

Moscow's Syria Campaign

Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy



Dmitry (Dima) ADAMSKY

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Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15—FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00—Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

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Author

Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky is a Professor at the School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy at the IDC Herzliya. His research interests include international security, cultural approach to IR, modern military thought, and American, Russian and Israeli national security policies.

He has published on these topics in *Foreign Affairs*, *Security Studies*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Intelligence and National Security*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Journal of Cold War History*. His books *Operation Kavkaz* (Hebrew) and *The Culture of Military Innovation* (Stanford UP) earned the annual (2006 and 2012) prizes for the best academic works on Israeli security. His book on religion and strategy in Russia is forthcoming with Stanford University Press in 2018.

Abstract

This monograph argues that the Syrian experience may leave a major imprint on Russian strategic thought and operational art. It explores Moscow's Syrian campaign and seeks to answer the following questions: How did the Russian art of strategy manifest itself? How did Moscow design the campaign and then estimate its operational performance, judged against its own ends? Which lessons has the Russian strategic community learned? How might these insights project on Moscow's future strategic behavior? Which strategic trends are more likely than others?

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Introduction

This monograph argues that the Syrian experience may leave a major imprint on Russian strategic thought and operational art. It explores Moscow's Syrian campaign and seeks to answer the following questions: How did the Russian art of strategy manifest itself? How did Moscow design the campaign and then estimate its operational performance? Which lessons has the Russian strategic community learned? How might these insights project on Moscow's future strategic behavior? Which trends are more likely than others?

The monograph addresses these questions in three parts. The first section focuses on the Russian art of strategy and operations in Syria. It discusses Russia's strategic goals, principles and approach, theory of victory and campaign design, desired end state and self-estimate. The second section discusses the lessons learned by the Russian strategic community which can be traced to Russian sources. It focuses on the reconnaissance-strike complex and its segments (intelligence, command and strike capabilities), which is the main leitmotif in the Russian process of learning, and also covers several topics pertaining to the operational art. The third section hypothesizes about possible trends in the Russian art of strategy and operations. It focuses on the issues pertaining to deterrence, the nature of regional alliances, and the emerging status of private military companies.

Three disclaimers are due. First, it is still too early to argue about specific lessons, since the Russian experts themselves are still in the ongoing process of exploration and knowledge development. Second, while the paper is based on open sources, the major part of the process is classified. The reliability of available sources is questionable and their number is still too limited to offer definite arguments. Consequently, the paper offers a preliminary outline of the major themes, which Russian sources emphasize over others. It highlights the main topics of interest of the Russian military brass, theoreticians and experts, but does not seek to outline specific resolutions. Finally, the paper does not assess the actual ability of the Russian strategic community to execute the lessons learned.

Russian Art of Strategy and Operational Art in Syria¹

What does the Syrian campaign teach us about the Russian art of strategy and operations? The following insights regarding Russia's strategic goals, principles and approach, theory of victory and campaign design, desired end state and self-estimate with regard to it, loom large.

Strategic goals

The intervention in Syria demonstrated the traditional holistic Russian approach, as the campaign has promoted several connected goals: international, regional and domestic. Specifically, it aimed to defend and save an embattled ally and secure Russian military-political assets in Syria, to prevent a regime change through replication of a Libyan scenario; to inflict a preventive strike on jihadists, thousands of whom allegedly came from the post-Soviet space (Central Asia and Russian Muslim regions) and were believed to be bringing jihad back to Russia; to divert attention away from Ukraine where Russia has continued to bleed money and soldiers, break the international isolation and possibly soften the sanctions regime; to enhance its regional position, among other things through economic benefits; to position itself domestically and globally as a rising great power and indispensable international actor, claiming a status on par with Washington. Apparently, the desired end state of the operation was stabilization of Syria in a way that ensures preservation of Moscow's presence, interests and regional power projection.

1. This section is based on: D. Adamsky, "Putin's Damascus Steal", *Foreign Affairs*, September 2015, www.foreignaffairs.com; "Putin's Syria Strategy", *Foreign Affairs*, October 2015, foreignaffairs.com; "Putin's Game in Syria", *Foreign Affairs*, April 2016, www.foreignaffairs.com; "Russia and the Next Lebanon War", *Foreign Affairs*, October 2017, www.foreignaffairs.com; "Hahitarvut Harusit Besuria" [Russian Intervention in Syria], *Eshtonot*, November 2016; M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?", *Military Review*, January 2018, www.armyupress.army.mil; P. Malovany and N. Burgin, "Mother Russia Holds the Reigns", *Israel Defense*, 16 February 2018, www.israeldefense.co.il.

Strategic principles

Presumably, the Kremlin realized that overall intervention might become a deadly self-inflicted blow. Apparently, three strategic principles, unwritten and implicit, drove Moscow's regional conduct towards and following the intervention. First, the Kremlin seeks to preserve *controlled tensions* in the region. This enables it to promote its goals through power brokerage in the regional conflicts. Ideally, it seeks to keep political-military confrontations between the parties high enough to sustain the prospects for Moscow's indispensability but not so high that they lead to a counterproductive escalation endangering its regional interests and assets. Consequently, Moscow seeks to act as *mediator and dependence amplifier*. In all regional conflicts Moscow cultivates equal access to all parties—a clear competitive advantage vis-à-vis the U.S. Being at once part of the problem and part of the solution provides it with an ability to escalate or deescalate confrontations. It prefers the actors involved not to be too strong and not too weak, and in any political-military development it seeks to demonstrate to them the limits of their power and their dependence on the Kremlin's brokerage.

Secondly, apparently the Kremlin realized that when the situation demanded an increasing level of military involvement, the biggest danger was overextension. Seeking the golden range between overshooting and undershooting, it adopted the principle of “reasonable sufficiency”—*razumnaia dostatochnost'*.² Applied to the Syrian context, the principle means limiting the scale of military intervention to the minimum possible that would still allow Russia to project influence and promote regional goals. Application of this principle was helpful in preventing Moscow from crossing the culminating point of intervention—the moment after which additional application of forces becomes counterproductive and brings diminishing returns. It should be noted that the quest for reasonable sufficiency occurred not only by design but was also a default option, due to Moscow's objective weaknesses, constraints and limitations in the fields of logistics, supply and maintenance, power-projection capacity, expeditionary warfare, and coalition fighting experience. Moscow, however, kept on sticking to this principle even when the correlation of forces began playing in its favor and when it solidified its combat-logistical stronghold in Syria.

2. The term originated in Soviet strategic thought during the late Cold War and was unrelated to the Middle East. Articulated during the Gorbachev era, it originally meant procuring only the military power necessary to defend against external threat. However, since it illustrates accurately the current Kremlin's approach, this monograph adopts it. One may parallel this principle also with Asian martial arts, judo in particular. The latter involves a mastery of achieving maximum results with minimum effort, a philosophy that clearly aligns with the “reasonable sufficiency” approach.

Finally, in keeping with desire to generate maximum benefits with minimum friction, Moscow has adopted a flexible approach to strategy. Evidence suggests that the Kremlin, not necessarily a chess grandmaster, possesses a systematic method for managing crises and running strategic interactions. The system is not infallible, but even when it acts assertively, it examines its options carefully, is aware of its own limitations and failures, and can learn from them and adapt quickly, changing course in response to dynamic developments. Kofman and Rojansky define this as an ability to execute “emergent” or “lean” strategy, preferring adaptation and a trial-and-error approach over a more dogmatic, and elaborated strategy.³ Although Moscow has not qualified its approach exactly in Kofman’s and Rojansky’s terms, this seems like an analytically useful definition of the Russian conduct. Emergent strategy builds on learning by operational friction and improvisation, which are the best fit for situations of uncertainty, and instability.⁴ Advancing on several vectors simultaneously, the Russian campaign planners repeatedly revisited their basic assumptions, adjusted the course of the operation and the directions of the main strike (*napravlenie glavnogo udara*) in keeping with the developments on the ground. The authoritative nature of the regime ensuring rapid decision-making and decision-execution amplified the effectiveness of this approach to strategy, which naturally resonates with the reasonable sufficiency principle.

Conceptualization of threat

According to the Russian political-military leadership, the armed forces dealt in Syria with a serious operational challenge—not an insignificant cell or group, but a well-organized, coherent, effectively trained and adequately equipped terrorist army, posing an immediate threat to Russia.⁵ Envisioning the adversary not as a terrorist group, but as an “enemy of new formation,” or “hybrid enemy,” was not propaganda but a genuine professional definition. The Head the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (military intelligence, GRU) Igor Korobov saw these “terrorists of new formation” (*terroristy novoj formatsii*) as some sort of “irregular-regular army” with modern weapons, and as comparable, in many

3. M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, “What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?”, *op. cit.*

4. Interestingly enough, this approach, which is outlined by M. Kofman elsewhere, strongly resonates with the traditional Israeli strategic-operational modus operandi bearing the same name and promoting the same logic of an emerging strategy (*astrategia behithavut*) in warfare against the hybrid enemy. See M. Kofman, “Moscow School of Hard Knocks: Key Pillars of Russian Strategy”, War on the Rocks, 17 January 2017, <https://warontherocks.com>; for the Israeli approach of this type, see: D. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, Pale Alto: Stanford UP, 2010, chapter 3; M. Finkel, *On Flexibility*, Pale Alto: Stanford, UP, 2011; E. Shamir, *Transforming Command*, Pale Alto: Stanford UP, 2011.

5. A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, “Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi” [The army remains invincible] *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 December 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>.

senses, to regular armies in general and to the Syrian military in particular.⁶ In terms of the employed resources and ability to generate operational-tactical effects, Moscow saw this new adversary as leaving behind even some medium-level powers.⁷

The Russian conceptualization of hybridity⁸ corresponded with the Israeli Defense Forces' usage of the same term: a non-state actor armed with state military capabilities, waging warfare along the lines of guerilla principles and driven by the logic of terrorism.⁹ Despite the similarity, the Russian view of hybridity has been probably informed by the concept of mutiny-war (*miatezhevojna*). The concept, which was invented by the Russian military theoretician Evgeny Messner in the mid-20th century, was disregarded and forgotten during Soviet times, only to be re-popularized in Russian professional discourse during the last two decades. *Miatezhevojna* meant that wars of the future would be waged differently from the industrial era warfare. Diffused small formations of insurgents, terrorists, and special operations forces armed with advanced weapons would become the main striking force, and would achieve political goals through asymmetrical operations, political influence, internal subversion and revolutions aimed at regime change.¹⁰ The resonance with the hybrid war threat perception, as outlined by Gerasimov on various occasions, and the Russian asymmetrical school of military thought, which informed Gerasimov's approach, is evident.

6. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma'" [Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General Valery Gerasimov: "We broke the backbone of the strike forces of terrorism"], *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 26 December 2017, www.kp.ru; "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii—pervogo zamestitelia Ministra oborony Rossijskoj Federatsii generala armii Valerii Gerasimova na otkrytom zasedanii Kollegii Minoborony Rossii 7 noiabria 2017 g." [Statement by Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation Valery Gerasimov at an open meeting of the Collegium of the Russian Defense Ministry on 7 November 2017], Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 7 November 2017, <https://function.mil.ru>; A. Luk'ianov, "V Minoborony soobshchili o poiavlenii terroristov novoj formatsii" [The Ministry of Defense announced the appearance of terrorists of new formation], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 25 August 2017, <http://vm.ru>.

7. A. Bartosh, "'Trenie' i 'iznos' gibridnoj vojny" ["Friction" and "wear" of hybrid war], *Voennaia Mysl*, No. 1, January 2018.

8. *Ibid.*

9. The Russian categorization resonated with the main pillars of the hybrid theory of victory and conceptualization of a hybrid military actor outlined by the Israeli practitioners. I Brun and C Valensi, "The Other Revolution in Military Affairs", in D. Adamsky and K.I. Bjerga (eds), *Contemporary Military Innovation: Between Anticipation and Adaptation*, London: Routledge, 2013.

10. For the recent Russia re-popularization of E. Messner's ideas, see: E. Messner, *Vsemirnaia miatezhevojna* [The worldwide mutiny-war], Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2004; V.I. Marchenkov, *Hochesh mira, pobedi miatezhevoynu: Tvorcheskoe nasledie E.E. Messnera* [Want peace? Defeat the mutiny-war: the creative heritage of E.E. Messner], Moscow: Voennyj Universitet, 2005; V. Miasnikov, "Konets Protivoborstva po Klauzevitsu" [The end of Clausewitz-style warfare] *Nezavissimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 8 July 2005, <http://nvo.ng.ru>; I.V. Domnin and A.E. Savkin, "Asimmetrichnoe voevanie" [Asymmetric warfare], *Otechestvennye zapiski*, No. 5, 2005, www.strana-oz.ru.

Moscow saw its adversary as equipped with various types of armor, artillery and communication, reconnaissance and target acquisition capabilities, including electronic warfare (EW) and intelligence and strike unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). This arsenal and concept of operations enabled it, according to Moscow, to conduct both maneuverable and static ground warfare of high and low intensity, in urban, desert and mountain areas, while the terrorist logic of using the civilian population as shields or as targets significantly multiplied its combat effectiveness. Among the unique capabilities of this new type of enemy encountered in Syria, Russian military experts emphasized its ability to rapidly switch back and forth from guerilla and terrorist tactics to those of state militaries, and the other way around; a high level of adaptability to the rapidly changing situation; a high aptitude for innovation, for developing new operational knowledge and effectively disseminating it horizontally. In the Russian view, this type of adversary emphasizes rapidness, surprise, moral-psychological demoralization and physical exhaustion of the enemy forces, putting the enemy constantly on the defensive through systematic attrition.¹¹

Theory of victory and campaign design

A relatively clear and uninterrupted strategic guidance from the Kremlin delivered during the campaign and the flexible approach to strategy enabled both straightforward campaign design and theory of victory. Moscow did not seek to mount a large-scale operation but one that would reverse strategic trends, deny the initiative to the anti-Assad forces, demonstrate the strength of the incumbent regime, inflict fragmentation on the opposition forces with their subsequent localization and neutralization, and facilitate conditions for a political process by convincing the main actors and their proxies of the futility of further fighting. The air campaign took the form of strikes on the systems holding the opposition forces together: the Command and control (C2) systems, material supply chains, and economic centers of gravity. In conjunction with air strikes fragmented the opposition forces,

11. I. Korobov, "Deiatel'nost' terroristicheskikh gruppировок na territorii Sirii" [Activity of terrorist groups on the Syrian territory] in "Opyt boevykh dejstvij v Sirii" [Experience of fightings in Syria], *Arsenal otechestva*, Vol. 31, No.5, 2017, pp. 22-24. Also see: S. Solomatin, "Osobennosti boevykh deistvij v pustynnoj mestnosti" [Features of military operations in desert areas], *Arsenal otechestva*, vol. 31, No. 5, 2017, pp. 30-32; A. Tikhonov, "Sirijskaia proverka boem"—"Terroristi novoj formatsii" [Syrian ordeal by fire—The terrorists of new formation], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 29 August 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>; A. Tikhonov, "Sirijskaia proverka boem"—"V pustyne vostochnogo Khomsa"; "V gorakh Latakii" [Syrian ordeal by fire—In the desert of Eastern Homs; In the mountains of Latakia]; *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 3 September 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>; I. Iarovitskij, "Opyt vedeniia boevykh dejstvij v gornoj mestnosti" [Experience of fighting in the highlands], in "Opyt boevykh dejstvij v Sirii", *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-35.

ground operations sought first to control the main transportation infrastructure, to lift the blockade of encircled cities and garrisons of the Syrian army, and then in the subsequent stages to localize, isolate and dismantle pockets of resistance, while in parallel systematically destroying hardware and fighters all over the country from the air.

The coalitional “division of operational labor” reflected the *reasonable sufficiency* principle and enabled strategic flexibility. Moscow planned, maintained and oversaw coalition operations and acted as a force multiplier on the frontlines. It led the operational planning, provided logistical, C2, and intelligence (visual, signal and target designation) assistance, and delivered close- and long-range fire support, mainly from the air. In parallel, it boosted training, advice, equipping and rebuilding of the Syrian army. Moscow delegated most of the ground warfare to its allies—the main combat effort was borne by the Syrian army, Hezbollah, Shia militias and IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps); these were augmented by Russian mercenaries, and only finally, if the need for a force multiplier emerged, did the regular Russian formations step into the fray of the ground warfare episodically, to inflict decisive blows in the critical sectors and along the main vectors of the operation (*reshaiushchee usilie na napravlenii glavnogo udara*).

The quest to ensure the right balance between using too little and too much strategic energy, as well as the campaign design, resonated with the New Generation Warfare (NGW) notion (also known as “Gerasimov Doctrine”)—a set of ideas about the changing character of war that had been circulating in the Russian strategic community under the current chief of the general staff for several years prior to the intervention. The concept minimizes the role of large-scale military operations of the industrial war era and instead combines hard and soft power across military and nonmilitary domains. It capitalizes on indirect action, informational operations, paramilitaries, and special operations forces backed by sophisticated military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. As such, the concept naturally corresponds with the principle of reasonable sufficiency. The unity of simultaneous and mutually reinforcing efforts, political, military, diplomatic and informational, rather than their succession, as usually prescribed by Western military thought, ensured, according to Moscow, the desired outcome of the campaign. The political process in Syria and outside it, military operations, and what lies between them, in the form of reconciliation centers arranging ceasefire agreements with local field commanders and village heads (*muhtars*), were interwoven in one integrated operation. As such, it was probably the most illustrative demonstration of a war effort waged on the principles of the NGW.

The desired end state

During the operation, Moscow expanded its beachhead and pushed militarily to restore Syria's prewar borders in parallel with inching toward a political settlement. Implicitly, the desired end state of the operation implied reconciliation and transition processes leading to at least partial territorial integrity, under any ruler that ensures the continuity of Russian control. Russia's termination mechanism in Syria echoed the one practiced during the Second Chechen War. At the time, Moscow sought to divide the opposition militarily and politically by appeasing and pacifying those that could be reconciled, drawing them into an alliance led by a pro-Kremlin leader, and crushing the uncooperative factions. In Syria, too, when military success opened an opportunity for diplomacy, the Kremlin sought to create a dichotomy among the anti-Assad opposition: the armed groups could either honor the ceasefire and gravitate towards a political process through the Russian reconciliation centers, or violate the ceasefire, receive the qualification of "terrorists", regardless of their actual worldview and affiliation, and find themselves immediately under merciless attack, defined by Moscow as "counter-terrorism" activities.

The term "withdrawal" that was announced several times during the operation was a misnomer. These periodical and pompous victory declarations essentially changed neither Moscow's strategy nor its operations. They simply downgraded enabled the domestic media to promote a triumphant "mission accomplished" narrative, expanded the Kremlin's maneuvering space, created optimal conditions for whatever comes next, and refuted Western claims that it would get bogged down in the Syrian quagmire. All these announcements left the door open to step in again if the need arises, and Moscow clearly signaled its resolve and capability to do so. Along the lines of reasonable sufficiency Moscow indeed pulled unnecessary forces out and inserted other formations in, thus repeatedly calibrating its operational footprint with its strategic aspirations.

The Kremlin's balance

Apparently, Moscow realizes that its military-diplomatic effort in Syria is far from over, but the overall assessment of the Russian commentators so far is positive. The operation has reversed the course of the war, met most of its goals, and secured tangible achievements at reasonable cost. In Moscow's view, the operation smashed the ISIS forces and the pro-Western opposition, saved the incumbent regime, inflicted a significant blow on jihadists from the post-Soviet space, retook control of significant portions of Syria, and made the political process more attractive to all the fighting and

involved parties. Perhaps most importantly, the Kremlin prevented a replication of the Libyan regime change scenario.¹² Russia has also expanded its stronghold in Syria, positioned itself as an indispensable regional player, diverted global and domestic attention from Ukraine, and broken down its international isolation. It has facilitated a diplomatic dynamic in Astana and Sochi, as well as separate reconciliation talks with opposition groups within Syria. Regardless of their actual effectiveness, this, in Moscow's view, terminated the Western monopoly on the political process. Moscow has reconfirmed its status as an indispensable power and validated that it matches or even surpasses the US as a regional force. Western powers have softened their position on Assad, and his resignation is no longer a precondition for settlement. Moscow also managed to cultivate and deepen its relationships with all the major regional actors, most of them traditionally parts of the pro-Western, or at least not pro-Russian, camp.

As the operation progressed, Moscow viewed it in three additional positive regards. First, it saw Syria as a cost-effective training ground and as an excellent testing range for its weaponry and concepts. Second, it utilized Syria as the marketing showcase of military capabilities to increase and diversify its arms sales. Finally, it exploited the theater as an opportunity for strategic signaling vis-à-vis both the West collectively and individual actors. It employed relatively dated and advanced weapons and platforms, conventional and dual use (nuclear-conventional), on land, air and sea, which demonstrated the Kremlin's ability to hold the European periphery at strategic-operational risk. Moscow succeeded in the above regards and created an image of victory, at home and abroad, relatively cheaply. A limited order of battle sustained a very high rate of bombing sorties and combat missions, with a historically low number of combat losses, both in personnel and in platforms, and of mechanical accidents, unparalleled in comparison to all previous Russian combat experiences.

Comments from Moscow also reveal an understanding of the negative trends and short- and longer-term challenges. Probably the biggest Russian expectation from the operation, which failed to materialize, was that Moscow could produce a strategic accommodation with Washington through the counterterrorism cooperation and then carry over this positive momentum and desired public image of formal cooperation to other issues on the bilateral agenda. Moscow repeatedly expressed its puzzlement and

12. After Libya, Moscow was fixated on the notion that this scenario may repeat itself, so saving Assad was more than just saving a regional ally; it was about preventing the US from successfully executing this pattern of regime change. Thus, in Moscow's interpretation, the Syrian episode demonstrated to the US that it is not a declining regional power, but one that should be respected and dealt with as an equal, since it is willing to and capable of demonstrating all these intentions through power projection and use of force.

frustration at the lack of progress in acquiring the status of Washington's partner in the war on terror. Consequently, another related unrealized aspiration was the possibility of a tradeoff involving Syrian cooperation and reconciliation with the West over Ukraine.

In the short term, the current phase of the post-conflict settlement is still challenging. Although Moscow presents it as mainly a humanitarian stabilization operation, the fighting is still ongoing and the political and reconciliation processes are far from smooth. Political normalization and cessation of hostilities are going slower than expected, and while Moscow leads a coalition, it has no full control over the military actions of its members, but bears responsibility for the overall result. While Moscow is trying to control Assad, he is not in its pocket, and in the meantime it has not cultivated an alternative to him within the Syrian elites. The growing radicalization of the predominantly Sunni population at home, which was evident before, but has now received an additional impulse due to the pro-Shia image that Moscow acquired during the campaign, also preoccupies the Kremlin.

In the longer term, the biggest challenge is the competition for influence in postwar Syria. As the campaign advanced and the situation in the Assad-held parts of Syria stabilized, the interests of coalition members began to diverge. It seems that the more stable the situation in Syria is, the deeper becomes Russia and Iran's competition for influence there. The Kremlin wants to preserve its assets under any future political arrangement, even if Assad is replaced as Syria's leader or if the country is federalized. Iran similarly seeks to solidify its power in the Levant on its own terms. Both seek a permanent military foothold in Syria and geopolitical influence in the region, but the territories that Assad has reclaimed apparently cannot host two different patrons. It seems that the Kremlin would like to circumscribe Iran's aspiration to regional hegemony without souring relations with the country, which remains its biggest regional ally. Moscow prefers Iran and Hezbollah's presence in Syria to be neither too strong nor too weak.

Other conceivable frustrations for Moscow are the second-order effects, in the form of undesired combat activities of other actors in Syria. Moscow has no choice but to deal with two additional campaigns in Syria, which are interfering with its own operation. One is the Turkish fighting against Kurds in the north, and the other is friction between Israel, Iran and Hezbollah in the south. When it comes to the later, the Kremlin can't fully control these parties or dictate its rules, and thus can't ensure that the dynamic between them does not hurt Moscow's regional interests. Iran and Israel can be rather impulsive and unpredictable, thus turning into risk multipliers and potential spoilers of the Russian efforts to pacify Syria. The Kremlin did not come to fight these wars, but is nonetheless engaged in them right now.

Russian Operational Art – Lessons Learned

Reconnaissance-strike complex: the leitmotif of the lessons learned

Moscow sought to provide with combat experience the highest number of commanders from all the services—by the end of 2017 48 thousand troops had rotated in three-month deployments.¹³ Commanders acquired experience in combined arms warfare, inter-service cooperation, and “complex employment of intelligence, C2 and fire destruction means.”¹⁴ Also, the Ministry of Defense (MoD) dispatched to Syria engineers and scientists from the military design bureaus, scientific institutes and military industry to accompany their products and to calibrate them technologically and conceptually based on the hands-on experience.¹⁵ The General Staff (GS) turned Syria into an incubator of learning, training, and innovation. It explored combat experience, disseminated the acquired insights,¹⁶ and embarked on wartime adaptation,¹⁷ when the lessons learned led to the

13. All the commanders of the military districts, who one after another commanded the grouping of forces, and the commanders of the General Purpose, Air and Air Defense armies went through Syria. They arrived with their organic staff apparatus, including officers from operations, intelligence, communications, and rear departments. Ninety percent of the Russian armies' commanders and more than 50% of the regimental and brigade commanders—rotated through Syria. V. Baranets, “Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov”, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; I. Avdeev, “Piatiletka preobrazovanij” [Five-year transformation], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 31 October 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>; “Itogi spetsial'noj operatsii v Sirii” [Results of the special operation in Syria], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 24 December 2017, <http://redstar.ru>; “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

14. Also, the crews of ships and submarines employing precision guided weapons, and almost the entire order of battle of the operational-tactical aviation, including the maritime aviation of the Northern Fleet, acquired combat experience. *Ibid.*; “Voennaia priemka. aviatsiia v Sirii. Samolety. Chast' 2” [Military inspection. Aviation in Syria. Aircraft. Part 2], Telekanal Zvezda, Youtube, 14 August 2017, www.youtube.com.

15. V. Baranets, “Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov”, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; I. Avdeev, “Piatiletka preobrazovanij”, *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; “Itogi spetsial'noj operatsii v Sirii” *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

16. V. Baranets, “Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov”, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*

17. See: D. Adamsky and K.I. Bjerga (eds), *Contemporary Military Innovation: Between Anticipation and Adaptation*, *op. cit.*

adjustment of the concept of operations, organizational structures and force buildup.¹⁸

A recurrent theme in the reflections of Russian commentators is defining the Syrian operation as the first occasion on which a Russian military fought along the lines of the Information Technology Revolution in Military Affairs (IT-RMA). This notion, which was developed by Soviet military theoreticians during the 1980s, and was known in the West as the Ogarkov doctrine after the then Chief of the General Staff (CGS), has been popularized since the 1990s by Andrew Marshall and experts from the Office of Net Assessment, and became the backbone of the US defense transformation. The IT-RMA school of thought argued that in the information era militaries should transform into a combined arms system of systems which links together intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities (ISR), C2 systems and precision standoff fires. The Soviet lexicon defined this phenomenon at the strategic-operational level as a reconnaissance-strike (*razvedyvatel'no-udarnyj*) and at the operational-tactical level as a reconnaissance-fire (*razvedyvatel'no-ognevoj*) complex.¹⁹

The Soviet Union, a pioneer in conceptualizing this concept, never materialized it. The post-Soviet reforms headed in this direction, but the flaws, which the war in Georgia highlighted, were exactly the pivots of the IT-RMA: the deficit of the precision guided munitions (PGMs); an inability to wage network-centric warfare (NCW) due to the low level of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR); and the low capacity to wage combined arms warfare. The aim of reform since then has been to rebuild the conventional military, and to advance it as close as possible towards the ideal type of reconnaissance-strike complex. Modernizations enabled an improvement, and Russian experts argue that Syria is the first time that the military has materialized the IT-RMA. The GS saw the operation in Syria as a testing ground for almost all types of weapons and services, and specifically the use of ISR, C2 and fire systems integrated into unified complexes.²⁰ Consequently, the Russian discourses with regard to Syria are saturated with the terms reconnaissance-strike complex (RSC) and reconnaissance-fire complex (RFC).²¹ In envisioning the modernization directions Gerasimov

18. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*

19. D. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, *op. cit.* Despite the formal terminology, there is no consistency today—commanders and commentators use these terms interchangeably, and substitute for the term “complex” with “contour.”

20. "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

21. "VKS RF v Sirii realizovali printsip 'odna tsel'—odna bomba" ["Russian air forces in Syria implemented the principle of “one goal—one bomb”], RIA Novosti, 7 November 2017, <https://riafan.ru>.

speaks about turning the services into RF and RS contours and integrating them all into one automated reconnaissance-strike complex.²² Consequently, the following sections focus on the lessons about the main components of the complex.²³

ISR segment of the complex

A strong emphasis on PGMs demands a bank of prepared in advance and real-time targets. The Russian commentators discussing the ISR segment, so far, have paid significant attention to the Command of Special Operation Forces (KSO), UAV fleet and GLONASS constellation. The KSO forces, a new branch in the Russian military for which Syria became a period of professional establishment, interchangeably took responsibility over the three elements of the RSC. When functioning as the ISR segment, they acquired and designated targets of strategic operational importance, such as leadership and C2 centers, for strikes by the artillery and air force.²⁴ Presumably, as a takeaway from the operation, the ISR responsibilities of the KSO as an organic part of various RS and RF complexes will continue to increase.

Since 2012, in terms of the quality and quantity of the UAV fleet, the Russian military has taken a huge leap forward, aimed at increasing the combat effectiveness of the general-purpose forces at a tactical-operational depth.²⁵ The operation in Syria employed an unprecedented, in terms of types and numbers, fleet of UAVs. On average, at any given moment, there have been 60-70 reconnaissance, strike and radio-electronic suppression UAVs over Syria, and all branches involved have been using this fleet most extensively on the operational-tactical level. As a takeaway, the Russian high command envisions the UAVs as an integral part of all future combat activities of all the services for the sake of creating RS and RF contours.²⁶

22. "Genshtab: osobennost'iu konfliktov budushchego stanet primeneniye robotov i kosmicheskikh sredstv", [General Staff: The peculiarity of future conflicts will be the use of robots and space vehicles], TASS, 24 Marta 2018, <http://tass.ru>.

23. This division is mainly for the purpose of organizing the available material, as many topics easily fit into several categories.

24. S. Rudskoj, "Osnovnye etapy operatsii VS RF v SAR i osobennosti organizatsii sistemy upravleniia" [Main stages of the operation of Russian air forces in Syria and specificities of the organization of the command system], in "Opyt boevykh deystvij v Sirii", *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*, p. 25. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, "Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi", *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; Also see: A. Tikhonov, "Sirijskaia proverka boem" [Syrian ordeal by fire], *op. cit.*

25. 38 new UAV units and detachments were established, which together operated almost 2,000 UAVs of various types.

26. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

The GLONASS constellation supported the C2 missions, the UAV fleet, and the feeding of targets to sea, air and ground precision systems. Although for most of the time Russia had between 21 and 27 satellites in orbit, the constellation still fell short of satisfying all navigation, guidance and C2 demands. General air forces (AF), naval aviation, and long-range bombers equipped with targeting and navigation stations were the main GLONASS consumers. The system also improved the accuracy of the strikes with unguided munitions, making it possible to strike well-disguised targets in the unfamiliar desert-mountain-urban terrain by guiding the airplane on target instead of guiding bombs. Presumably, Russia deployed on the ground correction stations, without which the effectiveness would probably drop. The Russian experts demonstrated an awareness of the system's limitations and will probably prioritize further refinement of its abilities.²⁷

In sum, as Russia continues to enter a precision regime, the main challenge will be providing targets for accurate fire. The biggest obstacle in Syria was hitting small, maneuvering targets, which demanded the ability to rapidly close sensor-to-shooter loops.²⁸ Thus, further modernization is likely to set its sights on small and maneuverable targets in the longer ranges, and to decrease the scale of indiscriminate bombings.

C2 segment of the complex

The creation of a National Defense Management Center (NTsUO) responding directly to the minister of defense and the president²⁹—a reincarnation of sorts of the traditional Russian wartime supreme command (*Stavka*)—made it possible to tailor procedures from the strategic to the tactical-operational levels. The C2 architecture consisted of three echelons: the highest-level operator was the *Group of Combat Management* within the NTsUO in Moscow; the *Command Post of the Grouping of Forces* in

27. A. Lavrov, "Russia's GLONASS Satellite Constellation", *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 4, 2017. Collateral damage was probably less of a demand for the Russian operators than for their Western counterparts. However, it was much more important than the majority of Western commentators, who see these as indiscriminate carpet bombings, tend to present. The Strelets reconnaissance, target designation, and communication systems were used to acquire target coordinates on the ground.

28. P. Iddon, "For the Russian Military in Syria, Old Habits Die Hard", *War Is Boring*, 29 December 2017, <https://warisboring.com>.

29. For NTsUO, see: A. Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2017, pp. 184-185; V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; "Doklad pervogo zamestitelia MO RF Ruslana Tsalikova na otkrytom zasedanii Kollegii Minoborony Rossii 7 noiabria 2017 g." [Report of First Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation Ruslan Tsalikov at an open meeting of the Collegium of the Russian Defense Ministry on 7 November 2017], Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 7 November 2017, <http://деятельность.минобороны.рф>; I. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, "Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi", *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

Khmeimim was the second layer of C2; *Operational Groups of Advisors* in all the tactical-operational directions was the lowest expression of this architecture.³⁰ The *Group of Combat Management* consisted of around-the-clock shifts, with representatives from all organs of military management.³¹ It collected, analyzed and assessed the combat situation and decisions made by the *Command of the Grouping of Forces*, and planned the subsequent operational activities. Constant situational awareness made it possible to rapidly adapt to the changing trends. The *Group* was in contact with representatives of the US, Turkey, the Special UN Envoys, the Cease Fire Monitoring center in Geneva, and also representatives of international organizations. As such, it was responsible for the uninterrupted staff work on the combat, diplomatic and humanitarian activities. The *Command Post of the Grouping of Forces* in Khmeimim ensured the combat coordination of the Russian Forces with the Syrian Army, Republican Guard, local and foreign militias. The *Post* also coordinated informational exchange in order to avoid incidents with the US operational centers in Jordan and Qatar, and with the Turkish and Israeli militaries. *Operational Groups of Advisers*—the lowest level of C2—deployed within the staffs of the Syrian Army and within the pro-Assad militias of all types. Their number varied according to the demands; during the most active phases there were fifteen groups of this kind.³²

GLONASS supported all the C2 layers, and coordination of the different services and strikes from the ground, sea, and air from the strategic to the tactical level.³³ Combat management of the troops on the tactical-operational level rested on a unified mobile field C2 system, which was further tested and refined during the Kavkaz-2016 and Zapad-2017 exercises. The posts of the system enabled automatic collection and analysis of the information for the situation estimate, combat planning, sending orders, fire management, and logistical-rear support.³⁴ A unified communications network, enabled by stationary and mobile complexes, provided cell, radio, video and documents connection capacities through all the C2 layers. This intranet enabled a constant intelligence and operational data flow on the collective usage screens, a better battle damage assessment

30. S. Rudskoj, "Osnovnye ètapy operatsii VS RF v SAR i osobennosti organizatsii sistemy upravleniia", *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*

31. The CGS and MoD observed in real time all activities on the ground, including air, artillery, missile and long-range PGM strikes. The *Command Post* in Khmeimim waged the operation and did the staff work supporting it; however, it was fully and uninterruptedly accessible to the supreme military leadership in Moscow. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*

32. S. Rudskoj, "Osnovnye ètapy operatsii VS RF v SAR i osobennosti organizatsii sistemy upravleniia", *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*

33. A. Lavrov, "Russia's GLONASS Satellite Constellation", *Moscow Defense Brief*, *op. cit.*

34. "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

(BDA), rapid decision-making and decision execution, orchestration of the activities according to a unified operational plot, and uninterrupted control from the high command.³⁵

In sum, according to Russian commentators, this unified tactical-level C2 system reduced by 20-30% the time needed for organizing combat activity, and accelerated the combat management tempo in some case by three times. Given the favorable assessment of its effectiveness and modus operandi, this C2 architecture and the system supporting it are likely to be preserved in future practice. During 2018 the system already began arriving to the Russian general-purpose forces and fleets.³⁶

Strike segment of the complex

The proportion of the Russian PGMs used in Syria is unclear, and probably was less than five percent.³⁷ However, the coordinated salvos by sea-based and air-based accurate weapons from strategic and nonstrategic platforms were an entrance to the precision regime club, positively assessed by the GS.³⁸ When executing precision or unguided strikes, the GS sought to conduct them as part of the reconnaissance-strike complexes. In this way C4ISR systems, in the Russian view, multiplied the utility of non-advanced forces and munitions³⁹ and, according to the Russian commentators, made their effectiveness comparable to that of the precision strikes.⁴⁰ The overall estimate of the general-purpose non-precision weapons—the missiles, artillery pieces, mortars and howitzers, and the thermobaric weapons, some of them modern and some of them relatively dated—was positive, thanks to the conditions provided by the ISR and C2 segments.⁴¹

35. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; S. Rudskoj, "Osnovnye etapy operatsii VS RF v SAR i osobennosti organizatsii sistemy upravleniia", *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*; Kh. Arsalanov, "Osobennosti organizatsii sviazi v khode boevykh dejstvij v SAR" [Features of communication in the course of military operations in Syria], in "Opyt boevykh dejstvij v Sirii", *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-30.

36. A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, "Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi", *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

37. M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?", *op. cit.*

38. A. Tikhonov, "Sirijskaia proverka boem", *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.* Also see: A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, "Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi", *op. cit.*

39. "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

40. The limitations included the low ability of the AF to hit effectively small moving targets, and employment of the Gefest system, improving the accuracy of the non-guided munitions below a certain altitude, to which the pilots often preferred not to descend. A. Tikhonov, "Sirijskaia proverka boem", *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*

41. Tikhonov. For additional discussion of the artillery systems, see: Iu. Ljamin and V. Moiseev, "Siriiskie bogi vojny" [Syrian war gods], *Arsenal Otechestva*, vol. 31, N°5, 2017; L. Kariakin, "Proverennye boem" [Tested by fighting], *Arsenal Otechestva*, vol. 30, N°4, 2017. In addition, the KSO functioned as a strike

The quest of the Russian ground forces' commanders to turn their units into RS and RF complexes is not new. However, it is seen as a sophisticated skill of combined arms warfare, not easy to acquire, and the Syrian experience refined it. The intent to wage modern warfare using forces that function as mobile and self-sufficient RF and RS complexes is the main takeaway from the operation, which the GS emphasizes to inform the future exercises and modernization.⁴² The Syrian lessons have already informed the work on the State Armaments Program (GPV) 2018-2027 and are likely to shape subsequent military modernizations.⁴³ According to the Russian senior brass comments, the rearmament program should aim at producing self-sufficient groupings of forces equipped with sea-, air- and land-based precision, standoff, C4ISR and REB capabilities in strategically important theaters.⁴⁴ Promotion of robotics, which Moscow sees as a force multiplier, is another takeaway informing procurement directions.⁴⁵ References to “informationalization” and intellectualization of the battlefield probably

element; it was involved in leadership decapitation, and the destruction of critically important material, C2 and supply infrastructure objects in the operational and strategic rear. S. Rudskoj, “Osnovnye etapy operatsii VS RF v SAR i osobennosti organizatsii sistemy upravleniia”, *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*; V. Baranets, “Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov”, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, “Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi”, *op. cit.*

42. N. Surkov, “Sirijskaia shkola sovremennoj vojny”, *Izvestiia*, 29 December 2017, <https://iz.ru>; V. Khudoleev, “Kursom k razvedyvatel'no-ognevoj sisteme” [The course to the reconnaissance and fire system], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 20 November 2014, <http://archive.redstar.ru>; “Udarnye I razvedpodrazdeleniia VDV ob'edeniatsia pod odnim komandovaniem” [Strike and reconnaissance units of the Airborne Forces will unite under one command], TASS, 31 July 2017, <http://tass.ru>; “Ministr oborony general armii Sergej Shojgu v ramkakh sbora rukovodiashchego sostava Vooruzhennykh sil proveril gotovnost' organov voennogo upravleniia k boevomu primeneniiu” [As part of the gathering of the leadership of the Armed Forces, Defense Minister Sergej Shojgu checked the combat readiness of the military command organs], *Tv Zvezda*, 19 July 2017, <https://tvzvezda.ru>; “Ministr oborony v ramkakh operativnogo sbora rukovodiashchego sostava VS pribyl vo Vladimirskuiu oblast'” [Minister of Defense arrived in Vladimir region within the framework of the operative gathering of the leadership of the Armed Forces], *Tv Zvezda*, 20 July 2017, <https://tvzvezda.ru>; A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, “Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi”, *op. cit.*

43. M. Shepovalenko, *Sirijskij Rubezh* [The Syrian frontier], Moscow: CAST, 2016, pp. 119-120; R. McDermott, “High Technology Set to Dominate Russia's Rearmament Program,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 154, 29 November 2017, <https://jamestown.org>; D. Gorenburg, “Russia's Military Modernization Plans: 2018-2027”, *PONARS*, No. 495, November 2017, www.ponarseurasia.org.

44. For example see: “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*; A. Tikhonov, “Sirijskaia proverka boem”, *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, “Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi”, *op. cit.*; “Siriiskii opyt Kuznetsova liazhet v osnovu trebovanij k novym avianostsam” [Syrian experience of the “Kuznetsov” will form the basis of the requirements for new aircraft carriers] TASS, 8 February 2017, <http://tass.ru>; R. McDermott, “Shoigu Promotes Russia's Effective Army Plans to 2025,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 54, 25 April 2017, <https://jamestown.org>.

45. “Genshtab: osobennost'iu konfliktov budushchego stanet primenenie robotov i kosmicheskikh sredstv”, TASS, *op. cit.*

relate to digitalization of the fire control.⁴⁶ In sum, the next GPV, based on the lessons learned from Syria, pays special attention to the quality and quantity of the PGM arsenal and the C4ISR systems supporting it, including UAVs and space satellites as its main enablers in all the branches.⁴⁷ Experts see this as the strongest emphasis of the program, second only to modernization of the nuclear triad.⁴⁸

46. R. McDermott, "High Technology Set to Dominate Russia's Rearmament Program", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *op. cit.* Also see: J. Grady, "Experts: Syrian War Prompting Russians to Expand Unmanned Systems", *The US Naval Institute*, 9 October 2017, <https://news.usni.org>.

47. I. Avdeev, "Piatiletka preobrazovaniy", *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*

48. "Iadernye sily—glavnyj element sderzhivaniia" [Nuclear forces are the main element of deterrence], *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 8 December 2017, <http://nvo.ng.ru>.

Other Themes Pertaining to Operational Art

In addition, Russian sources have covered several other themes related to general questions of operational art.

Strategic mobility

The Syrian campaign offered rich experience in conducting a long distance, intensive, continuous expeditionary operation. Russian sources argue that the reform in the system of material-technical support (MTO), together with exercises and snap inspections, laid the ground for the rapid and discrete dispatch of the force, and for sustaining stable lines of maritime and aerial provision of armaments, spare parts, and supplies, which ensured the uninterrupted combat activities.⁴⁹ The Russian military brass envisioned maintaining a proper level of MTO, as one of the main conditions of success. The strategic exercises and snap inspections during 2016 and 2017 further refined speed and effectiveness in transportation, supply, repair and technological maintenance. The strategic exercise Vostok-2018 is also likely to test the ability to project a large combined-arms expeditionary force to a faraway theater of operations and deploy it as a self-sufficient grouping of forces.⁵⁰ The implementation of some lessons is already evident,⁵¹ and the prioritization of strategic mobility in various theaters of operation and rapid

49. V. Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov", *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*; "Doklad pervogo zamestitelia MO RF Ruslana Tsalikova na otkrytom zasedanii Kollegii Minoborony Rossii 7 noiabria 2017 g, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*; A. Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185-194; N. Surkov, "Sirijskaia shkola sovremennoj vojny", *Izvestia*, *op. cit.*

50. *Ibid*; A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, "Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi", *op. cit.* For detailed discussion of the MTO, see: Roger McDermott, "Zapad 2017: Myth and Reality," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 126, 10 October 2017, <https://jamestown.org>.

51. In 2017, probably influenced by the impact of the Syrian operation, the VKS established a new military-transportation air division and a special-purpose air division. A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, "Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi", *op. cit.* Also, Russian experts recommended turning production of the landing ships and expanding the auxiliary fleet into one of the main priorities of naval modernization. M. Barabanov, "Morskaia logistika Sirijskoj kompanii", in M. Shepovalenko (ed.), *Sirijskij Rubezh*, *op. cit.*, p. 129-131. Also see: M.L. Abramov, "Commentary", in M. Shepovalenko (ed.), *Sirijskij Rubezh*, *op. cit.*

deployment based on MTO is likely to remain intact in Russian military modernization.

Radio-electronic struggle (REB)

A significant portion of the Russian discourse deals with the lessons related to REB. As for other systems, Syria became a testing ground for the REB assets of all types, old and modern.⁵² In the years preceding the operation, the MoD invested significantly in force buildup, concept of operations, and organization of the REB forces in the ground, aerial and naval domains. The main trends were to expand the number of targets which the REB systems can effectively engage, extend the ranges of intelligence, defense and suppression missions, and enable their maximum compatibility with the PGM systems and UAVs.⁵³ It seems that the constantly growing employment of REB systems in recent conflicts, in Syria in particular, coupled with theoretical discussions about the REB in battle, stimulated the REB senior commanders to claim broader organizational responsibilities, transforming REB into one of the main tools of victory in modern operations. Although discussions are still underway, the dominant role of the REB in ISR, C2 disorganization and anti-PGM defense in combined arms operations is already evident and is likely to continue growing. The same increasing role of the REB branch, according to the Russian sources, can be expected in all services of the Russian armed forces in the coming years.⁵⁴ Also, in line with his view of the informational struggle as outlined in his above-mentioned programmatic article from 2014, Gerasimov, commenting on the lessons learned, further emphasized the need to merge informational-technological and informational-psychological forms of influence in the framework of an integrated REB operation.

52. S. Sukhankin, "Syrian Lessons and Russia's Asymmetric Response to the US", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 118, 26 September 2017, <https://jamestown.org>.

53. "Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii", Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

54. Iu.I. Lastochkin Iu.L. Koziratskii, Iu.E. Donskov, A.L. Moraresku, "Boevoe primeneniie vojsk REB kak sostavnaia chast' operativnogo iskusstva ob'edneniia Sukhoputnykh vojsk" [Combat application of EW troops as an integral part of the operational art of the Army], *Voennaia Mysl'*, No. 9, 2017, pp. 18-26; "Russia's upgraded Mig-29 fighter jets to test new aircraft armament in Syria", TASS, 7 December 2017, <http://tass.com>.

Professional qualities of commanders

Since 2016, the field manuals, curriculum of military institutions⁵⁵ and training of the forces have been adjusted in line with the Syrian experience.⁵⁶ The emphasis has been on testing new forms of long-range and standoff destruction, and on the use of RS and RF complexes in combined arms offensive and defensive operations.⁵⁷ In reference to the training of commanders based on lessons learned from Syria, Gerasimov has underscored cultivation of such qualities as an ability to rapidly assess the situation, foresee its development, make non-standard decisions, employ military cunningness and deception, act unexpectedly, opt for calculated risk, and capture initiative.⁵⁸ Additional emphases highlighted competitiveness, self-education, learning, and a willingness to depart from the template and to express “reasonable initiative.”⁵⁹ According to him, commanders should be creative, energetic, inclined to take the initiative, not stick to the field manuals, and employ military ingenuity (*voennaia smekalka*). According to Gerasimov, the Syrian experience highlighted talented commanders blessed with non-standard thinking. These qualities promise promotion,⁶⁰ and correspond with the skills needed to employ RS complexes.⁶¹ The dictum not to think by the book, to base a theory of victory

55. For example, the Moscow Highest School of All-Forces Commanders, the main educational institution of the Ground Forces, rotated almost half of its officers-professors from the Tactics Faculty on internship tours to Syria in order to adjust their theoretical insights and educational programs based on the insights from combat practice. N. Moiseenko, “Glavnaia auditoriia—Poligon” [The main audience is the polygon], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 14 December 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>; “MosVOKU vzialo na vooruzhenie Sirijskij opyt” [MosVOKU adopted the Syrian experience], *Voennoe Obozrenie*, 15 December 2017.

56. “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

57. *Ibid.*; M. Kofman, “What Actually Happened During Zapad 2017”, Russian Military Analysis Blog, 22 December 2017, <https://news.err.ee>; R. McDermott, “Zapad 2017 and the Initial Period of War”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 14, No. 115, 20 September 2017, <https://jamestown.org>; A. Khokhlov, “V Vojska Vnedriaetsia pobednyj Sirijskij opyt” [The victorious Syrian experience is being introduced into the troops], *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 13 December 2017, <http://vm.ru>; A. Bondarenko, “Pod pritselom—dzhihad mobili” [Jihad-mobiles at gunpoint], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 9 July 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>.

58. “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

59. A. Kartapolov, “Okrug udarnykh zadach” [The percussion group], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 6 December 2017, <https://vpk-news.ru>.

60. “General Gerasimov: Sirijskij opyt—bestsennaia shkola dlia rossiiskikh vojsk” [General Gerasimov: Syrian experience is an invaluable teaching for Russian troops], *Polit Rossiia*, 5 February 2017, <https://politros.com>; “V Voennoi akademii GSh VS RF proshlo ocherednoe zaniatie kursa ‘Armiia I Obshchestvo’” [The Military Academy of the General Staff of the RF Armed Forces hosted another session of the course “Army and Society”], Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, 3 February 2017, <http://ens.mil.ru>; “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

61. “General Gerasimov: ‘Sirijskij opyt—bestsennaia shkola dlia rossiiskikh vojsk’”, *op. cit.*; “V Voennoi akademii GSh VS RF proshlo ocherednoe zaniatie kursa ‘Armiia I Obshchestvo’”, Ministry of Defence of

on qualitative and not quantitative superiority, on higher operational skills and strategic ingenuity, corresponds with the asymmetric approach.⁶²

the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*; L. Khairemdinov, “Sirijskij opyt kak osnova” [The Syrian experience as a fundament], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 18 July 2017, <http://archive.redstar.ru>.

62. To further refine the qualities that the high command seeks to cultivate, the Russian military has begun to cultivate the principle of competitiveness among the troops (*printsip soztiazatel'nosti*) and incorporating it in all levels of command. A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, “Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi”, *op. cit.*; “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.* Similarly, the new Field Manual of the Ground Forces, among others issues aims to cultivate creative tactical thinking. N. Moiseenko, “Glavnaia auditoriia—Poligon”, *Krasnaia Zvezda*, *op. cit.*; “MosVOKU vzialo na vooruzhenie Siriiskii opyt”, *Voennoe Obozrenie*, *op. cit.*

Possible Emerging Trends

This section hypothesizes about the lessons regarding strategy and operational art, which Russian practitioners may possibly draw, but which, as of this writing, are not sufficiently reflected in the sources.

Conceptualizing new forms of warfare

Within the Russian professional discourse, the operation in Syria is likely to become one of the main references for conceptualizing the changing character of war in which traditional warfare has merged with “asymmetrical methods,”⁶³ highlighting a general tendency of modern militaries to act with plausible deniability (“*bezulikovye deistviia*”).⁶⁴ In hybrid warfare, according to the Russian conceptualization, the adversary is engaged simultaneously in several phases of the classical military campaign. When there is no sequence of times—first military effort and then translation of it into diplomatic effects—decentralized, network-centric management (*setevye skhemy upravleniia*) is more effective than the hierarchal variety. This also implies involving non-state actors, for the purpose of achieving political goals, and asymmetrical actions.⁶⁵

Russian generals have also emphasized the importance of combining enemy-centric and population-centric activities, and see the merging of combat, humanitarian and reconciliation activities as necessary for success.⁶⁶ Establishing relations between the Syrian army, opposition forces and local population, in parallel with the fighting, was another manifestation of the NGW principle. According to MoD Shoigu, the integrated military-social-political infrastructure on the ground made strategic achievements possible.⁶⁷ Moscow established a *Center for Reconciliation of Belligerent Sides* and turned it into an integral element of the C2 architecture, subordinated to the *Command Post of the Grouping of Forces*. The overall

63. S. Shoigu in M. Shepovalenko (ed.), *Sirijskij Rubezh*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

64. Literally translated as actions lacking evidence. “V Minoborony rasskazali o strategii strany-protivnikov v Sirii” [The Ministry of Defense told about the strategy of the enemy countries in Syria], *RIA Novosti*, 24 March 2018, <https://ria.ru>. Although Gerasimov spoke about *bezulikovye deistviia* as the enemy’s way, it can be seen as a general trend in the character of war as he envisions it.

65. A. Bartosh, “‘Trenie’ i ‘iznos’ gibridnoj vojny”, *Voennaia mysl*, *op. cit.*

66. A. Romanchiuk, “Osobennosti boevykh deystvij v gorodskikh usloviakh” [Features of military operations in urban conditions in “Opyt boevykh deystvij v Sirii”, *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

67. A. Gavrilenko, A. Tikhonov, and R. Biriulin, “Armiia ostaetsia nesokrushimoi”, *op. cit.*

design and the *Command Post* manifested the NGW dictum of merging military and nonmilitary activities—it enabled not only effective combat control of the Russian forces and their coordination with others armed segments of the coalition, but also synchronization of these activities with all the social-political-diplomatic efforts, and uninterrupted political control over the military operation.⁶⁸

Force build-up and deterrence

Further sophistication of the conventional arsenal, an ongoing theme of the military modernization and a takeaway from Syria, not only makes it possible to fight a conventional war of the industrial-informational era, but also secures a presence in the “precision club” and brings three complementary benefits. The first is further enhancement of the conventional, pre-nuclear deterrence potential, the quest for which has been doctrinally evident since 2010. Prospectively, argues Gerasimov, the acquisition of long range PGMs together with the hypersonic missiles should transform most of the strategic deterrence missions from the nuclear to the non-nuclear field.⁶⁹ Second, the PGM arsenal contributes to the effectiveness of the classical conventional warfare. As potential multipliers, these capabilities offer an alternative to the massive presence of boots on the ground,⁷⁰ and signal an ability to wage conventional war in the near and far abroad.⁷¹ Finally, being by design dual use (nuclear-conventional), these capabilities by default increase the level of uncertainty, blurring the line between the conventional and nuclear realms. As such, they preserve the already solid deterring “escalation for de-escalation” image. The Syrian operation demonstrated these capabilities and their deterrence benefits in all three above regards. In practice, production and procurement in mass might be financially and industrially challenging. The stronger the financial constraints, the more likely the missions are to gravitate towards the third type of activity.

68. V. Baranets, “Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov”, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, *op. cit.*; S. Rudskoj, “Osnovnye etapy operatsii VS RF v SAR i osobennosti organizatsii sistemy upravleniia”, *Arsenal Otechestva*, *op. cit.* For the analysis of the Reconciliation Center, see: M. Shepovalenko, *Sirijskij Rubezh*, *op. cit.*, pp. 181-183.

69. “Vystuplenie nachal'nika General'nogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii”, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, *op. cit.*

70. R. McDermott, “High Technology Set to Dominate Russia's Rearmament Program”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, *op. cit.*

71. This is further underscored by the fact that the Syrian operation demonstrated what achievements the effective use of even somewhat outdated air platforms, of still one of the biggest AFs in the world, could bring. The Russian operation demonstrated that victory is possible even without using PGMs, and fighting with the weaponry of the industrial era.

Private military companies (PMCs)

The massive use of mercenaries, or PMCs (ChVKs in Russian), has been among the most innovative features of the operation. Scholars have widely covered the Wagner group and Turan unit (better known as “Spetsnaz iz SSSR”), but differ on the operational configurations of these formations.⁷² Three things are obvious: Russian mercenaries have been playing a major role on the battlefield, their *modus operandi* differs from their Western counterparts, and they are most likely to become an ongoing feature of Russian conduct. As mentioned above, Moscow delegated most of the ground warfare to its allies. ChVKs augmented these efforts as a force multiplier and in some case as decisive effort. In the later stages of the campaign, they became some sort of assault units within the 5th Corps established under the Russian command. Thus, in contrast to the US PMCs, Russian mercenaries were not used for security and stabilization missions, but were engaged in the actual fighting as their main responsibility. Presumably, the ChVKs took the highest rate of Russian combat casualties.⁷³

The prominence of the ChVKs as a tool in the national security arsenal is likely to grow. One of the main operational-strategic benefits it offers is plausible deniability, or what Gerasimov recently characterized as lack of evidence (*bezulikovost*). The deployment of ChVKs, like the employment of *hacktivists*, is a *modus operandi* where the hybridity of the actors makes it possible to outsource military operations, benefiting from their results but not bearing responsibility for their actions. Terms like “*ikh-tam-net*” (“they-are-not-there”) units and “*a nuka dokazhite*” (“go and prove”) became trademark statements in the Russian discourses.

Following the operations in Donbas and Syria, Moscow possesses a reservoir of PMCs, certain procedures for using them, and is overall satisfied with their employment. What is next for them? Will they return home and wait for another mission or will they be kept away from Russia? Will they be integrated into the Russian strategic community? Who are the main stakeholders competing to curate this new force? As of this writing, these are open questions. Presumably, having such a force as a monolithic formation on the Russian territory might not seem an appealing option to the Kremlin, which might prefer to maintain them as an expeditionary legion abroad. In the Middle East, one may imagine two models of their activation. In postwar Syria, they could be used as a security force in the energy and critical

72. For example, see: Sarah Fainberg, “Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict”, Ifri, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 105, December 2017, www.ifri.org.

73. Although according to the official Russian statistics, as of spring 2018, there were less than a hundred casualties (over half of them due to non-hostile reasons), experts suggest that around twice as many ChVK fighters were killed in Syria.

infrastructure installations. If the situation on the ground deteriorates, they can act as a rapid reaction force, before major reinforcements arrive. Another *modus operandi* might be deploying them elsewhere in the region, in conjunction with Russian needs. In this case, they will be a *reconnaissance by force* of sorts—they can explore operational configurations in the theater, gather intelligence and prepare a bridgehead for the main assault force. In both cases, however, given their relatively limited logistical capabilities, coordination and cooperation with the local hosts will be needed.

Like several other Russian military innovations of recent years, this one seems to be a bottom-up novelty, which emerged unplanned and was then co-opted by the system. Already a major phenomenon, it obliges the Russian strategic community to streamline it with other processes within the security ecosystem. While the Duma is drafting legislation to formalize the ChVKs' legal and social status, the intergovernmental competition among various *siloviki* stakeholders seeking to control this new entity has intensified, reflecting an internal struggle among various clans and interests. As of now, the MoD, FSB and GRU, and the NGOs affiliated with them,⁷⁴ have emerged as the main competitors trying to influence legislative activities in their favor and to become “curators” of this force. It is not inconceivable that the National Guard and the SVR might enter the picture too.⁷⁵ On the one hand, the Kremlin might seek unified command and control of these forces and avoid decentralization, with each security entity maintaining its own mercenary component, which increases the risk of unsanctioned combat activities with unintended strategic consequences. On the other hand, the Kremlin may opt for a divide-and-rule approach, avoiding the concentration of traditional and nontraditional military power in the hands of a specific *silovik*.

74. Such as DOSAAF and Donbas Volunteers Union.

75. For example, see: P. Goble, “Russian Siloviki Fight for Control of Still-Illegal ‘Private’ Military Companies”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 15, No. 46, 27 March 2018, <https://jamestown.org>.

Conclusion

Despite repeated declarations on victory, the withdrawal of forces, and cessation of hostilities, Syria might stay a significant site of Russian military presence, and not only because of the extension of the basing rights, or because of strategic considerations.⁷⁶ It is not inconceivable that due to institutional inertia and the interests of various bureaucratic actors, the Syrian momentum will be maintained and regular rotations of forces and hardware to Syria will continue. Let's consider the following reasons for this "Syria Eternal." First, it seems that rotation to Syria has become an appealing career experience, since it has acquired the status of a promotion multiplier. It seems to be a professional belief in Russia that the operation has crystallized the future military aristocracy. Second, relatively acceptable risks coupled with potential benefits naturally increase the motivation to go to Syria. There is enough fighting to justify rotations, for actual operations and for rebuilding the Syrian army, but at the same time there is no full-scale war. Statistically, at least as of this writing, the chances of being killed are relatively low. Even if this eventuality occurs, the state offers financial and social support, as well as glory, much more generous and significant than on previous occasions. Finally, a certain level of hostilities in Syria offers a cost-effective training experience, a testing range for the new weapons systems and concepts, and a strategic signaling opportunity. Moscow may assume that Syria is a more preferable theater for strategic friction with the US, since the chances of enflaming the situation and jeopardizing strategic stability might be lower there than elsewhere on the European periphery. The utilization of the Syrian civil war as a showcase to promote arms sales might also stay intact. Taken together, all of the above may multiply the potential institutional inertia of preserving the Syrian theater of operations.

Operation might also project on Moscow's approach to regional alliances. Although Moscow lacked significant experience in coalitional fighting, the Syrian operation demonstrated its rather sophisticated abilities of learning this craft. It may become inspired by this successful experience and further lean on the local forces when projecting power regionally. Operational self-confidence in this regard is important. In contrast to the US, which is logistically self-sufficient in terms of expeditionary operations and not dependent on local hosts, Moscow can apparently project power

76. The author is thankful to Michael Kofman for this insight.

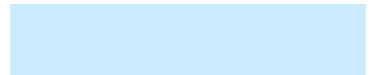
only if it has a regional partner-host with an airport or naval base. This is another incentive for Moscow to further cultivate regional actors, which may serve as power projection enablers. This does not demand treaties that ensure permanent basing, but only a certain level of military rapprochement and cooperation, which can then be smoothly translated into an operational safe haven for the potential touchdown of Russian forces. The first indications of such an effort are already evident among several of the Mediterranean littoral states, most notably Egypt. Following the Syrian episode, this option is more available to Moscow than before, as the Kremlin has acquired an additional facet of attractiveness in the eyes of regional actors. The operation has positioned Moscow as an alternative provider of regional security for those actors that traditionally have been under Western “patronage”. Regional actors can now hedge in terms of their superpower “umbrellas”. A byproduct of this might be trends in arms purchasing and basic forms of military cooperation driven not so much by the qualities of the weapons and their price, but in appreciation of the patronage as part of the hedging approach.⁷⁷ Moscow is likely to further promote such a regional image and to extract additional benefits from it.

77. The emerging Russian-Lebanese rapprochement, especially the cooperation in the military sphere and arms sales, is the most recent illustration of this phenomenon.

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