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Russia's game in Syria

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For the past month we have seen an increasing Russian military presence in Syria, as well as an increase in Russian supplies of weapons and equipment to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad over the last few months. These actions have been undertaken in support of the Kremlin's current diplomatic offensive, which culminated in the announcement on 28 September by President Vladimir Putin at the anniversary session of the UN General Assembly in New York of his offer concerning Syria.

The Kremlin's overall aim is to use the crisis caused by the Syrian civil war to overcome Russia's limited isolation, imposed by the West in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Ukraine. The spectacular increase in the Russian military presence in Syria is primarily being used to strengthen Assad's weakened regime, and to awaken an illusory expectation in the West that Russia can make a decisive contribution to the eradication of the so-called Islamic State (IS).

The Kremlin's diplomatic offensive

In the past few months, Moscow (including President Putin personally and the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov) has been holding intensive consultations (including at the highest level) with all the regional actors in the Middle East (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Egypt, Jordan), and also the USA and Germany, preparing the ground for the formulation of the offer on Syria, which was ultimately announced in President Vladimir Putin's UN speech. The essence of the Kremlin's offer is the creation of a coalition (with the participation of Russia) in which countries in the region (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan) well as interested Western powers (the United States, France, the United Kingdom) would work with the Assad regime in Syria with the aim of jointly combatting Islamic State.. This would mean the Western powers, Turkey and the Arab countries giving up the policy aimed at overthrowing the Syrian government, in exchange for Russian military assistance in the fight against Islamic State, and perhaps a cosmetic reconstruction of the Assad regime in such a way as to include elements of a 'licensed' opposition.

Military demonstration

In order to credibly back up its offer, Russia has in recent months significantly increased its supply of arms and equipment for the Syrian army. In addition, since the beginning of September, reports have begun to emerge about the appearance in Syria of Russian military personnel (between 1700 and 2000 individuals) and heavy equipment: T-90 tanks, armoured

personnel carriers, artillery systems and surface-to- air missiles. Previously, Russian military presence has been limited to personnel operating the naval repair depot in the port of Tartus electronic intelligence stations, as well as advisors and technicians. The biggest change was the appearance at the airport in Latakia of around 30 combat aircraft (Su-24, Su-25, Su-30) and about a dozen ground-attack helicopters. In addition, on 30 September, the Russian parliament gave the President a mandate to use military force in Syria.

By locating its armed forces in the region, Russia has shown that it will not allow Assad to be defeated militarily. The Russian presence in Syria is also designed to compel the United States to coordinate its air operations in the region with those of Russia (to avoid incidents between Russian and US forces), and to prevent the Americans from providing air support to the Free Syrian Army (whom they are backing) against Assad. The Russian presence is also intended to demonstrate that Russia is still a major regional player which has the military means to fight Islamic State.

The geopolitical bargain

Moscow hopes that the West will accept the Russian offer on Syria, and that it will thus be forced to rebuild relations with Russia and abandon the economic sanctions imposed as a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine. The joint struggle against Islamic terrorism would create a favourable atmosphere for the Western capitals to consent to implementing the provisions of the Minsk agreements, in accordance with Moscow's interpretation and interests. Such thinking, in terms of a 'geopolitical bargain' is characteristic of the Russian elite.

The solidarity of dictators

One of the Kremlin's important aims, often underestimated by analysts, is to save the Assad regime. By so doing, the Kremlin wants to demonstrate that unlike Washington, it does not abandon its political allies and clients, regardless of the methods they use in domestic politics. For the Kremlin, it is also important in principle to prevent another case of an authoritarian regime being removed from power through a grassroots rebellion enjoying external (Western) support. In the Kremlin elite's vision, the uprising against Assad, as well as the whole wave of protests in the Arab world (the 'Arab spring') was the result of the US policy of democratisation (the 'colour revolutions' policy). Because the Russian elite believes that it is, or may become, the object of a similar policy by Washington, it is deeply interested in demonstrating its inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Military bluff?

The Russian military demonstration in Syria is aimed not so much at the liquidation of Islamic State as at saving the Assad regime from military defeat at the hands of IS or other Islamic groups (such as al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army). At the same time, from the propaganda point of view, the appearance of Russian forces in Syria has strengthened the illusion that the West can count on real military help from Moscow in the fight against Islamic radicalism in the Middle East.

From the military point of view, the Russian forces are sufficient to deprive IS of the capacity to continue its offensive against the Syrian army, but they are not sufficient to lead to IS's liquidation and ensure Assad final victory in the civil war. Moreover, the Kremlin has no political interest in the long-term stability of the Middle East. The Syrian crisis diverts the attention and resources of Western capitals from the Ukrainian conflict; it also generates a wave of refugees which destabilises the European Union, and also acts as a magnet for Islamic extremists in the North Caucasus, who instead of joining local underground terrorist groups are pouring into the ranks of IS.

It is highly unlikely that the Kremlin will decide to use ground forces in land-based operations in Syria against IS forces. The trauma of Afghanistan is still alive among the Russian leadership and the wider Russian public. Recent studies by the Levada Centre show that military intervention in Syria is supported by only 14% of the population, and 69% are against it. Despite earlier, more ambivalent statements on this matter from the president's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, President Putin himself (in an interview for PBS and CBS) ruled out any such possibility.

The political consequences of the Russian offer

In the short term, Russia's military involvement in Syria strengthens the position of President Assad, and also makes Moscow a more interesting interlocutor for all the players involved in the Syrian conflict. Also in the short term, the Kremlin has managed to get the US firstly to thaw relations between the two countries' defence ministries and discuss the coordination of military action in Syria, and secondly to acknowledge that Assad can remain in power for a 'transitional period'. However in the long term, it is not clear whether, given their fundamental differences as to the causes of the crisis, Washington and Moscow will be able to find a common formula to resolve it. So it seems that the Russian military intervention will only lead to the deepening and extension of the Syrian civil war, and not to its conclusion.

It is also doubtful that the Kremlin will manage to convince Western capitals with its concept of a geopolitical deal of 'Syria for Ukraine', even in the form of an informal and tacit mutual understanding. Such a 'compromise', as desired by the Kremlin, is politically and morally unacceptable for Western elites and public opinion, especially in the face of the deep crisis of confidence in relations with Russia. However, it will undoubtedly strengthen the position of those in the West who support a new 'reset' with Moscow and advocate the lifting of the Western sanctions against Russia.

In the Middle East the consequences for Russia will be ambiguous. On the one hand, its demonstration of its readiness to defend its client will improve its popularity in authoritarian-run countries. On the other hand, it is inconceivable that Moscow will manage to persuade Turkey and Saudi Arabia to withdraw their support for anti-Assad forces in Syria; and its military involvement on the side of Assad could seriously complicate its previously good relationship with Ankara.