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Old grudges never die



How Russian air power in Syria shifted the balance

In September 2015 tensions between Russia and Western powers, already stretched by Moscow's intervention in Crimea and sabre-rattling in the Baltics, were ratcheted up even further when Russian warplanes began strikes against anti-Assad forces in Syria. Coalition forces (which include, the US, France, UK and Australia as well as other partners) began

their own air campaign almost a year earlier against ISIS, which at that point had rapidly expanded to control or threaten large parts of Iraq and Syria, while declaring itself a Caliphate. Since then the anti-ISIS air campaign waged by US and its allies (along with Iraq) in the Middle East has now been joined by Russia, which has intervened to protect its close ally, the regime of President Assad. While the US-led coalition has had a goal to stop, degrade and then roll-back ISIS insurgents in Iraq

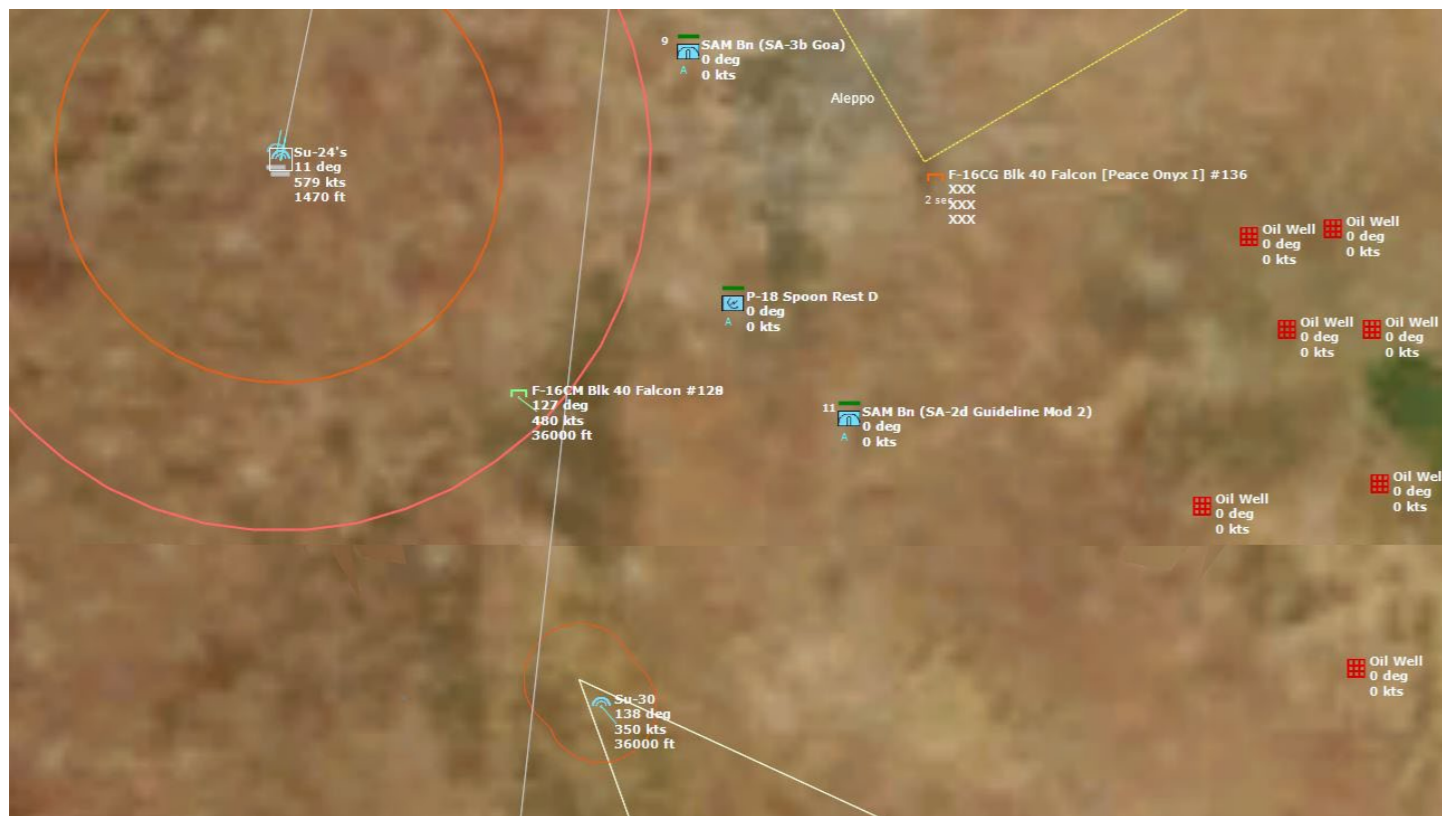
and Syria, Russia's air campaign has focused on the different goal of hitting Western-backed rebels threatening the critical territory of Assad's regime. Thus, this may be the first civil war in which two of three sides (Government, and anti-Assad 'moderate' rebels) are receiving air support from outside major powers - but so far a tacit agreement has kept them from engaging directly. What then, is the significance of Russia's high-risk intervention in such a complex civil war?

Shifting the balance

The aerial intervention by Moscow can be seen as strategically significant for five reasons:

First, until the arrival of Russian air power, Assad's regime was locked in a losing stalemate with rebels. Losses to the Syrian Arab Air Force (SyAAF) and the capture of key air bases meant it was reportedly forced into last-ditch measures such as pressing MiG-25PDSs into the

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American and Turkish F-16's flying over strategic positions.

ground attack role with air-to-air missiles fired unguided to the ground. A lack of tactical fighters also saw helicopters used to drop barrel bombs on rebel-held areas, with large civilian casualties. AAA and rebel MANPADS also took its toll, with the SyAAF also suffering from defections and poor maintenance and availability.

The deployment, then of Russian aircraft such as Su-34s, Su-24s and Su-25s, as well as attack helicopters such as Mi-28 and Ka-52, along with small numbers of Russian ground troops, for security and targeting, came just in time and has swung the civil war in favour of Assad, relieving pressure on his forces, and allowing recapture of key territory.

Protecting Assad, for Moscow, is not just about honouring commitments to a regional ally and buyer of Russian military hardware. There is also a direct strategic interest in Moscow in protecting and securing its leased naval base in Tartus, Syria – which supports its warships in the Mediterranean.

Second, the deployment by Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) at a stroke removed from the

table the option of an UN-approved 'no-fly zone' for the Western anti-Assad coalition – a move which had been mooted as a way to limit Assad's use of indiscriminate bombing of rebel-held urban areas and protect civilians caught up in the conflict.

Meanwhile, the deployment of Russia's latest and most lethal SAM system, the S-400 (SA-21 Growler) at its base in Latakia with a range that even extends over the Mediterranean to cover Cyprus and RAF Akrotiri, half of Israel, and parts of southern Turkey, added a whole new dangerous factor for coalition air planners to take into account. Any sudden aggressive confrontation with Russia then, by western forces, could put coalition aircraft at risk across a wide area, including not just fast jet types and UAVs, but the support 'enablers' of modern warfare such as RC-135 Rivet Joints, other ISR aircraft and tankers.

Third, Russian's intervention in Syria has also showcased its latest weapons and acted almost as a live-fire test range, sending a message to all that its military modernisation is bearing fruit. It has to be remembered that only eight years ago, Russia's

air forces struggled against tiny Georgia, due to a lack of ISR assets, UAVs and precision weapons. Some seven aircraft (including a Tu-22M3 sub-strategic bomber pressed into the reconnaissance role) were shot down in that conflict. Fast forward to today, and Russia deployed the latest combat aircraft to Syria, including the Su-34 Fullback, Su-30SM multirole

weapons used as well as the combat debut of the latest cruise-missiles such as the air-launched Kh-101 and the sea-launched SS-N-30A Kalibr. In addition, Western analysts also spotted the first operational deployment of the latest R-77-1 medium-range active air-to-air missile.

This deployment then has proved a highly useful shop window for Russian defence

“Protecting Assad, for Moscow, is not just about honouring commitments to a regional ally [...]. There is also a direct strategic interest in Moscow in protecting and securing its leased naval base in Tartus, Syria.”

fighter and Su-35S fighter. Long range strikes have also seen the combat debut of strategic bombers such as the Tu-95MS & Tu-160M. Russia's new combat helicopters, the Mi-28 and Ka-52 have also been blooded in Syria and UAVs were also in use.

Russia's modernisation effort is not just platforms either – the conflict saw precision-satellite

industry, in being able to attach the 'combat proven' tag to its products. Indeed, in January 2016, it was announced that Algeria would acquire 12 Su-34s. Furthermore, despite fears of reverse engineering, in November 2015, Russia sealed a deal to supply 24 Su-35s to China. With Russia's economy hit by sanctions after Crimea,

defence exports such as these have increased in importance.

The deployment in the same theatre where a number of the latest Western assets, such as the F-22, E-7 Wedgetail, and Eurofighter Typhoon are operating, has also given Russian a valuable opportunity for electronic intelligence gathering to update its threat libraries and suck up electrons from the air. It can be assumed that Russian spy planes such as the Tu-214R are used as much for spying on NATO, as for picking up anti-regime transmissions.

Yet, while the intervention has highlighted how far Russian air power has come since Georgia in 2008 – a closer study indicates capability gaps still remain. For example, although it now has deployed UAVs in more numbers, Moscow still faces a shortage of ISR assets. Targeting pods, ubiquitous on Western tactical fighters, and even PGM-capable bombers like B-1s, are few and far between. Footage of aircraft released by the Russian MoD also showed that while precision weapons

were deployed (and were given high profile), the vast majority of expended ordnance were free-fall unguided bombs. Finally, the shutdown of the Su-24 in November also raised questions over avionics and self-protection suites – especially when video footage showed a Fencer cockpit with a western consumer GPS device stuck to the windscreen.

It is also noticeable that aerial incursions of NATO airspace fell while strategic bombers such as Tu-95s and Tu-160s were conducting long-range strikes from airbases in Russia, suggesting that Russian long-range aviation was at the limits of its operational tempo.

Fourth, it might also be argued that when Russian Aerospace Forces did shift their targeting to ISIS groups threatening the regime, it had a disproportionate effect compared to Western precision strikes, thanks to much looser rules of engagement. Russia, for example, had no compunction in hitting large groups of civilian fuel tankers



out in the open, that although not ISIS, transported oil that powers the group's war machine. Refineries too, that have been linked in selling oil to ISIS have been hit, which (along with pressure on its front-line forces from coalition aircraft) has contributed to ISIS's expansion being halted. It is significant, that in April 2016, it was also reported that the US had loosened its RoEs in order to destroy ISIS.

Fifth – while this has been a short deployment compared to NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, it shows Russian now flexing its expeditionary muscles, to support an air campaign far from home. This takes substantial amounts of air and sea logistics. In addition, some Western observers were surprised at the reported high-level of operational tempo that the Russian VKS forces in Syria achieved. This may have been due to the fact it was planned



S-400 Triumph batteries deployed to Syria by Russia after the Turkish shoot down of a Russian Su-24.



Turkish F-16 get ready to take off.

as a short-term 'surge', rather than a sustained operation – but it does indicate that Russia is now capable of these sort of 'out-of-area' expeditionary air campaigns that previously only the West could manage.

Summary

However, while this short, sharp intervention may be considered a success for President Putin in propping up a key ally, retaining access to its naval base in

Syria, and showing the world the latest Russian equipment, it has also increased tensions and led to fears that a miscalculation could spark off a wider war. Large numbers of warplanes, helicopters and UAVs flying in close proximity from different nations and the muddled situation on the ground raise fears that a small incident could escalate and spiral out of control.

The shutdown of a Russian Su-24 in November by a Turkish

F-16, in particular, was a defining moment – as some analysts have drawn parallels between Putin and Turkish President Erdogan as being premiers with a 'hard-man' image and unlikely to back down*. In particular, Turkey, has a significant stake in the outcome of the Syrian war, thanks to an exodus of refugees and its ongoing long-term war against Kurdish rebels which straddles the border. NATO decision-makers then, have

been concerned that any further incidents between Russia and Turkey could see the Alliance forced to choose between being dragged into a conflict by Ankara, or standing back and seeing Putin effectively spilt the organisation.

In short the current situation remains extremely volatile.

* Editors note: In reality on 27 June Erdogan publicly apologised for the Su-24 in a move to smooth relations.



Russia's Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier heading to Syrian waters.