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POLITICAL AND MILITARY LESSONS OF THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN IN SYRIA

Abstract:

Decision of the Russian Federation to support the regime of Bashar Assad in its fight with terrorists and opposition became a crucial event in the world politics with the long-term consequences for global international relations, for the future of the Middle East and for Russia itself. One of the most important questions in this context is why Kremlin decided to interfere and what are the political and military lessons of its campaign in Syria? It can be said that the main political goal of Vladimir Putin was to make the United States take Russia into account as a serious (if not equal) player in the international arena, and he reached that goal, making his state a key factor in the Middle East. There was a doubt if Russian army is able to act effectively abroad and change Syrian situation at low cost. It proved that it is efficient enough, showing the advantages of Russian weaponry, and got valuable experience in many spheres. At the same time, the end of the Kremlin game in Syria is not clear, but this can be an inevitable price of its revived imperial ambitions.

Keywords:

Middle East, Russia, Russian “Grand strategy”, Syria, Syrian peace process, the United States, fight on terrorism, ISIS, Russian army, Russian weapons, Kalibr, Russian special operations forces, private military companies, Wagner group, Russian military bases in Syria, information warfare.

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Introduction

*Watching, how Russians fight for Syria,
I cannot imagine, how they will fight for Russia.*

Bashar Assad,
President of Syria²

It seems that two main elements of the Russian “Grand strategy” are the following: lead the reintegration of the post-soviet area (for example, creation and development of the Eurasian economic union) and make the West treat Russia as a serious (if not equal) partner, which has its undisputed spheres of influence (like Ukraine) and must participate in global decision-making process.

Europe and especially America do not agree with such role of Moscow (of course, some elite groups there are ready to recognize that “Russia is back”, but the so-called “deep state” in the United States prefer confrontation and forces the EU to act in the same way). Therefore, Kremlin seeks to prove them, that it is better to accept new reality than try to win in a zero-sum game. For instance, Russia did not let Georgia get back South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008, then “took” Crimea and supported separatists in Donbas.

But it was not enough, because those actions did not affect Europe and the U.S. directly. At the same time, the Middle East is a geopolitical arena, where America had been dominating for a long time, and in 2015 Vladimir Putin decided to interfere in the Syrian war (possibly, he was ready to help Muammar Gaddafi in Libya too, but president Dmitri Medvedev was not tough enough to do that).

As Stephen Blank wrote for Atlantic Council: “Essentially, Moscow seeks to exploit crises to create a regional bipolarity against the West in the Middle East and Europe as well as in places like Latin America or Afghanistan. This would force the United States and its allies to take Russia at Moscow’s own self-valuation and cement a system of global multipolarity (with China and the United States) that accords to Russia the status of a great global power whose voice must be heard”³. At the same time, Steven A. Cook noticed for the “Foreign Policy”: “And what better place to start than the Middle East, where the United States is already widely resented even among its allies. (...) In the span of less than a decade, the Middle East has gone from a region in which

² *Aforizmy niedieli ot izwiestnykh ludiej. Wypusk № 48, Argumenty i fakty, 29.11.2017, <http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/aforizmy_nedeli_ot_izvestnyh_lyudey_48> (29.05.2018).*

³ S. Blank, *Beyond Syria: Moscow’s Objectives in the Middle East, Atlantic Council, 17.04.2018, <<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/beyond-syria-moscow-s-objectives-in-the-middle-east>> (28.05.2018).*

the United States was overwhelmingly predominant to one that Washington and Moscow contest”⁴.

There were several factors, which eased Russian intervention (historical ties and good political relations with Syria; Russian Navy’s support facility in Tartus; participation of Iran – another Russian ally in the region – in the conflict). Also, as in the case of Crimea operation, America was not ready for such a scenario. Still, there was no guarantee that Putin’s plan will succeed, because (a) it is a first military operation of the Russian Federation far abroad of such a scale; (b) in the beginning Russia provided only air support, and Syrian army on the ground was in the pitiable condition at that moment; (c) sooner or later the West had to react in some way, seeking to complicate Russian actions and limit the spread of Russian influence in the region.

So, let’s see, what are the intermediate political and military results of Russian campaign in Syria, which is not over yet.

Political lessons

Moscow wanted to be important for the West, and it did that. Putin meets the leaders of Iran, Turkey, Israel, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan. All of them have very different interests in Syria, but all they are in dialogue with Russia, which thus is in the centre of the Middle East politics, showing its diplomatic and military (especially after the establishment of the permanent naval and air military bases in Syria) potential.

As Jessica Tuchman Mathews from Carnegie Endowment notes: “Since Russian President Putin saved Syrian President Bashar Assad’s regime from collapse, he has established working relations with every major power in the Middle East, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and Turkey, though several of them fiercely oppose what he is doing in Syria. (...) In the space of a few years, Putin has ended decades of Russian irrelevance in the Middle East and built a stronger position than the Soviet Union enjoyed 40 years ago”⁵.

So, there is no surprise that the United States ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley actually recognized that America cannot just ignore Kremlin’s actions anymore, because “whether it’s their involvement in Ukraine, whether you look at how they are supporting Maduro in Venezuela, whether you look in Syria and their way of propping up Assad and working

⁴ S. A. Cook, *Russia Is in the Middle East to Stay*, Council of Foreign Affairs, 26.03.2018, <<https://www.cfr.org/blog/russia-middle-east-stay>> (28.05.2018).

⁵ J. T. Mathews, *Russia Replaces America as the Power Player in the Middle East*, Carnegie Endowment, 06.03.2018, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/03/06/russia-replaces-america-as-power-player-in-middle-east-pub-75726>> (28.05.2018).

with Iran, that continues to be a problem”⁶. It means that from being nothing Russia was able to become a problem for the U.S., and in order to solve this problem America must treat Moscow as a player, what Putin needed.

But playing in the highest geopolitical league is not an easy task, because in the conditions of strategic proximity the level of confrontation and the possibility of big military conflict grows rapidly. For example, information warfare between the West and Russia in case of Syria became extremely sharp, and the fact is that Moscow, even being right about some things, is not able to concur “Western truth”, because its media sources (Russia Today, Sputnik, etc.) are not influential enough. In avoiding local (like in Vietnam or Afghanistan in the 20th century) or a full-scale war with America Russia is much more successful, demonstrating patience and responsibility. Still, it is not the main challenge for it.

The main question: “If Russia has an exit strategy in Syria?”. Moscow develops more or less effectively an inclusive peace process in that country and speaks about restoration of the territorial integrity of Syria⁷. It plays smart, but still, it is unclear, if there is a long-term Middle East strategy in Kremlin. Paradoxically, the final result, in this case, may be less important than the process itself. In other words, if it is possible to bring Syria back to its 2011 situation – good, if not – good enough, because being inside the Syrian conflict means being inside the Middle East politics, what will keep Russia in the high-stakes game with the United States and will further maintain its influence in the region (just like in case of the American presence in Afghanistan, where Washington is not able to destroy Taliban, but saves its political and military position in the strategic geopolitical point).

Of course, there is a question of cost then. Up to now Russia’s campaign in Syria was successful in terms of cost-benefit relations, but its further long-time participation in the conflict will inevitably require more human and financial resources. Is the Russian economy ready for that? Some experts think, it is not. Others say that you will never be fully ready for a fight, but if you do not get in when necessary, you will lose for sure. Russia made a choice to become a “Big State” with global interests again. This status has its price. It seems that Putin is ready to pay that price and believes that this mission is possible for the Russian economy despite Western sanctions. We will see, who is right, but history shows that there was no price for Russia(ns), when they wanted to win.

⁶ T. Hains, *Nikki Haley: Russia Is “Involved With All The Wrong Actors” Around The World*, *Realclearpolitics.com*, 15.04.2018, <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/04/15/nikki_haley_russia_is_involved_with_all_the_wrong_actors.html> (28.05.2018).

⁷ T. Qiblawi, *All ‘foreign forces’ to leave Syria, Putin tells Assad*, *CNN*, 18.05.2018, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/18/middleeast/assad-putin-intl/index.html>> (29.05.2018).

Military lessons

Russian diplomacy did a great job in the Middle East, but the Russian military did even more – for Syria, for Russia and for itself⁸. Syrian conflict proved some traditional military laws, broke some myths and presented some new war approaches.

First of all, the crucial role of the air force in modern warfare was demonstrated once again. When Russian jets and helicopters arrived, the situation changed dramatically in favour of Assad. At the same time, drones showed their importance – first of all as an intelligence tool together with space intelligence instruments. On the other hand, Russia still lacks powerful attack drones, which could make its air attacks cheaper, but works hard to create them⁹.

In the context of Russian-American competition in the air of Syria, air defence system S-400 together with the systems of radio-electronic warfare became a significant factor of deterrence of Western aviation, and Russian air defence complex “Pantsir” showed its power in a real fight with terrorists’ drones. Finally, modern technological warfare is unimaginable without “smart weaponry”. Russia successfully used in Syria different types of cruise missiles, launched from ships, submarines and jets (for example, “Kalibr” from the Caspian Sea), and it means that now it belongs to the club of states, which can fight last generation war.

It is clear that the latter becomes more and more technological, but man’s role (primarily – of special forces, especially snipers) is still dominant – if you want to win, only man to man fight can guarantee a victory. That is why Russian special operations forces work together with the Russian air force, helping it to detect and destroy its targets, and take part in direct battles with terrorists. Besides, Russia unofficially uses private military companies in Syria (for example, “Wagner group”¹⁰), which are supposed to be controlled by Russian military commanders and do the “dirtiest work” in that war – also because Syrian army is still too weak for the fast large-scale operations. On the other hand, Russia invested a lot in its rebuilding, and it became much more powerful and efficient. It means that Russian military advisers are capable

⁸ W. Baraniec, *Naczelnik Giensztaba Woorużonnych sił Rossii gienieral armii Walerij Gierasimow: „My pierielomili chriebiet udarnym silam tierrorizma”*, „Komsomolskaja prawda”, 27.12.2017, <<https://www.kompravda.eu/daily/26775/3808693/>> (29.05.2018).

⁹ *W Rossii sozdadut bojewyje biespilotniki wiesom do 15 tonn*, „Rossijskaja gazieta”, 14.11.2017, <<https://rg.ru/2017/11/14/v-rossii-sozdadut-boevye-bespilotniki-vesom-do-15-tonn.html>> (29.05.2018).

¹⁰ L. Peter, *Syria war: Who are Russia’s shadowy Wagner mercenaries?* BBC, 23.02.2018, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43167697>> (29.05.2018).

to teach and motivate even the weakest soldiers, and therefore, there is no surprise that they already appeared in African states.

Next point is that the Syrian war destroyed the popular military myth that tanks and artillery are “dinosaurs” in contemporary military conflicts. An example of the first war in Chechnya (New Year attack of Grozny) is usually used to show that tanks cannot be used in the cities. But this is just an example of how tanks should not be used in the cities. In Syria, they proved their importance, especially T-90 (and it would be interesting to see T-14 “Armata” there). At the same time, it is clear that they need to be supported by troops and support machines. So, in Russia tanks now have two devastating “friends” – tank support machine called “Terminator”¹¹ and small unmanned tank “Uran-9”¹², which will make fights in the cities and other areas even more effective. Artillery (both barrel and rocket one) also is not “dead” in the modern battlefield (especially in the conditions of Syrian deserts). For instance, such Russian systems as “Buratino” and “Solncepiok” became a real nightmare for terrorists in Syria.

The latter on their side create the self-made mechanisms, comparable to big mine-throwers, which use gas balloons with many metal pieces in order to achieve bigger damage. And this is not the only “innovation” of regime opponents: for Syrian army and even for Russian special forces it is very difficult to destroy the so-called jihad-vehicles (simple jeeps or armoured vehicles with suicide fanatic inside), when often there are just several seconds to see it and just one shot to stop it. Besides, jeeps with machine-gun or mine-thrower on their board, which combine mobility and a rather big firepower, became one of the most significant weapons in the Syrian war. Reacting to that, Russia improves its armoured vehicles, such as “Tigr”, “Volk”, “Medved”, “Taifun” and others¹³.

The last but not the least moment, related to Russian military lessons in Syria, is about training. Taking part in the Syrian conflict, Russia tested its logistics capabilities and new weapons (for example, “Kalibr” cruise missiles and SU-34, SU-35 and SU-57 jets), which is useful for their modernization and trade perspectives. Also, it trained in real war its younger soldiers (especially pilots, special operations forces and private military companies) and high-level officers, who could improve their knowledge about fighting in the cities (effective tactics of surrounding some territory, its separation to smaller pieces

¹¹ *Ekspiert o nowom woorużenii armii RF: „Tierminator” probjot lubuju broniu*, „RIA NOWOSTI”, 20.03.2018, <https://ria.ru/radio_brief/20180320/1516810188.html> (29.05.2018).

¹² *Ispytanija robota-zaszczitnika sniali na widieo*, Lenta.ru, 06.05.2018, <<https://lenta.ru/news/2018/05/06/uran9/>> (29.05.2018).

¹³ For example: *Tanki na kolosach. Samyje woorużonnyje bronieawtomobili Rossii*, „RIA NOWOSTI”, 29.05.2018, <https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20180529/1521556363.html> (29.05.2018).

and destruction of that pieces became evident). Finally, the Russian Navy found itself in the Mediterranean Sea and is not going to leave.

To sum up, in Syria the Russian Army proved that the talks about its revival are true. At the same time, it saw its weaknesses, but only to eliminate them and become even stronger. Good news for the West is that Russians “showed their cards” in many spheres, and now Western military planners know better, how to respond to Russian challenge.

Conclusion

To make a long story short, interference in the Syrian conflict was important for Russia in political and military terms. Politically it helped Moscow to strengthen its position in geopolitical dialogue with the West (not to speak about the influence in the Middle East), which cannot ignore Russia anymore. The final price of that victory is as unclear, as the perspective of the Syrian war, but it seems that Putin and his supporters are ready for a long game. At the same time, the Russian military demonstrated its growing strength in Syria and learned a lot of useful lessons (logistics, a test of new weaponry, training of soldiers and officers, etc.), which will help it to become even more powerful. The task of the United States and Europe is to learn their own lessons of the Russian campaign in Syria in order to make the right political and military decisions on further relations with Moscow.

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