

# SECURITY INSIGHTS



## *The Impacts of the Syrian Intervention on Russian Strategic Culture*

*By Pavel K. Baev*

### *Executive Summary*

Russian political leadership and military command have gained much experience from launching and waging the military intervention into the Syrian war and tend to see this experiment in projecting power as successful. The political and military lessons learned in this enterprise are quite different, so the transformation of Russian strategic culture driven by this learning is far from coherent. The most significant discrepancies are:

- The Kremlin is preoccupied with the goal of suppressing revolutions by military force, and the military seek to exploit this obsession for modernizing strategic nuclear forces, which should deter the West from manipulating the threat of revolutions.
- The political leadership seeks to gain freedom of maneuver in the international arena by cultivating multiple networks, but the military leadership needs to build reliable alliances and to distinguish between friends and foes in local wars.
- Policy-makers have concluded that the risks of intervening in various conflicts are not that great and can be further minimized by using deniable unconventional means, but the military sees the limits of their capabilities and are cautious about employing maverick mercenaries.
- President Putin is keen to make regional conflict an agenda item in the high-level dialogue with the United States, but the military see the superior U.S. capabilities for deploying forces and firepower as a major risk factor in their operations.

### *Introduction*

The impact of the Syrian intervention on the transformation of the Russian strategic culture is greater than the limited scale of this endeavor would suggest, and it keeps growing. This is partly the result of the fast and far from coherent changes in this culture caused by the eruption of the conflict with Ukraine and the escalation of the confrontation with the West. In this new and acutely challenging geopolitical environment, the political decision to launch the intervention into the Syrian civil war in September 2015 was driven by so many different goals that it is possible to describe it as over-determined. Some of these goals (such as the establishment of

meaningful cooperation with the U.S. and the EU on managing the war) never materialized, but other goals appeared instead (such as the development of a triangular cooperation with Turkey and Iran), therefore the political profile of this high-risk exercise in projecting power far beyond the borders of the Russian Federation has been fluid but invariably very high.

This heavy political load has demanded priority attention from the military command, who must secure continuing success of this difficult engagement while persistently attempting to boost the significance of this operation for the Armed Forces. Turning Syria into a testing ground for new weapons systems was one way to ensure such significance and establishing an “academy” of sorts in the middle of the conflict, where many Army and Air-Space Force commanders could gain combat experience, was another. Much effort was directed toward generalizing the lessons learned in the very particular battles and maneuvers in Syria and developing a set of propositions about a “new generation” war.<sup>1</sup> Some of these propositions—like the idea that the U.S. is executing a “Trojan horse” strategy in such wars—may appear far off target, but it is clear that the top brass have encountered, and dealt successfully with, challenges very different from their previous experiences in fighting local wars in the post-Soviet era.<sup>2</sup>

Military lessons learned in Syria are inevitably different from the political conclusions, provisional as both are. What is striking, however, is the scope of this difference, which signifies profoundly dissimilar inputs from the political leadership and the high command on the transformation of Russian strategic culture. This analysis will examine the divergence between political and military takeaways from the Syrian intervention.

### *Counter-Revolution, Counter-Insurgency, and Deterrence*

One of the strongest motivations for the Kremlin in the opaque decision-making on using military force in Syria appeared to be the desire to confront forcefully the threat of revolution, which was perceived as a major challenge to the durability of the existing regime in Russia. President Putin positioned himself as a champion in the global struggle against the chaos of the “color revolutions.” In autumn 2015, Syria was seen as the decisive battleground, where the tide of these uprisings could have been turned back. Whatever the shortcomings of this self-serving stance, the series of uprisings known as the “Arab Spring” was indeed interrupted (until the public protests forced Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir to relinquish their grasp on power in Algeria and Sudan, respectively, in 2019), and the resonance of the “Euromaidan” in Ukraine was also suppressed, at least until the April 2018 “Velvet Revolution” in Armenia.<sup>3</sup> Despite the latter surprise, Putin gained confidence in the conclusion that determined application of military force can defeat any U.S.-instigated explosion of street protests.

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<sup>1</sup> Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff, used this term in the presentation at the 2018 annual conference in the Academy of Military Sciences; Oleg Falichev, “Горячие точки науки Генштаб обозначил ученым плацдармы и рубежи” [Hot Spots in Military Science], *Военно-Промышленны Кuryer*, March 27, 2018, <https://vpk-news.ru/articles/41870>.

<sup>2</sup> In Gerasimov’s interpretation, the “Trojan horse” strategy involves a combination of long-range high-precision strikes and manipulation of opposition in the target country; Leonid Bershidsky, “What Scares Russia’s Generals the Most? Russians,” *Bloomberg*, March 4, 2019 <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-03-04/it-s-not-the-pentagon-russia-s-military-fears-it-s-russians>.

<sup>3</sup> My analysis of the latter case is in Pavel Baev, “What made Russia indifferent to the revolution in Armenia,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 104, July 2018, 20-24.

The high command planned and executed the Syrian intervention not as a counter-revolutionary enterprise but as a conventional operation against an insurgency that controlled significant territory. The initial setting was not that different from the Second Chechen War (1999-2003). The General Staff revised its opinion that such wars could not be won primarily from the air and concluded that indiscriminate strikes produced not just “collateral damage” (which needs to be camouflaged by means of propaganda) but also demoralizing impact on local support for the rebels. The assumptions about the capacity for projecting power were tested and the requirements for increasing the airlift and sealift capabilities were detailed. These requirements were, however, left mostly unaddressed in the 2027 State Armament Program (SAP), finalized in early 2018.<sup>4</sup>

The decision-making on this SAP was heavily influenced by competition of various industrial lobbies, but the neglect of the requirements needed in long-distance rapid-deployment capabilities was quite possibly determined by the divergence of military and political assessments of the threat of revolutions. For the Kremlin, the main focus in this threat was domestic; the newly-created National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) was supposed to be the main response to such challenges.<sup>5</sup> The military command engaged in some theorizing defining the “color revolutions” as a new form of warfare in the “hybrid wars,” but did not really aim at developing capabilities for prevailing in such combat operations.<sup>6</sup> What they prioritized instead was the modernization of nuclear capabilities in such a way that the nuclear deterrence strategy would become applicable to revolutionary situations.

The key proposition in this stretch of an old strategic idea is that the main driver of revolutions is U.S. sponsorship and manipulation. Putin is always ready to subscribe to this attribution with no reservations. Modernization of Russia’s nuclear arsenal and a strong emphasis on making it into a usable instrument of policy is supposed to lead the U.S. leadership to the conclusion that Russia is too dangerous to pushing into chaotic “regime change.” Moreover, they hope that to place added emphasis on the risks of unpredictable pro-active moves by the Kremlin should it face a crisis endangering its grasp on power. Putin’s emphatic presentation of new weapon systems in the 2018 address to the Federal Assembly was aimed at convincing the Trump administration of the importance of opening new high-level dialogue with Moscow on matters of strategic stability. The expectations for asserting Russia’s right to be treated “as equal” in such a dialogue were disappointed, but Moscow noted that the U.S. refrained from any interference in the Armenian revolution.<sup>7</sup> Putin therefore reinforced the emphasis on the “wonder-missiles” in the 2019 address to the Federal Assembly, despite the failure in arms control talks. Overall, it is remarkable that the flawed strategic assessment of the external drivers of the threat of revolutions

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<sup>4</sup> On the problems with shipbuilding, see David Axe, “That ‘Sinking’ Feeling: Russia’s Navy Has a Serious Problem,” *National Interest*, December 6, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/sinking-feeling-russias-navy-has-serious-problem-38017>.

<sup>5</sup> On this new armed force, see Mark Galeotti, “National Guard: the watchdog that could break the leash,” *Raam-op-Rusland*, August 14, 2017, <https://raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/militair-beleid/677-national-guard-the-watchdog-that-could-break-the-leash>.

<sup>6</sup> This reluctance is identified in Aleksandr Golts, “Росгвардия подминает Генштаб” [Rosgvardiya Prevails over General Staff], *New Times* (in Russian), June 5, 2017, <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/116432>.

<sup>7</sup> This lack of pro-Western dynamics is emphasized in Sergei Markedonov, “Почему в Армении удалась бархатная революция” [Why the Velvet Revolution Succeeded in Armenia], *Commentary* (in Russian), Carnegie Moscow Center, April 23, 2018, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76157>.

has resulted in a massive build-up of military assets (nuclear weapons) entirely useless for countering this threat at the expense of capabilities (long-distance mobility) necessary for engagement in revolutionary situations in Russia's extended neighborhood.

### *Building Alliances and Cultivating Networks*

In the decision-making about launching an intervention in Syria, a major issue was cooperation with regional and global partners because the limited scope of Russian operation necessitated joint efforts with other forces. This alliance-building has evolved in the course of the nearly four year-long engagement, but the military need to developing reliable interactions on the ground has always been different from the political goals of turning the intervention into a tool for advancing Russian influence in the Middle East.

For the military, the necessary main partner is Iran, since the safety of Russian bases and convoys could only be ensured by close ties with pro-Iranian militias. The division of labor with Iran in building combat-capable units in the disorganized Syrian army has worked perhaps not entirely as Russian advisors would prefer, as even the Russian-trained Fourth Corps in the Latakia province includes distinctly pro-Iranian units.<sup>8</sup> From a political perspective, the partnership with Iran must remain limited in order not to jeopardize networking with such important states as Israel and Saudi Arabia. This political ambivalence resulted in Iran cancelling the agreement for use of Hamadan Airbase by Russian Air-Space forces.<sup>9</sup> Russian commanders need full combat cooperation with Iranian counterparts for the planned offensive on the rebel-held Idlib province, while Russian leadership is not altogether comfortable with the prospect of an Iranian base near Latakia even though it is in accordance with the agreement to expand cooperation, which the al-Assad regime signed with Iran in mid-2018.<sup>10</sup>

This discord between the military and the political guidelines can be seen particularly clearly in relations with Israel, which seeks to derail Russian-Iranian cooperation.<sup>11</sup> President Putin highly values his personal rapport with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and seeks to downplay disagreements on Iran's role in Syria. For the Russian command, the recurrent Israeli air strikes on targets in Syria are a direct threat, which materialized in the destruction of Il-20M surveillance aircraft by Syrian "friendly fire" in September 2018. Putin tried to defuse the incident referring to a "chain of tragic circumstances," but the top brass persisted in blaming Israel, even after General Amikam Norkin, the commander of Israeli Air Force, traveled to

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<sup>8</sup> Aleksei Khlebnikov, "Развитие сирийских вооруженных сил: основные тенденции и проблемы" [Development of the Syrian Armed Forces: Main Trends and Problems], *Analytics & Commentary* (in Russian), Russian International Affairs Council, December 6, 2018, [https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/razvitie-siriyskikh-vooruzhennykh-sil-osnovnye-tendentsii-i-problemy/?sphrase\\_id=29690358](https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/razvitie-siriyskikh-vooruzhennykh-sil-osnovnye-tendentsii-i-problemy/?sphrase_id=29690358).

<sup>9</sup> Anna Barnard and Andrew E. Kramer, "Iran Revokes Russia's Use of Air Base, Saying Moscow 'Betrayed Trust'," *New York Times*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/world/middleeast/iran-russia-syria.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Igor Subbotin, "Иран может потеснить базы РФ в Сирии: Тегеран создает военный объект между Хмеймимом и Тартусом" [Iran may crowd out Russian bases in Syria], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 26, 2019, [http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-05-26/1\\_7582\\_syria.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-05-26/1_7582_syria.html).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Segall, "The Rocky Marriage of Convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, January 29, 2019, <http://jcpa.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria>.

Moscow and presented all the data.<sup>12</sup> Remarkably, this hard line prevailed and Putin had to adjust his discourse and agree on deploying additional S-300 surface-to-air missiles in Syria.<sup>13</sup> By mid-2019, the political dialogue had been restored, but Russian control over the upgraded Syrian air defense system involves a high risk of a direct clash between Israeli and Russian forces.<sup>14</sup>

Turkey is another regional actor on which Russian political and military perspectives differ significantly. Putin maintains a close personal connection with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and is eager to upgrade “strategic partnership” with Turkey, particularly in the energy sector. For the military, Turkey is a difficult and even treacherous counter-part, which effectively blocks the long-planned offensive on Idlib.<sup>15</sup> The so-called “Astana format” of talks on managing the Syrian war by joint efforts of Russia, Turkey, and Iran may not be that productive, but it serves the purpose of legitimizing the al-Assad regime as the apparent winner in the protracted war. It is clear, however, that in this unstable “triangle,” Turkey is a major political asset for Russia, while the top brass prioritizes the “brotherhood-in-arms” with Iran.

Interactions with the U.S. in Syria are of crucial importance for Russia, however both political and military perceptions and experiences are strikingly incoherent. The Kremlin has been trying to make interactions with Syria into a major agenda item for the high-level dialogue with the White House, but at the same time the Kremlin positions Russia as the firm opponent of U.S. policy in this war zone. The Russian high command has established a “de-conflicting mechanism” for avoiding direct clashes with U.S. forces, but puts a lot of effort into building defenses against air strikes for its bases. The high-level discussions have remained fruitless, but the experimental “de-confliction” has proven to be workable.<sup>16</sup> Russian diplomacy is looking for opportunities created by Trump’s decision (as yet, not implemented) to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, and Russian commanders are rather impressed with the demonstrated U.S. capacity for concentrating massive fire-power in a local clash.<sup>17</sup> The defeat of ISIS eliminated a common enemy for Russia and the United States, so the number of items on the agenda for possible political talks has shrunk, but the risk of a direct military encounter escalating into a full-blown air-naval battle remains high, particularly in the context of U.S. and Israeli pressure on Iran.

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<sup>12</sup> Pavel K. Baev, “Putin’s anti-Israeli ‘Surge’ in Syria,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no.141 (October 9, 2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/putins-anti-israeli-surge-in-syria>.

<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Muhin, “Комплексы С-300 не обезопасят группировку РФ в Сирии Тегеран намерен размещать свои военные объекты вблизи российских баз и средств ПВО” [The S-300 complex will not make the Russian grouping in Syria safe], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, September 25, 2018, [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2018-09-25/1\\_2\\_7318\\_pvo.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2018-09-25/1_2_7318_pvo.html).

<sup>14</sup> Michael Peck, “Middle East Nightmare: Could Israeli Strikes in Syria Trigger War with Russia?,” *National Interest*, April 6, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/middle-east-nightmare-could-israeli-strikes-syria-trigger-war-russia-51082>.

<sup>15</sup> Aleksandr Sharkovsky, “Россия и Турция не могут поделить Идлиб” [Russia and Turkey cannot divide Idlib], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 30, 2019, [http://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-05-30/2\\_7587\\_syria.html](http://www.ng.ru/armies/2019-05-30/2_7587_syria.html).

<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Hamilton, “Russian and American De-Confliction Efforts in Syria: What’s the Endgame in the Civil War?,” *Russia Foreign Policy Papers*, FPRI, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Hamilton2018.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Kimberly Marten, “The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir al-Zour,” *War on the Rocks*, July 5, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour>.

Generally, Russian political intrigues in the Middle East aim at engaging with various parties without committing to a cause, while the military intervention in Syria constitutes a heavy commitment that requires the identification of friends and foes.

### *Experimenting with Unconventional Means*

Even the basic strategic plan for the Syrian intervention, with the key role of airpower, is quite untraditional for the Russian power-projecting policy. Many other unconventional elements have been added to this plan, so that the term “hybrid warfare” has gained much traction.<sup>18</sup> What is relevant here is the difference between political and military priorities in mixing elements of “hybridity.”

In the political plane, a major innovation is pro-active information warfare aimed at countering Western criticism of the intervention as an indiscriminate bombing campaign in support of the outlawed al-Assad regime. In the domestic arena, the key aim of the propaganda offensive is to sustain public support for this protracted engagement by downplaying its costs. The first aim determines the prevalence of the anti-terrorism discourse in justifying the intervention, while the second underpins Putin’s recurrent statements on partial withdrawal of Russian forces made possible by achieving a “victory.” For the military, these “withdrawals” were quite unhelpful for the implementation of the plans for consolidating the presence and building high-capacity naval and air bases. Their information warfare is aimed at advertising the high-tech components of the intervention (while most of combat tasks are performed by such workhorses as the Su-24 and Su-25 aircraft) and also at covering up the “brotherhood-in-arms” with Iran. The high intensity of information warfare leads to serious over-reaction to the setbacks (such as the shoot-down of Russian warplanes by Turkey in November 2015 and by Syrian friendly fire in September 2018) that undercut the propaganda narrative.

Perhaps the most controversial of all “hybrid” features of the Syrian intervention is the employment of the quasi-private military units (often labelled as the “Wagner group”), which has quickly evolved into a prominent innovation in Russian strategic culture.<sup>19</sup> Russian military intelligence (GRU) can claim credit for inventing this instrument by recruiting and training several groups of mercenaries, though it certainly continues to deny their role in this, not least because such activities are illegal in Russia. The military command would have preferred to use far more reliable units of special forces or airborne troops, but it had to follow the political instructions on limiting the number of “boots on the ground” and minimizing casualties, so the bands of mercenaries became a disposable substitute for regular troops. These “Wagners” performed key combat tasks in several battles, including the capture of Palmyra, with only minimal exposure, but they gained unexpected “fame” after the disastrous attack on a U.S. special forces position to the east of Deir al-Zour in February 2018.<sup>20</sup> Quite probably, that escapade was launched outside the military chain of command. Afterwards, the Russian top brass reduced its reliance on maverick mercenaries, using instead newly-created units designated as

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<sup>18</sup> An interesting Chinese interpretation is Yimin Zhou, “A Double-Edged Sword: Russia’s Hybrid Warfare in Syria,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (April 27, 2019): 246-261.

<sup>19</sup> Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s Use of Semi-state Security Forces: The Case of the Wagner Group,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (March 26, 2019): 181-204.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Hauer, “Russia’s Mercenary Debacle in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-02-26/russias-mercenary-debacle-syria>.

“military police.”<sup>21</sup> The political leadership, to the contrary, found high value in using the private military contractors as an instrument of foreign policy from the Central African Republic to Libya to Venezuela.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, for the military command, various unconventional means are useful supplements for the deployment of forces in combat operations, while for the policy-makers, cyber-trolls, “Wagners,” and other hired malefactors have become key means of waging deniable battles in the new confrontation with the West.

### *Conclusions*

The mutating war in Syria is by no means over, but both the Russian leadership and top brass are keen to present the high-risk intervention as a decisive success and to utilize the experience gained for new exercises in projecting power. The Kremlin has learned that Western condemnation does not account for much (providing that Russia can build a coalition of willing authoritarian regimes) and that risks can be minimized by employing various unconventional means. The military command tends to see the protracted violent calamity in Syria as a model of a “new generation” of wars and proceeds with modernizing Russian forces accordingly. From the military perspective, the old-fashioned means and methods of warfare are quite sufficient for achieving results on the ground, but deployment of high-tech weapon systems is necessary for deterring U.S. interference in Russian operations.

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Not-So-Soft Power: Russian Military Police in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, October 2, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/not-so-soft-power-russias-military-police-in-syria>.

<sup>22</sup> Sergei Sukhankin, “War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Military Contractors Pursue Moscow’s Interests,” *War by Other Means*, Jamestown Foundation, March 20, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-ideology-how-russian-private-military-contractors-pursue-moscows-interests>.

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