Russia leased a naval port at Tartus; its only Mediterranean repair and replenishment base (Valenta, 2016). Russia's lack of warm water ports and Turkey's control of entry into the Black Sea gives this base great strategic importance. During the winter, Russian ports have limited access due to the sea freezing over. Turkey also controls both

sides of Bosphorus, a small strait that connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Russian access to the Mediterranean and the ability of its ships to return to port is dependent on Turkish goodwill. The port at Tartus does not freeze over and does not require passing through the strait. This allows the Russian navy to act as a global power as it has year-round access to the seas. Russia continued to stand by the Assad regime when Hafez's son Bashar took over in 2000. Russia maintained a military presence in Syria and forgave three-quarters of Syria's \$13.4 billion Soviet-era debt in 2005 (Valenta, 2016). Russia has stood by Bashar Assad throughout the Syrian civil war, undertaking a prolonged aerial campaign against rebel and extremist groups. In September of 2015, airstrikes began targeting rebel positions with around 9000 strikes conducted during the campaign, aiding the Syrian army in retaking 400 towns and 10,000 square miles of territory (McDermott, 2016). The campaign was committed from a series of bases in Iran, Syria and at sea on the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*.

Towards a Multi-Polar World

The key to Russian involvement in Syria is its economic and geopolitical motives. In this section, I will first define what a 'great power' is, and then will discuss how Russia's involvement has helped establish its position against the US in the Middle East. I argue that Russia has used the conflict to raise its international image and standing especially in Europe.

I argue that Russia is using Syria to demonstrate to the world that it is a great power and that it can engage in international conflicts far from its domestic bases. A 'great power' is a

sovereign state that is recognised as having the ability and expertise to exert its influence on a global scale. Russian foreign policy explicitly states its pursuit of a multi-polar world, where no one power dominates international relations and there are several great powers of roughly equal influence. So how does Syria fit into this?

Firstly, the campaign disrupts America's hegemony, establishing Russia as a key figure in the region's stability. America has dominated the Middle East, both through diplomatic pressure and military actions, such as in Iraq. Further action in 2001 saw Afghanistan come under the US fold, a key Cold War battleground. The collapse of Iraq, failure of the Arab spring, and the rise of ISIS revealed the shortcomings of US policy in the region and gave Russia the chance to assert itself (Zisser, 2013). Russia has exhibited both strength and statesmanship, with Moscow playing the part of benevolent peacemaker. Russia co-sponsored the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), a coalition of 20 countries working towards a diplomatic solution, and rejected Assad's plan for his return to power, instead encouraging communication between the government and the rebels (Slim, 2016), it is unlikely Putin will allow Assad to fall from power, the wider implication of being perceived as an international facilitator of democracy helps re-enforce Russia's status as a 'great power'.

Russia has also carefully cultivated Iranian support. The US's thawing of relations with Iran threatened the Russian geopolitical position, possibly drawing the Iranian government to a more pro-western outlook (Liik, 2016). Russia had also backed nuclear sanctions, angering the Iranian government (Liik, 2016). Due to Iran and Syria's close political and religious ties, Russia has reaffirmed its diplomatic relations with both in one move. The two Shia regimes work together closely and have felt threatened by the democratic uprisings in the region. Russia's intervention has stabilised the situation, leaving both nations indebted to Russia.

Secondly, in addition to using the Syrian campaign to disrupt America's hegemony, Russia has shown that it can apply military pressure to an overseas territory and prop up a government. Since the troublesome Georgian campaign in 2008, Russian military forces and government were not seen as able to sustain a prolonged conflict, even on its own borders (Gorenburg, 2016). The Georgian campaign revealed shortcomings in the Russian forces, especially the air force. Georgian forces inflicted unexpected losses on the Russian air force and exposed flaws in Russian doctrine which was based on 20th century warfare. After a period of modernisation, Russia now appears able to not only dominate the air but also send in naval forces; a very different operation from the Soviet-era army that invaded Georgia. Previously, the only nation with this capability independent of other nations' support was the US (Pakhmov, 2015). This challenges the US's military might and shows other regional powers that Russia is an alternative partner.

Syria has also raised Russia's reputation in the wider world, particularly in Europe, where the conflict in Syria has seen large migrant movements as well as a raised threat of terrorist attacks, straining the continent. Due to American inaction, Russia appears as a major player; through its air campaign and media coverage, it has controlled the narrative, presenting itself as the saviour of Europe and Syria (Meister and Puglierin, 2015). Russia has made efforts to move away from its reputation of ignoring human rights abuses and propping up dictatorships, which historically has disrupted a working relationship with

Europe. Increasingly, Russia is now presenting itself as a partner with similar policy goals to Europe, with some political parties gravitating East which means that they are establishing closer political ties with Russia. Nationalist and populist parties, often bankrolled by Russia (Meister and Puglierin, 2015), voice their support for increased diplomatic relations with Moscow. The operations in Syria legitimise this, where clear foreign policy objectives are being achieved compared to the early 2000's where Russia appeared disjointed in its international approach (Kanet, 2007). The campaign also draws attention away from Ukraine and Crimea and allows Russia to challenge the sanctions imposed there. The same day that airstrikes started, the head of the Russian Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, Alexei Pushkov, announced that Western sanctions would be soon viewed as 'unnecessary' and 'inadequate' due to Russia's involvement in the anti-ISIS community (RIA, 2015) (Czuperski, 2016).

Through its actions in Syria, Russia has challenged America's domination of the Middle East and international relations by establishing stronger relationships with key powers in the region. such as Iran and Syria. Finally, through the campaign, Russia can put pressure on Western nations to resume normal diplomatic relations or cooperation as they are ostensibly on the same side against the Islamic State.

RUSSIA IN EUROPE

In this section, I argue that through its actions in Syria, Russia hopes to secure future energy exports and increase its influence in Eastern Europe by controlling the territory which future gas lines will travel through. Eastern European countries have attempted to move away from dependence on Russian gas through alternative pipelines such as the Trans-Anatolian. Any new pipe would very likely cross Syrian territory and Russia's intervention has secured its stake in this transit nation. The Syrian state has given Russian companies a free hand in their energy sector, allowing the construction of offshore rigs and transport pipes (The New Arab, 2016). Russia has strategically acquired the largest oil reserves in the Mediterranean as well as acquiring control of energy transit construction rights, cutting off a future energy alternative for European nations (Valenta, 2016). Qatar has been developing its gas reserves and would have become the new largest supplier of gas to Europe. Now, priority will be given to Iran and its natural gas reserves, limiting Europe to buying gas from Russia or a pro-Russian state. Russia is both economically and geopolitically motivated, as energy exports account for 14% of its GDP and over 75% of its exports (Valenta, 2016). Their federal budget is heavily reliant on energy revenues and the impact of the 2014 slump in oil prices has highlighted Russia's reliance on energy exports. The possibility of losing the European market would be crippling to the Russian economy.

Russia's geopolitical strength in Eastern Europe is reliant on its ability to control the energy supplies of the countries. Through securing the transit territory for any new Middle-Eastern to Europe pipeline, Russia has made sure it has not lost its leverage over Eastern Europe. A large proportion of gas imports in Central and Eastern Europe come from Russia: Hungary imports 89% of its gas from Russia; Poland 53%; the Czech Republic 99%; and Slovakia 95% (Tcherneva, 2015). The realignment of other transit states to the West, such as Ukraine, has threatened Russia's monopoly on energy. Regaining control of a vital transit country allows Russia to apply political and economic pressure, stopping countries from fully realigning to the West for fear of their economies being crippled and endangering their population. The alternative pipeline would

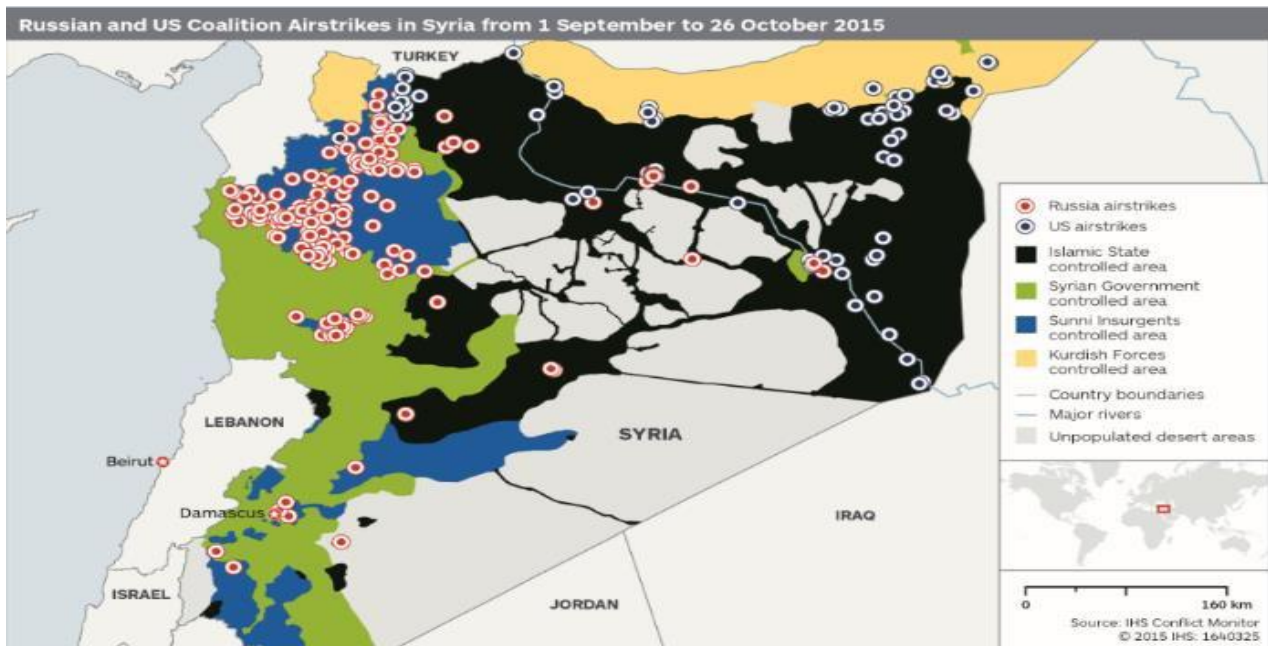


Figure 1: Russian and US Coalition Airstrikes in Syria from 1 September to 26 October 2015, IHS Conflict Monitor, 2015

have allowed the countries to move away from Russian gas and not be shackled to the whims of Moscow. This is a severe threat to Russia's *near abroad* policy, with which it hopes to maintain influence and power over former Soviet Union territories.

SECURITY OR SMOKESCREEN?

This section addresses another possible reason for Russian involvement in Syria. I outline why Islamic extremism might cause Russia to conduct airstrikes in Syria. I then argue that this is not plausible as Russia has not targeted extremist rebels, the airstrikes only encourage ISIS to attack Russia and that Russian security services have historically contained extremist elements.

A motive for Russian involvement in Syria is the security threat of extremist Islamic forces. Throughout the 21st century, Russia has suffered multiple terrorist attacks and subdued a Muslim uprising in Chechnya in 2005. Russia has a large Muslim population in the Caucasus and nearby in Central Asia that could be targeted by the Islamic State for recruitment purposes. Syria has a land route to Russia through the Caucasus along a large border that is difficult to monitor. The military action aims to destroy and disrupt extremist elements to safeguard Russia's borders and people. Furthermore, by disrupting extremist groups abroad, Russia also hopes to stop the threat of an Islamic style state in Central Asia, a region with extremist elements. Security services and the military have expressed concern at the rising threat level within Central Asia as militants return from Syria (Kommersant, 2015). Both the Caucasus and Central Asia have estimated that 2000 fighters have left their territory to fight for ISIS (Kazantsev, 2016). Russia cannot monitor the entire border, but the use of buffer nations allows Russia to deal with threats on foreign land with minimal risk whilst also sending a strong message to would-be extremists that there is zero tolerance. The experience of Western intervention in North Africa also showed Moscow the dangers of popular rebellion as Libya's mishandling allowed extremist elements to take power and create an unstable state (Valenta, 2016)

However, Islamic extremism in Syria is not enough of a motive to account for Russia's military involvement. Russian airstrikes

have continuously targeted moderate rebel groups rather than extremist groups, focusing on shoring up Assad's regime (Liebich, 2016). These airstrikes (shown in figure 1) are aimed at any opposition to Assad's regime, often funded by the West, who pose a threat to Russian influence if they gain power (Czuperski, 2016; Oualalou, 2016). Russia hopes to draw the moderates into negotiations rather than to outright destroy extremist elements. These negotiations would hopefully bring both rebels and government elements into a diplomatic dialogue to end the conflict. A peace negotiation achieves multiple aims: it removes the possibility of the Western-backed opposition taking power outright and gives Russia the opportunity to take centre stage in the talks. Furthermore, home-grown terrorists from Central Asian and Caucasus nations have been partaking in attacks for far longer than ISIS has existed. Yet, even here, Russia has secured a friendly regime change in Chechnya, the most troublesome of the Caucasus, and reduced its military presence in Central Asia, a region which has suppressed Islamic extremists by itself competently (Blank, 2016).

For a country so concerned about security, Russia is either reducing or outsourcing its security elements along the border, showing little worry beyond rhetoric (Blank, 2016). Before the 2014 Sochi Olympics, Russian security forces may have even been assisting extremists to leave the country and join ISIS (Tsvetkova, 2016). In a bid to reduce the possibility of a terror attack during the Olympic games individuals considered a threat were smuggled out of the country into Syria and Iraq. Domestically, Russia has managed to contain extremism within its borders more effectively through cooperation with Chechnya (Snetkov, 2014), a vital doorway into Russia for would-be terrorists. Putin has given greater autonomy to the border region in return for loyalty and security, and supports Chechnya's Islamic regime, reducing the possibility of a religiously inspired uprising. Russia is under less of a threat from Islamic terrorists because ISIS is perceived as a Western problem which destabilises Europe and undermines American interests in the region. Destroying these elements would, in fact, be assisting Western goals in the region.

TROUBLE AT HOME

This section argues that Putin is not using Syria to shore up domestic support. An alternate argument for Russia's intervention is that the military campaign distracts from the country's domestic issues. However, I will claim that this is wrong. I will first present several pieces of evidence that appear to justify domestic issues as a motivator, such as poll ratings, and a cause of political instability that would suggest Putin is using Syria to secure his position. I then argue that these are not persuasive as Russia's political system and repressive state limits the impact of public opinion on the government's stability.

Russian military involvement in Syria could be to secure Putin's presidency and draw attention away from domestic issues. In the wake of the 2014 Crimean occupation, Putin's approval ratings rose from 60% to 90% (Eremenko, 2015) before slowly dropping as the conflict drew on. After Syria, they once again raised to around 90% (Eremenko, 2015), portraying Putin as a legitimate and effective leader (Czuperski, 2016). Military operations are an extremely popular and effective way of drawing public attention away from pressing domestic issues (Czuperski, 2016). Low oil prices, Western sanctions, and a protracted conflict in Ukraine has caused an economic downturn within Russia. The Russian economy contracted by 4% in 2016 and real wages declined in 2014- 2015, causing a drop in living standards (Grennes, 2016; The Economist, 2016).

Previously, Putin was a secure autocratic leader due to Russia's rising living standards and the recovering economy. His legitimacy as a leader wavered in the face of economic collapse and the acceptance of the authoritarian rule weakened as the public no longer benefited (Czuperski, 2016). Involvement in Syria achieved two objectives. Firstly, it pleased the public and established Putin as a strong leader amongst conservative political elites. Secondly, the conflict in Syria has allowed state-run media to show alternative media cycles, moving away from coverage of Crimea and the economy to a successful military campaign. Putin's power rests on a new social contract in which he must deliver on returning Russia to being a respected and 'great power' nation (Czuperski, 2016). Russia has spent billions of dollars on modernising its military forces (The Economist, 2014), and Syria offered an opportunity to prove to the people and ministers that the money was well spent.

Yet Putin is not as wary of public opinion as Western democracies. The flawed democracy, repressive state, and vertical power structure reduce the public's ability to impact the government's position. Putin governs from the top with power centralised to the presidency and federal centre in a *power vertical*. Loyal figures are appointed to important positions who then owe their perks and jobs to Putin. Dissent against the regime is repressed and the formation of opposition parties is tightly controlled. Laws such as the ban on foreign-funded non-profit organisations limits the capacity of anti-regime groups and the liberalisation of party formation laws have fragmented the opposition (Sakwa, 2014). Since the 2011 protests over Putin's return to the presidency, there has been no major political uproar. Putin has stifled and abused the opposition whilst cultivating an extensive support base amongst political elites. Although Putin is at risk from these elites, they are less likely to be persuaded by a military campaign and more likely to be under the influence of cash and power (Minchenko Consulting, 2013). The war is an effective way of drawing attention away from economic downfall and stagnation, but it is not key to Putin's power. Putin's approval rating before the Crimean and Syrian conflict was 60% (Nardelli, 2015),

even with the spectre of an economic downturn. It is true that Putin has used the popularity ratings for legitimising his decisions, but this is more for the international stage rather than the domestic.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I argue that Russia is using Syria as a stage to improve its international image, secure its economy, and cement itself as a 'great power' - all under the cover of national security. Eastern Europe's attempts to diversify their energy sources has driven Russia to safeguard its economic and political future by controlling a key energy transit territory. Russia's reliance on energy exports to prop up its economy would leave it vulnerable to even further economic decline if Central and Eastern Europe did manage to secure new energy sources. The pursuit of a multi-polar world drives Russian foreign policy, and the loss of influence over Eastern Europe to the EU would have been exacerbated with the loss of control over energy exports. Russia is challenging American dominance in the international arena with airstrikes demonstrating Russia's military strength and hard power capabilities. When combined with soft power techniques, such as organising peace negotiations, Russia ostensibly appears to be a 'great power'. Putin has used Syria to improve Russia's international standing, acting as a mediator in a complex conflict whilst displaying advanced military capabilities. As a leading member of the International Syria Support Group, Russia will closely watch any negotiations to ensure its position in the region and further isolate the US. This is a step for Russia to rise in status amongst international institutions, with an overall aim to be on par with the US and blocs such as the EU. Although Putin's message is one of anti-terror and national security, Russia's actions do not echo the rhetoric. The bombing campaign in Syria has only encouraged ISIS to view Russia as a target while Russian security forces have been complicit in aiding possible recruits journey to Syria. Putin's iron grip on power within Russia means that domestic opinion has not fuelled the campaign. Syria has instead been used as a tool in Putin's campaign for a resurgent Russia that hopes to reassert its power in international relations.

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