

Week One of the Russian Military Intervention in Syria. Dangerous Times. What Next?

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The speed at which the Russian military operation in Syria was conducted what a [big surprise for the US intelligence community](#) (which I can hardly blame as I was just as surprised myself).

Make no mistake here, the Russian force in Syria is a small one, at least for the time being, and it does not even remotely resemble what the rumors had predicted, but it is especially the manner in which it is being used which is very original: as a type of "[force multiplier](#)" for the Syrian military and a likely cover for the Iranian one. This is a very elegant solution in which a small force achieves a disproportionately big result. This is also a rather dangerous strategy, because it leaves the force very vulnerable, but one which, at least so far, Putin very successfully explained to the Russian people.

[According to the most recent poll](#), 66% of Russian support the airstrikes in Syria while 19% oppose them. Considering the risks involved, these are extremely good numbers. Putin's personal popularity, by the way, is still at a phenomenal 85% (all these figures have a margin of error of 3.4%). Still, these figures indicate to me that the potential for concern and, possibly, disappointment is present. The big advantage that Putin has over any US President is that Russians understand that wars, all wars, have a cost, and they are therefore nowhere as casualty-averse as the people in the USA or Europe. Still, while combat footage taken from UAV is a good start, Putin will have to be able to show something more tangible soon. Hence, probably, the current Syrian army counter-offensive. Still, the current way of triumphalism in Russia makes me nervous.

The reaction in the West, however, has been very negative, especially after the Russian cruise missile attacks (which mark the first time ever that the Russians have used their non-nuclear but strategic forces in a show of force aimed less as Daesh than at the USA).

On October 8th, the US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, declared: 

We have not and will not agree to cooperate with Russia so long as they continue to pursue this misguided strategy. We've seen increasingly unprofessional behavior from Russian forces. They violated Turkish airspace, which as all of us here made clear earlier this week, and strongly affirmed today here in Brussels, is NATO airspace. They've shot cruise missiles from a ship in the Caspian Sea without warning. They've come within just a few miles of one of our unmanned aerial vehicles. They have initiated a joint ground offensive with the Syrian regime, shattering the facade that they're there to fight ISIL.

This will have consequences for Russia itself, which is rightfully fearful of attack upon Russia. And I also expect that in coming days, the Russians will begin to suffer casualties in Syria (Source: <http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/622454/press-conference-by-secretary-carter-at-nato-headquarters-brussels-belgium>)

On the next day, the Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov replied by saying:



Representatives of the Russian Defense Ministry, in their evaluation of the actions of the US military and the various operations they are engaged worldwide, have never sunk down to the level to publicly express the hope for the death of US servicemen or, even less so, of ordinary Americans. Today's announcement by Pentagon chief Ashton Carter, unfortunately clearly illustrates the current level of political culture of some representatives of the US government or, should I say, their level of cynicism towards the rest of the world. I am sure that no US general would ever have allowed himself to express such feelings. (Source: <http://tass.ru/politika/2331242>)

Does that not remind you of something? Does that not sound like a repeat of the threat made by Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief [Prince Bandar bin Sultan's threat](#) to unleash 'Chechen' terror attacks against Russia? At the very least, this is, yet again, a sign that the US controls or, rather, thinks that it controls the Wahabi crazies and can unleash them against any opponent.

Typically, there are two basic ways the West handles any Russian military operation: they are either presented as mass murder and butchery or as gross, primitive and ineffective. [CNN chose the second option and reported](#) that "A number of cruise missiles launched from a Russian ship and aimed at targets in Syria have crashed in Iran, two U.S. officials told CNN Thursday". Both Russia and Iran immediately denied that, as for the State Department and the Pentagon, they have refused to confirm or deny these reports.



Maria Zakarova, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry reacted with disgust to these reports [on her FB account and wrote](#): "I have read the CNN reports claiming that "Russian cruise missiles fell in Iran." I wonder, do they write that out of impotent anger, or what? As for the constant references to "sources" they remind of the channeling of water from the sewer".

Clearly, the Russians are rather disgusted with the rather pathetic US reactions to the Russian military operation. As for US officials, they appear rather clueless as to what do do next.

However, these appearances can be deceiving: this "game" is very far from being over.



As I have written [in a recent column](#), the notion that Russia has established a no-fly zone over Syria is plain false: four SU-30MS, even if backed by six SU-34s are not enough to

establish any kind of no-fly zone. The real mission of these SU-30MSs is to protect the Russian Air Force from any overzealous Turkish or Israeli fighter, not to establish a no-fly zone. In fact, according to the commander of the USAF operation over Syria, the US flies many more sorties than the Russians. What he does not add is that most of these US sorties do not include the release of weapons whereas all the Russian ones do. But, really, this is comparing apples and oranges. The USAF can fly as many sorties as it wants, only the Russian aircraft are operating in close coordination with Syrian and Iranian ground forces.

What worries me most is that people on both sides like to engage in cheap bravado and say things like “the Americans/Russians would never dare to attack a Russian/American aircraft”. This is a very dangerous way of thinking about what is going on because it ignores all the historical evidence for decision-makers making very dumb decisions to try to avoid appearing humiliated by the other side (Ehud Olmert in 2006, immediately comes to mind). The fact that Obama and the USA look totally out-smarted is nice, of course, but also potentially very dangerous.

The good news is that, at least for the time being, neither Russia nor the USA are directly threatening each other, at least not on a military level. The USAF apparently has decided on a 20 miles “avoidance radius” and while the Russians have not made any statements about this, I am pretty sure that they also go out of their way not to interfere with the Americans, much less so threaten them directly. Still, this situation is inherently dangerous.

Since this is a real combat zone and not just some peacetime patrol area, Russian and American aircraft have to use radar modes which are normally associated with a hostile intent: not just scan the skies for any potential enemy, but also actively track any detected aircraft. This is a very delicate situation because once a radar has acquired an aircraft and is actively tracking it all the pilot has to do to attack is press one button. For the pilot in the aircraft being tracked, this is similar to having a gun pointed at you – it makes you very nervous. To make things worse, modern aircraft can actually engage each other without using these radar modes and they can try to hide their radar signals, but that only adds to the tension. It is precisely because the US and Russia are two nuclear powers that it is crucial that neither side count on the other one to “blink first” or play any game of chicken. The politicians can indulge in this kind of nonsense, but I hope that the generals on both sides will do everything in their power to avoid any such situation. Right now, the situation appears to be under control, but it could get worse very fast. Hopefully, the Pentagon and the Russian General Staff will come to an “de-conflicting” agreement soon.

There are numerous reports that Iran is preparing a major intervention in Syria. These reports come from many sources and I consider them credible simply because there is no way that the very limited Russian intervention can really change the time of the war, at least not by itself. Yes, I do insist that the Russian intervention is a very limited one. 12 SU-24M, 12 SU-25SM, 6 SU-34 and 4 SU-30SM are not a big force, not even backed by helicopters and cruise missiles. Yes, the Russian force has been very effective to relieve the pressure on the northwestern front and to allow for a Syrian Army counter-offensive, but that will not, by itself, end the war. For one thing, should things get really ugly, the Daesh crazies can simply repeat what they have already done in the past: cross the border into Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. Furthermore, you cannot hold any ground from the air. For that, “boots on the ground” are needed and Russian boots are not coming – Putin has unambiguously stated that (although he did leave a small door open for a future change of strategy by saying that a ground intervention was not in the “current plans”). Regardless, anything short of a minor or very short intervention would be fantastically hard to sell in

Russia and I therefore still don't believe that it will happen. My bet is on the Iranians. Well, when I say "Iranians" I mean Iranians and their allies, including Hezbollah, but not necessarily in Iranian uniforms.

Chances are, the Iranians and the Syrians will want to keep the magnitude of the Iranian involvement as hidden from view as possible. But, of course, they won't be able to fool the USA, Turkey or Israel for very long, at least not if a large Iranian force is involved.

So the big question for me is this: what will the USA do if (when?) Iran intervenes in Syria?

Chances are that the Iraqis will request the Russian help to defeat Daesh exactly at the moment when the Iranians make their move. If the Russians agree, and it looks like they might, the Russian Air Force will, in fact, be providing air cover for the Iranian forces moving across Iraq towards Syria. My guess is that the Russians will try to get some UNSC Resolution to allow an international intervention in Syria or that, failing that, they will try to get some kind of deal with the USA. But that is going to be awfully hard, as they Neocons will go ballistic if the Iranians actually make a big move into Syria.

Right now the Russian Air Force does not have the resources needed to support an Iranian move into Syria, and that might be the reason for a [reappearance of the rumor about "six MiG-31s" going to Syria](#). I personally have seen no evidence for that, at least not from any halfway decent source, but if that does really happen, then this will become a major game-changer because one thing is certain: MiG-31s will never be used against Daesh or even a few isolated Turkish or Israeli fighters; if the MiG-31s ever really show up in the Syrian skies, their goal will be to keep control of the Syrian airspace and that implies a direct and credible threat against the US and its allies. The same goes for the actual deployment of S-300s. Thank God, we are not there yet. But unless the Syrian Army manages an extremely successful offensive against Daesh, a large Iranian intervention will become very likely. Then things will become very dangerous indeed.

In the meantime, NATO is still busy making big statements about being "[ready to defend Turkey](#)" while McCain declares that the US and Russia are engaged in a "[proxy war](#)". We ought to be grateful for such loud emissions of hot air because, hopefully, as long as the western leaders feel that their empty talk makes them look credible, they will not be tempted to do something truly stupid and dangerous.

These are definitely dangerous times.

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