

Paris, 30th October 2015

Brief

Object : summary of a month's worth of Russian intervention in Syria

Following the brief of the 21st September 2015 on the objectives of the Russian intervention in Syria, this report summarizes the 1 month (30th September-30th October) of the military operations, with regards to 5 key objectives identified in September as being:

1. Combating international jihad.
2. Defending the Russian military presence in the north-west region of the country.
3. Preserving the interests of the Russian industrial and military complex in the region.
4. Influence the internal Russian political scene and mood.
5. Reap the benefits of the return of Russia onto the geopolitical scene.

Has Russia managed to change the shape of the battlefield, the region and international relations as a whole, within a month? Has Russia managed to conduct an “anti-gulf war” in line with Putin’s view of international relations? Can Russia avoid an afghan quagmire?

The Russian *blitzkrieg* conducted in Syria has given the Russian Federation a series of tangible benefits within a very short space of time. However, these successes are still limited in scope and their geopolitical impact remains uncertain. The achievement of the final objectives remains equally uncertain as numerous risks and dangers linger – these are highlighted below.

1. The tactical result: Russia is in the midst of restructuring the Syrian battlefield – at least on the surface.

Russia has orchestrated a **media tour de force** through:

- The resources used (and put on show) in the 3 military branches: 5000 soldiers, 30 or so planes, 2 naval battle groups (in the Caspian and Mediterranean), 50 armored vehicles; 30 helicopters, cruise missiles etc.
- The attack figures as of the 30th of October (according to Kartapolov): 1391 aerial sorties and 1632 sites targeted.

The **operational target zone** has been limited to the western provinces where Russian installations are in danger of being targeted, where the Al-Assad government is at risk of losing a foothold and where the Aleppo-Damascus axis is in danger of being severed: Aleppo, Hama, Homs etc. Daesh’s and al-Nosra’s troops are much greater in number (30 000 to 50 000) than the Russian expeditionary corps.

The **impact of collective representations** is great, as Russia has managed to:

- Change the manner in which the Syrian conflict is read – it is today less a civil war in the wake of the Arab Spring than a duel between Russia and international Jihad.

- Change the status of the Syrian opposition – distinguishing between different “terrorists” is less pronounced.

Note: what advance can the Russian intervention in the field have in February 2016? Elimination of the last pockets of resistance to the Al-Assad regime? The whole of “useful Syria”? The whole of Daesh including Iraq? The risk of dragging the conflict along will then become great.

2. The economic result: Russia is subject to limited budgetary burdens in the short term and will obtain promising commercial propositions in the medium term.

The financial cost of the operation is estimated to be 2.4 million \$ per day, or 3% of the extrapolated Russian effort for an operation until February 2016. **The operation does not drain Russian public resources, for the time being and if the same capacities are observed.**

However, the economic objectives are on track and should be obtained in the medium term:

- Avoid the Libyan scenario where Russia lost an important commercial outlet.
- Conquer new markets: weapons demonstrations (cruise missiles SS-N-30, multirole fighter planes Sukhoi Su-30-SM) send signals to regional and Asian markets (several deals have been announced in the media).
- Armament contracts with Iran have spilled over into the civilian sector: Russia has concluded an agreement for 21 infrastructure projects totaling 25 billion \$ with Iran at the end of October.

Note: in order to prepare for the post-Al-Assad period, the Russian defense industry will continue to supply the Syrian army.

3. Domestic result: prepare the post-Al-Assad period from a strong position and control the domestic internal political scene.

The maintaining in power of Al-Assad is a pressure point more than an objective of warfare in itself. The visit of the Syrian president to Moscow on the 20th of September is ambivalent:

- It manifests an international support at the highest level.
- It underscores the dependency of the Syrian regime on Moscow help and hence, it's weakening.

The Kremlin's communication following the visit (telephone conferences with the regional enemies of Al-Assad) indicates that the Russian president supports the Syrian regime only because he guarantees the historical investments and Russian interests in the country.

To support Al-Assad is less an objective (who would really wish to support such a weakened state) but is a lever of power on the West in order to force them to take into consideration Russian interests.

Note: an ideological frame of reference can be misleading. Russia does not seek to create a “dictators' league”. It supports Al-Assad as a local investment for the long term. The political maneuvering shall be rendered acceptable if guarantees are given to military and economic interests.

On the Russian political scene, the Syrian campaign is useful:

- It reinforces the authority and popularity of the national authorities (70% approval ratings)
- The economic situation and its difficulties take a back-seat (GDP contraction).

The risk of an Afghan scenario, regularly invoked in western media outlets is a journalistic construction:

- Boots on the ground are not comparable (5 000 for 6 months vs 80 000 during 10 years).
- The cause defended (fight against terrorism) is more popular than the defense of the communist regime that has already been discredited in the 1980s.

Note: the signals sent to Russian Muslims (Caucasus, Tartarstan, Moscow) can appear as being a provocation and could trigger domestic terrorism.

4. Geopolitical regional and global result: a successful “anti-Gulf” war?

At a regional level, Russia has managed to:

- Become a trusted ally for all legal but contested regimes in the area, among which Iraq, contrasting with the neo-conservative approach of “regime change”.
- Show the Gulf wars as being irresponsible, by contrast with the operations conducted on behalf of the regimes in place.
- Create close ties, including on an operational level, with Iranian armed forces and benefit from the resurgence of Iran as a major regional player.

Note: will Russia include Iraq in its alliance network? Will Russia be able to share the responsibilities and roles with Iran?

On the international scene, Russia has managed to:

- Change the perception of Russia abroad, by becoming Europe’s rampart against (terrorist) threats, an ally and a lookout post to ensure security in the region, and being seen as a realist power contrasting with the American “sorcerer’s apprentices”.
- Put the Ukrainian conflict on the backseat, as well as the annexation of Crimea, the ongoing fighting in Donbass and the summer’s tensions in the Baltic Sea and in the Arctic.

Note: will the Muslim populations accept in the medium term the interventionism of a “Christian state” in the Middle East? Will Russia change its status from that of being a “nuisance” to that of being a power will the authority to impose global peace and stability?