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**Russia's military campaign in Syria, September 2015 to December 2017 – new warfare and lessons identified?**

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The surprise visit of President Vladimir Putin to Syria on 11 December 2017, his declaration of a military victory and order to start of the withdrawal of elements of the Russian forces deployed, marked the end of the third phase of Russia's military campaign in Syria. Congratulating Russian troops on their success, Putin stated that 'all the necessary conditions have been created for a political settlement under the auspices of the UN',<sup>2</sup> implying that any fourth phase will be primarily a political process supported as necessary by Russian military force. Drawing attention to the now permanent Russian bases in Syria, at Tartus and Khmeimim, Putin noted that 'if the terrorists raise their heads again, we will strike back with the strongest blows they have ever seen.'<sup>3</sup>

There is clearly a long way to go to the full conclusion of Russia's military intervention and the achievement of the desired strategic outcomes in Syria – in particular obtaining an internationally recognised political settlement that assures Russia's long-term interests in the country. It may yet be that even reaching Phase 4 of the Russian campaign will prove as illusory as that of the United States-led 2003 Iraq Campaign Plan, which morphed rapidly into an extended Phase 3b (a counter-insurgency) after the defeat of Iraq's armed forces and the fall of Saddam (the original Phase 3 outcome). Whatever the final settlement, however, the Russian military appears, so far, to have delivered an effective, situation changing intervention in Syria. As a first attempt at what, in Western terms, is "expeditionary warfare" since the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Russian military has both demonstrated a number of capabilities in combat for the first time and a level of clear-cut effectiveness that had eluded it in other campaigns, including Georgia (2008) and Eastern Ukraine (2014-current).

Given the Russian military's track record of having to learn from repeated mistakes, the current state of affairs may have surprised those observers who might have assumed that the intervention was poorly thought through and would merely muddle the situation rather than result in decisive outcomes – some Western officials and observers alike asserted that the Russian intervention would result in a quagmire for Russia, akin to Vietnam or the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. And such critics were not only to be found in the West: in Russia itself

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin speaking to Russian troops in Syria, 11 December 2017 reported by *Vesti* and is available at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCa8M...>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

there were doubts from various quarters, including some largely supportive of the Kremlin, about the wisdom of military intervention. An editorial noted the apparent limits of Russian commitment, stating that

the problem is that when you get involved in a war, even if for a short time and with as little commitment as possible, you do not know how you will exit it or when. There are plenty of such examples in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from Vietnam to Afghanistan. The fact is that Russia has voluntarily and openly become an active belligerent in a major international conflict and nobody knows how the conflict will develop.<sup>4</sup>

Leonid Isayev, of the Higher School of Economics, was more blunt:

The decision to participate in the military operation in Syria risks getting Russia bogged down in a Syrian quagmire. As is known, in December 1979, there was nothing to indicate a full-scale deployment of Soviet forces to Afghanistan. The result: a shameful decade that brought our country nothing but zinc coffins. We should not hope that the case in Syria the situation will turn out differently.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps though, the most prescient analysis was ‘The Syrian Conflict according to Clausewitz’ by Aleksei Fenenko, published on 10 November 2015. Highlighting Clausewitz’s famous dictum that war is the continuation of policy by other means, Fenenko considered what a political victory would look like for the Russians: ‘a political victory for Russia would be to keep the Assad government in power, launch the peace process in Syria and push ISIS out of Syria’.<sup>6</sup> Just over two years later, it looks like the Russian military campaign had come close to delivering against those three outcomes.

How strongly any doubts might have been felt privately by the Russian military at the start of the campaign is not known but is an interesting question. The initial deployment was certainly well planned and executed with a speed that was impressive even by Western standards. It does appear that the confidence of the Russian military has grown palpably as the campaign progressed (in part reflected by its increased openness and a positive public profile in Russia itself), suggesting that success in Syria has significantly increased the Russian military’s confidence in itself and its equipment.

This article seeks to highlight aspects of the Russian military’s approach to Syria and how it has so far avoided falling into the traps through effective campaign planning and execution. There has undoubtedly been an element of “adapt and overcome” in response to the situation on the ground and the operation itself has probably lasted longer than originally envisaged. Nonetheless as a first experience of operating in a true coalition (i.e. one where Russia could not simply dictate terms but had to negotiate), the military appears to have performed well. It has also grasped the opportunity to learn from the experience and tested personnel, equipment, doctrine and tactics. The Russian military has also recognised elements as being a new experience and is seeking to apply the lessons identified.

Whether this becomes over-confidence at some point in the future remains to be seen. The enduring nature of Russia’s military success is already a subject of debate in Russia itself.<sup>7</sup> The indirect fire attack on Khmeimim on 31 December, with reported (but denied by the Russian MOD) damage to seven aircraft, together with further rocket, mortar and armed drone attacks in early January 2018, represents a change in tactics to which the Russian military must respond.<sup>8</sup> The tactical requirement may shift from major combat operations against large armed groupings to a more directed counter-insurgency effort – and Russia’s claim of a precision guided munitions (artillery) strike on those responsible for the drone attack suggests that it has an intelligence-led “find, fix, finish” capability on a par with that which the West has used extensively in recent counter-insurgency and counter-

<sup>4</sup> ‘A New War: Why Russia needs it and what the risks are’, *Slon*, 30 September 2015, <https://slon.ru/posts/57299>

<sup>5</sup> Isayev, L. ‘Syrian Impasse’, *Vedomosti*, October 1, 2015, page 6.

<sup>6</sup> Fenenko, A. ‘The Syrian Conflict according to Clausewitz’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Moscow, November 10, 2015, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> ‘Did Moscow Win or Lose in Syria? Experts can’t agree between themselves on 60 Minutes talk show’, *Vesti News*, 13 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCa8M...>

<sup>8</sup> ‘Syria War: Russia thwarts drone attack on Hmeimim airbase’, *BBC*, 7 January 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-42595184>

terrorism activities. For the moment at least, the military appears confident and to have learnt much from its operational experience in the Syria campaign. As a result, the Russian military is committed to maximising the benefits of its recent experience across its armed forces and equipment programme.

### **What's new and not new about the Russian military approach in Syria?**

A significant distinguishing feature of Russia's campaign in Syria, in marked contrast to previous military operations, is the degree of openness and publically available information. This engagement appeared to increase noticeably as the Russian military's self-confidence in achieving its outcomes improved. Consequently, there is a wealth of material on the campaign objectives and execution from Russian sources. While there has clearly been a strong information-operations dynamic at play, seeking to influence as well as inform (both international and domestic audiences), the number of Russian MOD press-briefings by senior officers, interviews with key players, documentaries (including on the use of Russian special forces), release of combat footage and the width of general Russian press and news media coverage, has been unprecedented in comparison with past Russian military operations. Indeed, the level of media engagement by the Russians appears to have been on a par with that of the US-led coalition.

A familiar feature of all militaries has also been manifested during the campaign – inter-service rivalries – and each of the Russian services has clearly sought to use the news media to promote its role in Syria as an aid to securing future investment. The appearance of more information on the role of the Russian Army in Syria from early 2016 onwards, for instance, may have been designed to counter-balance the publicity that the Air Force and Navy had been getting. In this and other respects, the Russian military looks increasingly like its Western counterparts and less like the old Soviet armed forces.

The information campaign has also been Russia's first full 'Internet-age' operation. The Russian Ministry of Defence itself has Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts. It also has a channel on YouTube and an English language web-site. Old habits die hard, however, and the Russians (until recently, when it was announced that 48,000 personnel had participated in the campaign<sup>9</sup>) have been keen to mask the exact numbers of "boots on the ground", in particular any Russian ground units, such as artillery, actively engaged in combat. Russian ground casualties, with the exception of Special Operations Forces which have been avowed, have simply been presented as 'advisers'. Social media research, however, has identified specific artillery units deployed in Syria which have not been avowed.<sup>10</sup>

The Russian military has also, on occasion, sought to blame set-backs, such as surprise ISIS counter-attacks, on US direct and indirect support to the terrorists when, in fact, they resulted from Russian intelligence and reconnaissance failures. Bizarrely, in November 2017, the Russian MOD released fake photographs purporting to provide evidence of US coordination with ISIS. These were quickly exposed as fake, were withdrawn and the Russian MOD issued a statement, according to TASS, that 'the Defence Ministry is investigating its civil service employee who erroneously attached wrong photo illustrations to its statement on interaction between the US-led international coalition and the militants of the Islamic State'<sup>11</sup> – a singularly inept example of information operations. More recently the Russian MOD has been slow to provide full details of the indirect fire attacks on Khmeimim and denied the scale of damage reported, with purported images, by a Russian news outlet.<sup>12</sup> Overall however, there has been an unprecedented amount of valid information from the Russian military that can be verified against the situation on the ground.

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<sup>9</sup> Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu addressing the 'Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board' held at the Peter the Great Military Academy of the Strategic Missile Forces, 22 December, 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53571>

<sup>10</sup> Russian soldiers returning from Syria have posted photographs, together with their unit identification, on Russian social media VKontakte (VK), indicating the Russian MOD has struggled to control some information flows. There have since been efforts by Russian lawmakers to address this and tighten the use of social media by armed forces personnel.

<sup>11</sup> 'Defense Ministry provides explanation on wrong photos attached to Abu Kamal statement', *Tass*, 14 November 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/975642>

<sup>12</sup> 'Syria war: Photos 'reveal' Russian jet damage at Hmeimim airbase', *BBC*, 5 January 2018, [www.bbc.co.uk/world-europe-42580378](http://www.bbc.co.uk/world-europe-42580378)

## The nature and place of the military campaign

Over the past two decades, while the West has been engaged in military operations to bring about regime change in various countries from Yugoslavia to Libya, the Russian military appears to have been watching closely and learning at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. Russia perceives regime change driven and supported by external influence and, ultimately, force, to be a primary threat (the so-called “Colour Revolutions”) – both to Russia itself directly and indirectly through instability in parts of the world of key interest to Russia. Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, discussed the West’s regime change efforts in a 2013 essay.<sup>13</sup> This was widely misinterpreted in the West as a statement of Russian doctrine. In fact, Gerasimov was describing the problem that Russia faced and needed to respond to in a way that challenged previous military assumptions. The “defence” response to a “colour revolution” inside Russia has been largely addressed subsequently by the formation of the National Guard. In parallel, the Russian military has clearly been developing its approach for dealing with external “colour-revolutions” or regime change operations that threaten key Russian interests. In an article written in March 2017, Gerasimov again highlighted the threat and stated that ‘it is necessary to focus special attention on determining preventative measures to counter the unleashing of “hybrid warfare” against Russia and its allies’.<sup>14</sup>

Given Russian concerns at the instability created in the Middle East by Western ‘regime-change’ interventions and the Arab Spring (something Gerasimov had covered in his 2013 essay), the Syrian intervention (at the Operational Level) might be seen as Russia’s first full-blown military ‘counter-Colour-Revolution’ campaign. Indeed, the point was made by Russian Defence Minister Shoigu in December 2016, when he observed that the key operational-level outcome of preventing the disintegration of the Syrian state and ‘cutting short the chain of colour revolutions that multiplied in the Middle East and Africa’ had been delivered.<sup>15</sup>

At the tactical level, the risk of increased terrorism in the Russian Federation as “wash-back” from the large number of Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria returning and potentially being supported by a pseudo-state (the Caliphate), was undoubtedly a factor in the intervention. It has been used heavily, domestically and internationally, to provide a just cause for intervention. It is simple to present and tangible, given a succession of high-profile terrorist attacks in Russia and elsewhere, including the attack on a Russian airliner over Sinai in October 2015. It could also be presented as a common interest with the West, reflected in Putin’s offer of a counter-terrorism partnership in his speech to the UN General Assembly on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2015.<sup>16</sup> It also draws attention away from the true nature of the Assad regime but nonetheless it is a valid tactical issue for Russia.

At the strategic level, the Russian campaign, while suppressing the risk of further chaos resulting from violent regime change in Syria, nonetheless recognised the need for change. Russia has not sought a return to the *status quo ante* but rather that regime change takes place in an orderly manner in the context of a sovereign and relatively stable Syrian state. President Putin has been consistent that there should be a political settlement under the auspices of the UN, with the latter accepting the Assad government as being involved in the process. Of course, that outcome must also assure the protection of Russia’s geo-political interests in the country and the region. It has not been an altruistic campaign and has already succeeded in re-establishing Russia as a key player in the future of wider Middle-East. But the strategic issue has remained consistent: the future of Syria as a sovereign state. In this context, the first operational-level task to achieve Russia’s desired outcome was to stop the “Colour Revolution” and the violent overthrow of the legal regime.

<sup>13</sup> Gerasimov, V. ‘Tsennost’ nauki v predvidenii’, *VPK-news*, 27 February to 5 March 2013, [http://www.vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK\\_08\\_476.pdf](http://www.vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Gerasimov, V. ‘Contemporary Warfare and Current Issues for the Defence of the Country’, *Journal of the Academy of Military Sciences*, no 59, March 2017. p. 22. Translated by Dr Harold Orenstein and published in *Military Review* Nov-Dec 2017, Army University Press, <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/November-December-2017/Contemporary-Warfare-and-Current-Issues-for-the-Defense-of-the-Country/>

<sup>15</sup> Shoigu, “Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, 22 December 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘President of Russia, 70<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly’, September 28, 2015. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

## Campaign Planning

What some observers failed to notice in 2015 was that Russia had adopted what might be called a “comprehensive approach” to campaign planning and execution in Syria. Russia’s intervention, managing its consequences and delivering the desired outcome has involved all the instruments of state, military, diplomatic<sup>17</sup> and economic<sup>18</sup> in a coordinated and coherent way. Although never published as such, there were clearly strategic, operational and tactical objectives, with the distinction, at least militarily, maintained between them. The adoption of this approach, for instance, might be one of the lessons identified by the Russians having watched Western interventions in Iraq and Libya.<sup>19</sup> So while Russian objectives themselves can be seen as counter to Western interests, its campaign planning process is readily recognisable doctrinally as being very similar to that of the British military.

Whether or not there has been a conscious copying of the comprehensive approach, there is little doubt that Russia’s success to date has been underpinned by vigorous and joined-up campaign planning.<sup>20</sup> It is also the case that the command and control system adopted by Russia (and in particular the establishment of the National Defence Management Centre [NDMC]) brings together all the components of the state into a single strategic and operational level headquarters. It is an entity currently unique to Russia and is seen as a key enabler not only for campaign delivery but also wider defence management, as noted by Shoigu in 2016.<sup>21</sup> Syria has undoubtedly provided a valuable test of the NDMC concept, command and control arrangements and operational capability. Russian military activity has been multi-faceted and, critically, part of a multi-national coalition operation, not a simple Russian adventure in the use of air power. While the world’s and Russia’s press initially focussed on the aircraft and naval missiles, it failed to identify that these were only part of a wider ‘joint fires’ capability supporting what was first and foremost a ground campaign involving Russian, Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian and Hezbollah troops and militias. Indeed, without the agreement of Iran and Iraq to allow the transit of Russian supply and combat aircraft through their airspaces, it would not have been possible for Russian to mount a military intervention in Syria.

In an interview in October 2015, Colonel General Andrei Kartapolov, Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the Russian General Staff, who went on to command Russian forces in Syria, made a number of points about the campaign.<sup>22</sup> First, the Russian military leadership knew and understood Syria very well as a result of its long partnership, and the involvement of Russian advisers from the beginning of the uprising against Assad.<sup>23</sup> Intelligence and reconnaissance activities were already taking place before the decision to deploy Russian forces, so identification of operational options and planning for them were informed by detailed knowledge and understanding.

Second, this was a coalition operation (Russia, Syria, Iraq and Iran) and the creation of a coordinating committee in Baghdad was an essential precursor to increased Russian involvement, in order to ‘unite the efforts of those

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<sup>17</sup> For example, the success of the Astana talks is central to delivering Russia’s desired campaign outcomes. Another example is Russia’s growing diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia, the principal backer of Syrian oppositionists, starting with the visit of Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud’s visit to Sochi in October 2015 and culminating with Saudi King’s visit to Moscow in October 2017.

<sup>18</sup> As illustrated by Russia’s use of economic sanctions against Turkey in response to the shooting down of a Russian SU-24 by the Turkish Air Force in November 2015.

<sup>19</sup> The British military itself promoted the idea of a ‘comprehensive approach’ after Iraq to highlight the necessity of maintaining focus on the strategic end state and all the elements (not just military) needed to achieve it. See ‘The Comprehensive Approach: the point of war is not just to win but to make a better peace’, House of Commons Defence Committee, Seventh Report of Session 2008-2010, 9 March 2010, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmdfence/224/224.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Gerasimov’s 2013 essay could be seen as arguing for a ‘comprehensive approach’, recognising that the new threat included more than just the military, and the response to it required the combination of instruments. Both the British and Russian idea of a comprehensive approach is broadly Clausewitzian, so stem from the same ultimate source.

<sup>21</sup> Shoigu, “Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board, 22 December 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Kartopolov, A. Interview with Victor Baranets, *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*, 16 October 2015, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26446/3316981>

<sup>23</sup> Russian military involvement in Syria goes back over 40 years having had access to Tartus as a naval base since 1970. In the Soviet-era there was a continuous Military Assistance Group present providing support and training to the Syrian military. Russian Naval reconnaissance and anti-submarine aircraft routinely carried out operational deployments to Syria.

countries and those forces at war with ISIS on the ground.’ Maintaining unity of effort has, so far, been a Russian success, given the differing objectives and diversity of the coalition partners. Once the initial deployment had taken place, operational coordination activities shifted from Baghdad to Syria.

Third, Kartapolov distinguished the Russian air campaign from that of the US. Whereas the Russian campaign was focussed on support to ground activity, he identified that a component of the US air campaign also included attacking the economic infrastructure that allowed ISIL it to operate as a pseudo-state.<sup>24</sup> Kartapolov suggested that destroying ‘bridges, overpasses, electrical substations, thermal grids, hydraulic pump systems and water pumping stations’ did not address the issue of defeating ISIS on the ground and the scale of destruction carried out by the US-led coalition was ultimately counter-productive.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, when asked about the “moderate” opposition in Syria, Kartapolov asked the telling question: ‘but any person who takes up arms against legitimate authority, how moderate is he?’ At the start of the campaign, anyone not on the Government’s side was treated as an enemy – which in purely military terms demonstrated impeccable logic and was a key element in the first two phases of the campaign, which was about preventing the regime from collapsing and securing its long-term future. As the campaign progressed, the Russians adopted a more nuanced approach, distinguishing between opposition elements that would negotiate and potentially reconcile (who came to be referred to by the Russians as moderates) from the irreconcilable, such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (referred to as terrorists). This simple logic of the military campaign was often missed in Western media reporting, where Russia’s failure to focus air attacks from the start solely on ISIS (or indeed mirror the West’s air campaign against ISIS) was seen as evidence of Russian duplicity and exposing its dubious motives for intervention in Syria. In reality, it was a phased ground campaign plan and a necessary pre-cursor to subsequent Russian-led action against ISIS west of the Euphrates.

## **Risks**

At the start of its intervention in Syria, Russia faced the risk that the operation could expand into a broader conflict either as a result of clashes with neighbouring countries or the US-led coalition. A second risk was that Russian infantry units, at battalion or brigade level and above, would have to be deployed if Syrian regime forces continued to collapse. Russia anticipated these risks and put in place pragmatic measures to reduce their likelihood of it occurring.

Russia engaged diplomatically with neighbouring countries. In the case of Israel, for example, Russia provided advance warning of its military deployments and undertook not to interfere with any Israeli air operations over Syria. Russia reached an air operations de-confliction agreement with the US-led coalition and separation of ‘spheres of influence’ broadly along the line of the Euphrates (which also became the limit of the Russian-led ground campaign).<sup>26</sup> With regard to Turkey, the shooting down of a Russian SU-24 did not lead to a direct military response, instead the immediate deployment of the S-400 system acted as a deterrent against any further aggressive air actions by Turkey. Russia enacted its revenge through economic sanctions and diplomatic processes, ultimately producing a remarkable turnaround by Turkey, which became part of the Russian-led coalition, at least in diplomatic terms, as an active participant in the Astana negotiations and cease-fire guarantor.

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<sup>24</sup> This reflects reported US ‘strategic targeting’ in addition to tactical support. For example, a statement by Colonel Wayne Morotto, Public Affairs Officer of US Central Command on 31 March 2015 stating that air strikes included those against military and economic infrastructure and resources – ‘we have destabilised ISIL’s oil producing, processing and transportation infrastructure’. CENTCOM Operation Inherent Resolve News Release, 31 March 2015, <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/885043/march-31-military-airstrikes-continue-against-isil-in-syria-and-iraq/>

<sup>25</sup> Russia did go on to attack ISIS facilities (particularly money-generating oil related infrastructure) east of the Euphrates after the bombing of a Russian air-liner over Egypt but such attacks never formed a core part of the campaign.

<sup>26</sup> The push across the Euphrates by Syrian Government forces to cut off ISIS re-supply routes into Deir-ez-Zor during the fight for the city and the subsequent attempt to secure oil production facilities on the right bank of the Euphrates became a source of friction with the US-led coalition. This included US air strikes in early February 2016 when Syrian forces attacked SDF elements. At the time of writing, remains a matter of dispute how many Russian private military contractors were killed and a complex information war continues.

The Russians avoided the risk of having to commit infantry units in an escalating intervention through the parallel use of coalition manpower and the re-equipment and training of Syrian forces. The limited availability of effective Syrian and coalition ground elements very much dictated both the pace and direction of the campaign at any given time. It also eventually necessitated a number of temporary deals (such as the de-escalation zones) with irreconcilable opposition elements to concentrate forces for decisive operations against others (in particular ISIS). In this, the Russians were greatly aided by the fragmented nature of the opposition, who at times, expended more energy fighting each other than the regime.

While Russian joint fires initially held back further opposition advances in late 2015, military advisers and operators clearly provided key skills, not only in training Syrian forces but planning, directing and supporting coalition ground operations. The Russians also quickly identified “winners”, such as Suheil al-Hassan and the Tiger Forces, focussing development and support on them. Ultimately the Russians created, commanded and supported 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps as the key offensive force that advanced to the Euphrates. Through effective management of Syrian and coalition ground forces, the Russians avoided having to commit their own infantry. Moscow also recognised a third risk – that the US would decide to move from simply supporting selected opposition elements fighting Assad to direct military intervention to achieve his overthrow. The Russian leadership was conscious of the need to ensure that the US did not have a justifiable excuse to intervene. This was clearly a lesson the Russians had taken from other US interventions in the Middle East and Yugoslavia. The regime’s possession or use of chemical weapons was seen as the most likely cause of a US intervention – Obama’s infamous red line. As Shoigu noted in his speech at the Expanded Meeting of the Defence Ministry Board on 22nd December 2017:

speaking about the operation in Syria, it is necessary to recall the implementation of our President’s initiative on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013. It removed the threat of strikes by American cruise missiles on Syrian territory and the violent overthrow of the current government, as was the case in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya.<sup>27</sup>

The Russian leadership has remained sensitive to this issue throughout the campaign and may have believed that with the advent of the Trump administration the danger had passed. But the latter’s cruise missile strike against the airfield from which an alleged chemical attack was launched against Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017 was a sharp reminder that the risk did not end when Obama left office. Russia’s consistent response to chemical incidents has been to veto adverse UN action and an information operations campaign that the incidents are “false flag” operations by the opposition or the so-called “US Deep State” to provoke a US military intervention. More widely, part of Russia’s counter-colour revolution strategy has included attempts to de-legitimise US military activities on Syrian soil. Russia stresses constantly that its military intervention was at the request of the UN-recognised Syrian Government (and therefore legal), while US activity amounts to an unlawful invasion of a sovereign state. While this may not have gained much traction, it remains a key part of the Russian campaign narrative.

### **Success Factors – a Russian view**

By March 2016 (and what might be seen as end of Phase 1 of the campaign), with successes on the ground, the Russians felt confident enough with progress not only to announce a withdrawal of forces (actually a rotation and reconfiguration) but also to allow the commander of the Group of Russian Forces in Syria (hierarchically the equivalent of a Military District) to conduct an official interview on the occasion of his award of the Hero Of the Russian Federation Medal.<sup>28</sup> This marked a major change in Russia’s public presentation of the campaign as up to that point there had been no acknowledgement of its role on the ground, or even that Colonel-General Aleksandr Dvornikov, who had been deputy chief of staff for the Central Military District, was the commander of Russian forces in Syria. Dvornikov provided insight into the range of activities and what he saw as the success factors. These fell into five elements:

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<sup>27</sup> Shoigu, ‘Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board’ 22 December, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Gavrilov, Y. ‘Syria: Russian Thunder’, *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 24 March 2016, p. 1

- a. aligning Russian air support to the ground campaign;
- b. Russian logistics support, both to deployed Russian elements but also the rapid re-equipping and provision of new capability to pro-Government forces, including artillery, communications and intelligence (Dvornikov failed to mention that at least some of these were almost certainly Russian operated, for example tube and missile artillery elements);<sup>29</sup>
- c. the rapid creation of a system of military advisers and accompanying administrative apparatus to train Syrian forces and play a ‘very active role in planning combat operations’ and that ‘our military advisers have worked and are working at all levels, including at the tactical level’;<sup>30</sup>
- d. a step-change in the morale of the Syrian armed forces and population with the realisation that the opposition could be beaten and the subsequent formation of volunteer movements, brigades and battalions;
- e. the establishment of a reconciliation centre manned by 60 Russian officers to monitor and support the ceasefire that had been brokered by the US and Russia and agreed on 22 February 2016 – ‘at the time I left Syria, 43 armed formations had agreed to the terms of the ceasefire and elders of 51 municipalities had signed the reconciliation agreement’;<sup>31</sup>

Despite down-playing the full extent of Russian ground activity, Dvornikov’s description seems accurate and fits with a well-developed campaign plan that has a number of interconnected lines of operation. It highlights that those who might have thought the Russians were only applying air power in a vacuum of planning were wrong. It also recognises the critical role of logistics and the importance of the “Syrian Express” (the shipping route from the Black Sea) and the air bridge. Dvornikov additionally acknowledged the role of Russian Special Operations Forces in Syria: ‘they are performing the final reconnaissance of targets for Russian aircraft, guiding aircraft to targets in remote areas and carrying out other specific missions’. Perhaps hinting at the similarity of the two campaigns, he added that ‘we must bear in mind that similar units of the Armed Forces of the US and other coalition countries are carrying out various missions in Syria’.<sup>32</sup>

Dvornikov’s point about the re-vitalisation of Syrian elements (though ignoring the contribution of Iranian, Iraqi and Hezbollah elements) seems valid. The “volunteer movements” included the Russian-led and commanded Syrian 4<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps, made up entirely of volunteers, and later the 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps. Given the state of morale when Dvornikov arrived in Syria, he deserves credit for this change, as he appears to have been a forceful and dynamic leader. He noted in the same March 2016 interview that ‘a very important result of the military operation, in my opinion, is the improved morale of the Syrian people in general and the government forces in particular – the possible disintegration of the country has been prevented’. Government forces suffered some set-backs after Dvornikov’s departure, perhaps due to the absence of the strong relationship he had built with the Syrians, something his successor Colonel-General Aleksandr Zhuravlev initially lacked, and necessitating an extension of Dvornikov’s tour in Syria. (Zhuravlev returned to Syria for a second tour in November 2017 and, interestingly, the Russian Defence Ministry was forced to deny rumours circulating in February 2018 that he was to be replaced due to lack of effectiveness.<sup>33</sup> It is not clear where these rumours originated.)

Dvornikov oversaw the most risky phase of the campaign – deploying Russian forces, stabilising the situation and moving to the offensive – and was rewarded with command of the Southern Military District when he returned from Syria. This established a pattern where Syria became a proving ground for senior commanders and, if successful, a stepping stone to Military District command appointments or other senior posts. The most recent commander, Colonel-General Surovikin, who oversaw Phase 3 of the campaign, the decisive ground

<sup>29</sup> For example, during a televised briefing to Putin in October 2015 a map appeared to be marked with the location of Russian artillery units in Syria, including 18 2A65 152mm ‘Msta-B’ howitzers of the 120<sup>th</sup> Artillery Brigade (home base, Kemerovo). This unit is included in a listing of Russian Forces identified in Syria by Igor Sutyagin, Senior Research Fellow, RUSI, ‘Detailing Russian Forces in Syria’, London, 13 November 2015, <https://rusi.org/publications/rusi-defence-systems/detailing-russian-forces-syria>

<sup>30</sup> Gavrilov, ‘Syria: Russian Thunder’.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Defense Ministry rejects reports about plans to replace Russian troops commander in Syria’, TASS, 21 February, 2018.

<http://tass.com/defense/991147>



operations against ISIS, was promoted head of Russian Aerospace Forces on his return from Syria. This in itself is an interesting appointment for an Army officer, perhaps suggesting that the Russians seek to improve the integration of air and air defence forces with ground forces as a lesson identified from Syria.

The integration of Russian officers in the nominally Syrian command chain has also been extensive. Again, this is most obvious in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps, which were Russian staffed and commanded at multiple levels. Russian officers were acting in more than just an advisory capacity, for example operational planning is likely to have been a Russian activity. While the Russian MOD was generally reluctant to advertise this fact (partly, perhaps, due to Syrian sensitivities), an indication of the extent of Russian direction was provided at the funeral of Lieutenant-General Valery Asapov, killed in Syria in September 2017, when Valery Gerasimov said that Asapov had been Chief of Staff for Russian forces in Syria before assuming command of ‘Syria’s 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of volunteers’.<sup>34</sup> Gerasimov subsequently acknowledged the significance of 5<sup>th</sup> Corps and the Russian role in it during a speech to the Russian Defence Ministry Board on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2017:

The success of the Syrian Arab Army became possible mainly due to Russian officers acting as military advisers. They formed and trained the 5<sup>th</sup> Volunteer Assault Corps. The Corps, jointly with formations of General Suheil al-Hassan, played a crucial role in defeating ISIS detachments.<sup>35</sup>

Mikhail Khodarenok, a Russian military expert, described Syrian forces as being ‘under the command of Russian officers who served as battalion commanders of various armed forces, including artillery’.<sup>36</sup> Gerasimov also noted in his 7<sup>th</sup> November speech that:

a great number of Russian officers have gained combat experience. Indeed, all the heads of Military Districts with their staff, combined arms armies, air and air defence armies and almost all the Division commanders and more than half of combined arms brigade and regiment commanding officers have been involved in Russia’s group in Syria. They had combat practice in command and control, joint cooperation and complex surveillance, control and fire systems.<sup>37</sup>

There is no doubt, therefore, that a significant number of Russian officers have obtained vital operational experience during Syria rotations and the Russian military has taken the opportunity to maximise the testing and development of both its personnel and equipment. Speaking on 22 December 2017, Shoigu noted that aircrew ‘received invaluable combat experience that 80% of operational-tactical crews and 90% of army aviation crews have 100 to 120 sorties under their belts’.<sup>38</sup> This experience extends to the Navy, Long Range Air Force elements and all arms of service. Russian military equipment has also been operationally tested. In some cases, it has been found wanting, which has been publically acknowledged: Shoigu again said in December 2017: ‘we tested most of our military equipment during the Syrian operation, that is, 215 types of weapons. In combat, 702 defects and problems were identified, 99% of which were eliminated. We are grateful to our industry partners for their prompt action’.<sup>39</sup>

The cumulative effect of this experience appears to have been growing confidence in the Russian Armed Forces and a sense of change for the better. In his 7 November speech, Gerasimov has also noted that: ‘Combat experience gained in Syria has activated development and use of new forms of Russian Armed Forces as well as conducting new types of military operations and warfare.’ And Putin noted in his 28 December 2017 meeting with service personnel who took part in the Syria Campaign:

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Russia says general killed in Syria held senior post in Assad’s Army’, *Reuters*, 27 September 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-general/russia-says-general-killed-in-syria-held-senior-post-in-assads-army-idUKKCN1C22U3>

<sup>35</sup> ‘Remarks by Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation General of the Army Valery Gerasimov at the Russian Defence Ministry’s board session’, November 7 2017, [http://eng.mil.ru/en/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12149743@egNews](http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12149743@egNews)

<sup>36</sup> *Rossiya I*, 19 December 2017. [News:https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCu8M...](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCu8M...)

<sup>37</sup> ‘Remarks by Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation General of the Army Valery Gerasimov at the Russian Defence Ministry’s board session’.

<sup>38</sup> Shoigu, ‘Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board’, 22 December, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

You know and see better than anyone else that our armed forces have changed radically over the past two years because our people have proved equal to the task, which is the most important thing, as well as because we have seen how our military equipment works, how command and logistics elements work, and how modern our Armed Forces have become.<sup>40</sup>

In an earlier article, published in the Russian Journal of the Academy of Military Sciences in March 2017, Gerasimov had given an indication of what the new experiences in Syria might have been for the Russian military:

as the experience in Syria shown, today we are resolving many tasks through practical experience, without having the opportunity to draw upon the recommendations of military science. Thus military scholars have not given the necessary attention to the problems of conducting combat operations against irregular enemy formations; the employment of groupings consisting of regular forces and national militia detachments; combat under urban conditions, including when fighters are holding civilians as ‘human shields’; and post conflict normalisation ... during the operation for stabilising the situation in Syria, missions that were new to our troops were often resolved on the spot, taking into account experience that had been acquired and expedience. Here the Russian Army has shown skill in conducting new-type warfare, organising coalitions and working with allies.<sup>41</sup>

### **Phases of the Campaign**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a characterisation of the phases of the campaign as it has played out matches very closely that of the US-led campaign design to secure the Iraqi regime from collapse and defeat ISIS. The task, leaving aside any political and moral dynamic, was largely the same for both militaries – how to prevent the existing regime from collapsing militarily and then re-establishing government control over the country. As previously noted, the adversary for the Russians was wider than ISIS, but the campaign factors were essentially the same in both cases. The US CJTF campaign design was published and consists of four phases – Degrade, Counter-Attack, Defeat and Support stabilisation.<sup>42</sup> The Russian campaign design has not been published but its phases might be characterised as follows.

Phase 1: Deploy, stabilise, degrade adversary and move coalition to offensive ground operations. According to Dvornikov, by September 2015, 70% of Syrian territory was held by terrorists who controlled Idlib, Palmyra and Raqqa. Opposition forces were active in the suburbs of Homs and Damascus. They were also preparing to surround and capture Aleppo. The key Damascus-Aleppo highway joining the south and north of the country was under constant threat of interdiction. Government troops were exhausted after four years of hostilities and just hanging on. The population was leaving the country. The priority for Russian forces was to deploy and stabilise the situation by holding the circle until the re-supply and re-training of Syrian forces could be completed. Syrian military advances were limited during this period, in what was essentially a slow moving ‘bite and hold’ operation. Georgy Mirsky, a Russian commentator critical of Russian intervention, noted in December 2015 that:

President Vladimir Putin has said firmly that Russian air strikes will continue as long as the Syrian Army offensive lasts. Apparently, this is where [Russian leaders] miscalculated, hoping that with our aircraft covering them, the Syrian Government troops would make a victorious march to the Euphrates. In reality, they have been creeping at a snail’s pace for almost three months from one local settlement to another. For some reason, Moscow failed to grasp that in Syria (as in Iraq); the government forces have a very low level of combat capability, training motivation and moral’.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Putin, ‘Meeting with service personnel who took part in the anti-terrorist operation in Syria’, St George Hall, Grand Kremlin Palace, 28 December 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56516>

<sup>41</sup> Gerasimov, ‘Contemporary Warfare and Current Issues for the Defence of the Country’, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Operation Inherent Resolve, ‘Combined Joint Task Force Campaign Design’, <http://www.inherentresolve.mil/campaign/>

<sup>43</sup> Mirsky, G. ‘Five wars in Syria: Any light at the end of the tunnel?’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, Moscow, 28 December, 2015, p.9.

Mirsky was wrong, a key component of the Russian campaign plan was the re-arming and re-training of Syrian forces (specifically the creation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps), but this took time. Mirsky did concede that by the end of 2015 a significant change had been delivered:

Of course, [the Russian military] has already accomplished something big: Putin saved the ancient city of Damascus from the fate of Kabul ... [Russia] also rescued the community of Alawites, whom the jihadists would have either exterminated or enslaved. Now, even if Assad's Army offensive completely peters out, neither Damascus nor Latakia (the Alawite homeland) will be taken by enemies.<sup>44</sup>

The first phase, stabilisation of the situation, had been completed and the collapse of the Assad regime and the disintegration of Syria prevented.

The final element of the first phase, moving to more effective and general offensive ground operations arguably started in January 2016 with the first action by a newly trained, equipped and Russian-supported Syrian Battalion Task Group (that included Hezbollah elements) at Salma, in Latakia province.<sup>45</sup> Salma had been under opposition control since July 2012 and occupied a key strategic position and its seizure vital to further advances towards Kinsabba and Jisr al-Shughur in Idlib. This marked the start of wider offensive operations that fundamentally changed the balance in Syria.

Progress was almost certainly slower than the Russians might have hoped as Syrian and coalition forces continued to gain experience. In particular, holding territory against counter-attacks and keeping supply lines open. In fact controlling roads was a key element of the campaign, as Dvornikov noted: 'from a military point of view, it is very important that the major roads in Syria are under the control of government forces'<sup>46</sup> – and for the rest of the campaign a 'battle for the roads' has been a central element. By March 2016, government forces had taken control of key areas in north-east Aleppo to disrupt supply flows to the opposition from Turkey through the Jarabulus and Azaz corridor, critical to defeating forces to the north of Aleppo. The Kuweires airbase, which had been under opposition control for three years had been re-captured. Militant forces had, Moscow claimed, been cleared from Latakia province and the coastal areas secured. Palmyra was under siege with operations ongoing to re-capture it, which Dvornikov described as 'cutting the ISIS grouping into two parts and open the road to Raqqa and Deir-E-Zor, which will create the necessary conditions to take control of the Iraqi border'.<sup>47</sup> Control had also been re-established over large oil and gas fields, denying the financial benefits to opposition elements. Phase 2 of the campaign, offensive operations to secure key territory, followed the first Syrian ceasefire agreement in February 2016. A reconciliation process began and it is clear that reconciling those who could be reconciled (at least to the point of ceasing activities against the government) – and destroying those who could not – was at the heart of the Russian campaign plan. At this stage of the campaign it had a limited effect, but later (post-Aleppo) it became a key enabler, allowing the Russian-led coalition to concentrate forces against primary targets while parking some others to be addressed later (like Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham in Idlib).

Phase 2 of the campaign may have caused some tension between the Russian military and the Syrian regime. The move on Palmyra was a Russian priority, as Dvornikov said, to open a drive to the Euphrates (what might be seen as the 'decisive operation' against ISIS). For the regime, Aleppo was the priority as the economic capital of Syria. The Russian view prevailed initially and Palmyra was re-captured from ISIS, with much publicity fanfare on 27 March 2016 but the offensive was not further developed. Instead, the focus for much of the rest of 2016 shifted to Aleppo, the Syrian government priority, because there were simply not enough quality ground forces for both operations.

Aleppo came to be called Stalingrad by the Russians, partly because it was presented as the key turning point in the campaign and, more practically, because of the nature of high-intensity urban fighting. The operation first

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> As noted in South Front's Russia Defence Report: 'Russian Military advisers in Syria - Quiet Russians', 27 February 2016, [https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9vfX\\_R8MTI](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9vfX_R8MTI)

<sup>46</sup> Gavrilov, 'Syria: Russian Thunder'.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

required the encirclement of east Aleppo, cutting opposition supply lines (again highlighting the battle of the roads) and then capturing the opposition controlled part of the city. It was by its nature a vicious battle with neither side giving nor seeking quarter. Like Stalingrad, it involved massive destruction as battles were waged building-by-building, street by street. Control of buildings moved back and forth and finally the government side won through overwhelming and unsubtle use of Russian firepower.

The Russians received criticism for this, with charges of excessive civilian casualties. Russia's use of 'dumb' bombs certainly ensured that there would be significant collateral damage but, Aleppo also reflected the reality of urban war-fighting, largely forgotten since the Second World War. It is not a defence of Russian actions to note that the US-led coalition also went through a similar experience of high-intensity urban combat in the later battles for Mosul and Raqqa. Indeed, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, Chief of the UK's Defence Staff, noted in a speech at RUSI in December 2017 that the intensity of the fighting for Mosul in 2017 had been 'comparable with Stalingrad'.<sup>48</sup> This again highlights that several aspects and experiences were common to both the Russian-led and US-led campaigns. The US-led coalition, despite its greater use of smart weapons, has also been criticised for the level of civilian casualties caused in taking the two cities, though the exact numbers and order of magnitude remain disputed.

While victory was achieved at Aleppo and agreement reached for the evacuation of opposition forces and civilians, the continuing weakness of second-line Syrian forces was exposed with the recapture of Palmyra by ISIS on 11 December 2016. ISIS attempted to push on to the Tiyas airbase and once again the Syrian government was on the back foot and the Russians embarrassed.

The victory at Aleppo, however, was a necessary precursor to Phase 3 of the campaign, decisive operations against ISIS to clear the west bank of the Euphrates, as it allowed the 'parking' of opposition elements (for example, in Idlib) and freeing up Russian and government resources for a move to the east. This required two axes of advance, towards Raqqa and Deir-E-Zor, so the 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps was created to provide the key strike-force. The formation of the Corps was announced in November 2016, made up of 10,000 troops (from various groups) and, as is now known, under Russian command.

The Corps was first used to defend the Tiyas airbase and then counter-attack, taking Palmyra on 4 March 2017, with heavy Russian air and artillery support. It was then moved to blunt a major Al Nusra offensive towards Hama and went on to play the critical role throughout 2017 in the operation to reach Deir-Ez-Zor, ultimately clearing the west bank of the Euphrates. This operation, again a war of roads, was one of encirclements and 'cauldrons' (a term used by the Russian MOD, for example 'the Akerbat Cauldron',<sup>49</sup> resonating with battles of the Second World War).

The operation to clear the western Euphrates Valley and relieve Deir-E-Zor and on to the southern Iraqi border, lasted for the remainder of 2017. Oversight of the execution of Phase 3 was the responsibility of the new commander of Russian Forces in Syria, Colonel-General Surovikin, who took command in March 2017. Phase 3 successfully delivered decisive operations against ISIS and Surovikin, like Dvornikov for Phase 1, was awarded the Hero of the Russian Federation. Phase 3 was declared complete in early December 2017, allowing President Putin to announce an operational-level "mission accomplished" and the drawdown (again a rotation and re-alignment rather than withdrawal) of Russian forces in Syria.

### **The end, the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning?**

Despite Putin's declaration of victory – a statement that has usually occurred at the end of each phase of the campaign, but this time one also linked to his re-election campaign – the fighting continues as the Syrian government seeks to reduce the enclaves of the irreconcilables before meaningful negotiations for a political settlement commence. Russian forces will remain in Syria, as noted by Shoigu: 'staying in Syria as part of our

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<sup>48</sup> Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, Annual Chief of the Defence Staff Lecture, RUSI, 14 December 2017, <https://rusi.org/event/annual-chief-defence-staff-lecture-2017>

<sup>49</sup> For example, in a statement by Major General Igor Konashenkov, the spokesman of the Russian Ministry of Defence, Moscow, 29 September 2017, reported on *Vesti News*, <https://www.youtube.com/UCA8M...>

efforts to assist the political settlement and restore peaceful life is the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, at full strength, and three military police battalions exercising control in the de-escalation zones'.<sup>50</sup> The air force group at Khmeimim and the naval supply facility at Tartus remain on a permanent basis in accordance with a treaty agreed by Syria. The latter allowed Shoigu to report to Putin a strategic outcome of the campaign: 'in accordance with your order, the permanent presence of Russian ships and submarines carrying high precision long-range weapons will be ensured in the Mediterranean Sea'.<sup>51</sup>

At the tactical level, as the attacks on Khmeimim showed, the Russian military is still carrying risks. Having rotated 48,000 troops through Syria and suffered probably only about 50 combat deaths (not including casualties sustained by private military companies, such as the Wagner Group), the Russian Armed Forces may now see a steady drip of casualties in an insurgency/terrorist environment that may eventually become significant. Until there is a final political settlement the ultimate success of the campaign cannot be judged.

In this regard, however, the Russian-led coalition finds itself in exactly the same position as the US-led coalition. Iraq and Syria are in several respects mirrors, both require political settlements that address the internal divisions of Sunni and Shia, Kurd and Arab, Christian and Muslim. The respective military interventions to "save" each country have not in themselves delivered this outcome, just as the 2003 intervention in Iraq did not produce a united, democratic, country. The Russian leadership may understand this better than the West, and has talked about a new federal constitution for Syria that seeks to address the inherent tensions. Whether it succeeds or not, of course, remains to be seen.

For the Russian military, though, as previously noted, Syria has already delivered a wealth of experience, including for younger officers, which has already delivered significant benefits in terms of Russian military development. The Russian leadership continues to identify and learn lessons to develop both technical capability and doctrine. Gerasimov noted in his March 2017 article, for instance, that the military had gained practical experience in 'planning and conducting air operations, deliver and employing air, sea and land-based high tech weapons'. The Russian leadership has also learned, as the Americans did in the 1991 Gulf War, the value of precision weapons delivery and the need to expand the availability of modern technology to ensure their effective use in automated 'reconnaissance-strike' systems. An example is the need to equip more units with the much advertised 'Strelets' reconnaissance and control complex (KRUS), used by Special Operations Forces and others in Syria and which proved critical in providing accurate and automated targeting information. Having claimed that the 'SVP-24 Gefest' system (essentially an aircraft mounted bombing computer with multiple inputs) allows dumb bombs to be delivered with comparable accuracy to high-precision weapons, the military will no doubt have to decide if the results were 'good enough' to justify its continued use.

A sign of where Russia goes from here in terms of its operational capability was perhaps indicated by President Putin's stated intent for next year's main exercise, VOSTOK-2018: 'the Armed Forces should practice transferring a large group of personnel with ground equipment and aviation over several thousand kilometres and deploying it in new areas'. This might be seen as a Syria-type intervention but including ground forces. VOSTOK-2018 will be worth watching.

Finally, the Syria campaign may have reminded the Russian military of the moral component and importance of Clausewitz's 'trinity' – the government, the army and the people. In his March 2016 interview, Dvornikov commented on the importance of the motivation and morale of the pro-government Syrian population in supporting military activity. The Russians repeatedly stressed that 5<sup>th</sup> Corps was made up of volunteers and the elements that they trusted and developed, such as the Suheil al Hassan's Tiger Forces were also volunteers. As a matter of policy, Russian military elements deployed to Syria were contract soldiers and not conscripts. Gerasimov also noted in his March 2017 address:

Victory in any war is achieved not only by the material, but also by the spiritual resources of the nation, its cohesion and attempts by all forces to oppose aggression. Therefore, the Russian

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<sup>50</sup> Shoigu, S. 'Meeting with Senior Defence Ministry Officials and Commanders of Military Districts and the Northern Fleet', 22 December 2017. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56474>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

Federation's military-political leadership is exerting considerable efforts to restore the people's faith in the army. Today the armed forces are arriving at a fundamentally new level of combat readiness and this is finding full support in Russian society. In the interests of furthering the prestige of the armed forces, it is important to develop ties between the army and society.<sup>52</sup>

The military's success to date in Syria is already being used as a vehicle for engaging with the Russian population.

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<sup>52</sup> Gerasimov, 'Contemporary Warfare and Current Issues for the Defence of the Country', p. 26.