

Russian intervention in Syria: tactical successes and the spectre of a strategic deadlock

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President Vladimir Putin received Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the Kremlin on 21 October. This was Assad's first foreign trip since 2011. Meanwhile, Russian air forces continued air raids in Syria which they began on 30 September. Their targets are mostly opposition groupings in western and north-western Syria, and not Islamic State, as the Russian mass media is claiming. In parallel to this, Russian diplomacy has been engaged in intense consultations on Syria: for example, the Russian minister of foreign affairs took part in a meeting with the US Secretary of State, the foreign ministers of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and the European Union's head of diplomacy on 23 October. Earlier, on 20 October, the Russian Ministry of Defence signed a memorandum with the US Department of Defence on avoiding incidents between the air forces of Russia and the anti-terrorist coalition in Syrian airspace.

Commentary

- The Russian operation in Syria has achieved a number of goals: it has helped to bolster Syrian government troops; it has demonstrated that Russia will not allow Assad to lose the civil war; it has restricted the freedom of operation for the US Air Force and the anti-terrorist coalition led by Washington in Syrian airspace, and has guaranteed Russia the position of indispensable interlocutor for the USA and regional actors, one without whose participation and consent it will be impossible to resolve the crisis in Syria. The Russian media are presenting the operation as proof that Russia has regained global superpower status (this is the first Russian military intervention outside the post-Soviet area). As a result, Vladimir Putin has won record-high approval ratings, reaching 90% (WCIOM's survey of 17–18 October).
- At present, the Kremlin is seeking a diplomatic formula that would keep President Assad in power while providing Western capitals with a face saving cover for the failure of their Syrian strategy. According to this formula, proposed by Moscow and backed by Teheran, the moderate Syrian opposition should join Assad in fighting the Islamic State in exchange for the promise of a "process of political reform" that would presumably result in Assad and his supporters retaining the dominant position in a superficially reformed political system. Assad's declarations in Moscow that he is ready to amend the constitution and schedule a new election and the Russian offers addressed to the anti-

Assad opposition to join the government in its struggle against Islamic State are all intended to serve this purpose.

- However, it appears that the Russian intervention is unlikely to bring about a major breakthrough in the civil war. Nor will it force the anti-Assad opposition, Washington, Riyadh and Ankara to accept these solutions. Since the Kremlin is unable to significantly increase its military engagement in Syria – since the memory of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan lives on – the Russian intervention may lead to a political and military deadlock in the longer term. The Kremlin may thus soon face a similar problem as it has had with the intervention in the Donbass: how to conceal the fact that its spectacular but nevertheless merely tactical successes have failed to deliver the strategic victory, i.e. the normalisation of relations with the West on its own terms.