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Russian losses near Deir ez-Zor – a problem for the Kremlin

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At night between 7 and 8 February, US forces carried out airstrikes on columns of pro-Assad troops, including a group of Russian soldiers from the so-called private military company Wagner Group, near Deir ez-Zor. This was their response to Russian attempts to seize control of a local base of the Syrian Democratic Forces (an armed Syrian opposition group, mainly consisting of Kurds, backed by the USA) and probably to take possession of a local oil and gas production field. It is believed that dozens of Russians were killed at the spot during the US airstrikes (although it is impossible to determine the precise death toll), which makes it the most serious Russian-US incident of this type since the 1970s.

The Russian government views this incident as a political problem in two aspects – the domestic and international – because it undermines the image of Russia as a winner in the conflict in Syria which is currently establishing peace there while withdrawing its armed forces. This also creates the risk of the potential escalation of the Russian-US conflict which the Russian side has been recently trying to soften. This is the reason why Moscow has thus far been trying very hard to pass over this incident in silence or downplay it despite criticism from a section of public opinion. Further in its response, the Kremlin is likely to employ a restrained tactic, hoping to 'wait out the problem' and avoid escalating it.

Russian mercenaries in Syria

The main element of Russia's military engagement in Syria are air and missile attacks (at the peak around 80 Russian aircraft and helicopters were deployed in Syria and periodically in Iran, and missile attacks were launched from ships operating in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas). They have had a great impact on the character and the course of the conflict (reversing the military situation for the benefit of Assad's army). The core Russian land troops present in Syria is the grouping of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation consisting of at least 4,000 soldiers, while in the peak period up to 10,000 soldiers and marines were engaged simultaneously. By the end of 2017, over 48,000 Russian soldiers had taken part in the operation since it began on 30 September 2015. Another very important role has also been played by Russian advisors who have staged and implemented at least part of the Syrian army's offensives and soldiers from secret services (Spetsnaz and reconnaissance brigades of the Ground Troops).

Given the engagement of regular forces, mercenaries from the so-called private military company (Russian abbreviation ChVK) Wagner Group have only been an addition to Russia's military presence in Syria. Around 2,500 ChVK personnel serve in the Syrian army and other pro-Assad military groupings. According to some sources of information, this figure is

provided in the context of the Wagner Group alone. According to various calculations, between 73 and 101 ChVK personnel were killed in Syria until the end of 2017 (it has been claimed on the Internet that the death toll among Russian mercenaries was higher, around 150–200, but this information is impossible to verify). According to strongly contradictory reports, between several and, as suggested by some media, over 300 Russians were killed at the beginning of February near Deir ez-Zor, which gives a picture of the clash as a massacre of the Russian forces.

The Kremlin's tactic: keep quiet by the coffin

The Russian government, being aware of this problem, has been making efforts to downplay and even ignore this incident. The Russian Ministry of Defence has not commented the incident and only confirmed that there were clashes in this area in which Syrians were injured and no (regular) Russian forces were present there. The president's spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, stated that Western media reports concerning Russian losses were propaganda which should not be trusted. Peskov further suggested that some Russian citizens who had visited many countries worldwide might have been killed in Syria. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept repeating the Kremlin's stance but, faced with the facts revealed by journalists, admitted on 15 February that five Russian citizens might have been killed in Syria. Some Russian media published unofficial information reportedly originating from the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation that the death toll reached 13 or 14.

The Kremlin has in fact applied an information blockade with regard to the Deir ez-Zor bombardment. There has been no information about it in the mainstream TV channels, and news agencies have repeated only sparse statements from government representatives. However, news concerning these developments began to spread (from 10 February) via alternative channels: in social media and then (from 13 February) in Russian media (portals and newspapers) independent of the Kremlin. They made references both to reports in Western media and – to an increasing extent – their own information originating, for example, from soldiers from the Wagner Group, the families and friends of those killed, and doctors. The information blockade has thus lost its impermeability.

The Kremlin's problem on the domestic political scene

The deaths of the Russian mercenaries near Deir ez-Zor have undermined the key theses of the official Russian propaganda concerning Syria. Firstly, this has challenged the thesis that the war in Syria and Russia's participation in it are basically over and have ended in a Russian victory. It has also challenged the idea that Russian losses in this war are small and are likely to be lessening (due to the alleged 'withdrawal' of a significant part of the Russian armed forces from Syria). Thirdly, that Russia has political and military dominance in Syria which ensures, for example, that the USA is trying not to antagonise Russia politically and coordinate its military activity with Russian forces.

However, the main political problem for the Kremlin is above all the growing dissatisfaction among a section of the public with the stance adopted by the Russian government in this situation. Comments on Russian social media and the standpoint taken by some of the

media (no public opinion polls regarding this issue have been conducted as yet) suggest that a section of the Russian public are outraged by what has happened. Firstly, this outrage is directed against the USA, especially among those who are more inclined towards nationalism; they insist that the Russian government should take action against the USA (at least politically if not militarily). Secondly – and this is more widespread – this outrage is directed against the Russian government which is being blamed for concealing the truth, downplaying the tragic events, failing to honour those killed (for example, through national mourning) and, especially, for squandering the lives of Russian citizens by sending them on secret military operations abroad without proper security measures being applied. The latter in particular is a potential political problem in the context of the upcoming presidential election scheduled for 18 March; and the Kremlin needs a high turnout and high support for Vladimir Putin during this election, especially given the fact that this issue has already been raised in the Russian election campaign. Grigory Yavlinsky, the candidate for president of the Social Liberal, moderately opposition party Yabloko, demanded on 12 February that President Putin should find out what the Russian death toll was. In turn, on 16 February, the leader of the pseudo-opposition nationalist party LDPR, Vladimir Zhirinovsky (a candidate for president of the Russian Federation) stated in public that "300 Russian families had lost their fathers."

The Kremlin's problem in foreign policy

The bombardment near Deir ez-Zor has made it clear that the Russian intervention in Syria is not over, Russian victory is not preordained, Russia's participation in the war is still serious, and the death toll is growing. It has also proven that the USA is not afraid to risk taking military action in Syria against Russia. All this undermines the image of President Putin as a strong and effective leader who wins wars and brings peace.

The bombardment near Deir ez-Zor can be treated by both a section of the public and government of Russia as an intentional military attack from the USA on Russia which should meet with retaliatory action; this is a problem for the Kremlin in the foreign policy context. This problem is only slightly mollified by the fact that formally the Wagner Group is a private initiative (operating openly, even though serving as a mercenary is a crime under Russian law), and its moves allegedly are not coordinated with the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that the company's leaders are linked to Russian military intelligence (GRU), that it has received technical, logistic and training support from the Russian secret services and that soldiers from the Wagner Group have been used for special operations in Ukraine in Syria; all this makes it an informal part of the Russian law enforcement structures.

The incident took place in a situation where the Russian government – guided on the one hand by some hope of normalising relations with the USA (the Donald Trump administration) to a limited extent, and on the other by the fear of new US sanctions – has been trying very hard to avoid political (let alone military) confrontation with the USA. The Kremlin is aware of the fact that Russia would find it very difficult to win a confrontation of that kind, and its potential political and especially economic costs would be very high. This does not mean that the Kremlin has not become more determined to deal a blow against US interests in Syria.

The Syrian context

The clashes near Deir ez-Zor have weakened the Russian position in the Syrian conflict. The Russian side has been making consistent efforts to build its image as a power which can impose its will in the military and the political dimension. The humiliating losses (especially the overblown death toll of several hundred reported by some of the media) sustained by Russian mercenaries due to the attack by US forces will undermine the reliability of Russia as a deciding arbiter in the conflict in the eyes of the participants of the conflict.

Given the present situation, Moscow's main goal will be to rebuild its tarnished reputation among the participants of the Syrian civil war and to undermine the US position in Syria and the region as much as possible. One temporary solution which it is likely to employ will be to increase the pressure on the Syrian Democratic Forces dominated by Kurds. They are directly supported by US forces in north-eastern Syria (and these forces were engaged in the clashes near Deir ez-Zor) – but the US protection does not extend to the Kurdish exclave of Afrin in north-western Syria, where Turkey is currently conducting its own military operation with informal Russian consent. It was informed on 17 February that Kurds from Afrin had struck a deal on the deployment of government forces in the region (while Kurds are fighting against these forces in the east). Damascus and Ankara are dependent on Russia in this region. By playing them off against each other, Russia is capable of bringing about the liquidation of Afrin as a part of what is really an independent Kurdish para-state, thus escalating frustration among Kurds. According to numerous declarations from Turkey, one consequence of seizing Afrin will also be a Turkish operation targeted against Kurds in the Manbij region (i.e. in the areas where US forces are stationed). If this scenario plays out, this will not only mean a blow to Kurds but would above all create the risk of a Turkish-US clash, which would mean a strategic success for Russia in its policy of undermining the US position and breaking the unity inside NATO.

Another area where Russia has a chance of demonstrating its power is southern Syria, where Israeli-Iranian tension is concentrated – an Iranian drone was shot down over Israel on 10 February, which was followed by massive airstrikes on Iranian targets in Syria at the time of which an Israeli F-16 was shot down. These moves may be treated as a prelude to Israel's open intervention against Iran and its clients in Syria and Lebanon, while the stance taken by Russia will be of key importance for both Israel and Iran. Each of the aforementioned processes – and those that are currently taking place – offers Russia a chance to prove its strong position in the Syrian conflict, while also marginalising the USA in the Syrian and regional conflict (the variant with an Israeli-Iranian conflict) and will result in serious complications of a strategic nature (US-Turkish relations).

Possible developments

In the present situation, the Kremlin is likely to suffer negative consequences if it chooses to react more robustly. Therefore, it will most probably take a wait-and-see stance, responding flexibly to both sentiments in Russia and the stance taken by the US government. This will likely boil down to attempting to 'wait out the problem' (considering the visible decreasing interest of the media in this issue). This may, but does not have to, involve admitting to a

very limited extent that losses have been sustained, possibly expressing the government's solidarity with the families of those killed and paying significant compensation to them, as well as distancing the Russian government and Armed Forces from sharing the responsibility for the death toll, while suggesting – not too ostentatiously – that it is the US side which is to blame for the deaths. Nor can it be ruled out that Russia will respond to the USA with delay and asymmetrically (for example, the Russian secret services might launch a secret operation against the US or its forces in a manner that will be difficult to prove).

It is very likely that the losses sustained by the informal Russian military groups will affect relations between the institutions in charge of state security. The failure of the operation in Syria is a convenient pretext for the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service to make moves to strip the Ministry of Defence (or possibly military intelligence) of control over military companies. One sign of the rivalry is the fact that work on an act that will regulate the functioning of such companies in Russia has been suspended. Vladimir Putin in his official statement in 2012 did not rule out that it would be necessary to make such a move. Since then, the military companies bill has become the subject of a conflict between the FSB and the Ministry of Defence, which have developed competitive versions of the document. The point of dispute is the FSB's proposal to guarantee the right for the FSB to legalise private military activity. If this solution was accepted, this would mean the FSB taking control of the sources of financing of a given company as well as the evaluation of the suitability of candidates for service as part of the counter-intelligence protection of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation.

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Photo credit: Staff Sgt. Vernon Young Jr | United States Air Force