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The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean: The Need for a 'Permanent' Commitment

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Abstract

This article examines the current Russian military involvement in Syria and in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. It considers, in particular, why the point is constantly being made in Russian political and military circles that these two commitments will be 'permanent' in nature. It begins by providing the rationales behind the initial establishment of a Russian Eastern Mediterranean naval flotilla and the later sending of ground troops with air support to Syria. It goes on to show what benefits - geopolitical, political and military-strategic - have accrued from the combination of these two missions. Finally, this article shows that these benefits are too substantial for any Russian political leader to contemplate a withdrawal from Syria at any point in the foreseeable future.

Keywords: Russian Military, Syria, Putin, Russian Navy, Russian Air Force, Strategic Deterrence, A2/AD, Eastern Mediterranean

Introduction

In December 2017, President Vladimir Putin visited the Russian airbase at Hmeimim in Syria and made a speech to the assembled military personnel. He announced that a 'significant proportion' of the Russian forces there were being withdrawn.[1] Their mission, he said, had been 'completed with a full victory'.[2] Also in December 2017, Putin submitted an agreement to the Russian parliament for ratification. This was an accord reached with the Syrian government for a 49-year extension on Russia's lease for its naval base at Tartus. This is Moscow's only major naval facility outside the territory of the former Soviet Union.[3] This agreement - duly ratified and with promises from Moscow that considerable upgrades to the facilities at Tartus will be made - indicates that Russia will, for a considerable period into the future, maintain a military presence

[1] 'Putin Visits Syria Base, Orders Partial Russian Withdrawal', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 December 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-syria-surprise-visit-partial-withdrawal/28909593.html.
[2] 'Syria Fully Liberated from ISIS Terrorists – Russian MoD', *RT News*, 6 December 2017, https://www.rt.com/news/412149-syria-liberated-isis-terrorists/; Shaun Walker, 'Vladimir Putin Makes Triumphant Visit to Syria Airbase', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2017, https://theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/11/vladimir-putin-visit-to-syria-airbase-bashir-al-assad.
[3] T. Parfitt, 'Putin Expands Naval Presence in the Mediterranean', *The Times*, 14 December 2017, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putin-expands-naval-presence-in-the-mediterranean-hq3rhhzdh.

both in Syria and in the Eastern Mediterranean more generally.[4] This presence, and as Putin himself stated, will be 'permanent' [*postoyannyi*].[5]

There appear to be two contrasting degrees of Russian commitment to involvement in Syria being displayed here. Does Putin want to strike a 'mission accomplished' note and withdraw from Syria or does he want to maintain a Russian force presence in the region that is, as he says, 'permanent'? This article examines this apparent tension and, in so doing, considers the initial rationales for sending Russian forces to the Syrian theatre and how this operation has benefited Putin, the Russian military and the strategic situation of Russia itself. Ultimately, it concludes that the long-term benefits arising from the presence of Russian forces in the region mean that Moscow will be striving to ensure that this presence will, indeed, be 'permanent'.

Putin's Rationales for Involvement

Putin took the decision to deploy Russian forces to Syria in September 2015.[6] They came to be stationed mainly at the Hmeimim airbase near Lakatia and at Tartus. This deployment was made for several reasons. Ostensibly, of course, it was stated to be in order to fight 'international terrorism'.[7] Russia was thus providing the same reasoning as that being given by those NATO countries which had also sent forces to the region: that is, terrorist groups had to be dealt with *in situ* in Syria so that they did not become a domestic danger within these countries. It was a question of containment.[8] However, while Russia does have problems with Islamist terrorism within its own borders, in its case its intervention in Syria could be said to have very little to do with this issue.[9] There are other rationales behind Moscow's move that actually carry much more weight.

Perhaps the overriding driver for the commitment to Syria (and also the one least understood from a Western viewpoint) is the wish to display the Russian concept - or 'ideology' - of *derzhavnost'*.[10] This word has been translated most readily as 'greatpowerness'. From at least the early nineteenth-century onwards, successive Tsarist, Soviet and Russian governments have clung to the deeply held sentiment that their country is one which should always be playing a major role in the shaping of world events. This is a country whose rulers, of whatever political

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[4] J. Lowe, 'Putin Vows Russia Will Keep Permanent Presence in Syria', *Newsweek*, 30 December 2017, http://www.newsweek.com/putin-assad-russia-will-defence-syrias-sovereignty-766240.

[5] 'Rossiya Nachala Formirovat' Postoyanniyu Gruppirovku v Sirii' ['Russia Begins to Form Permanent Grouping in Syria'], *RIA Novosti*, 26 December 2017, https://ria.ru.syria/20171226/1511726361.html.

[6] P. K. Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War', *The Brookings Institution*, 21 February 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/21/russia-stumbles-in-the-fog-of-syrian-war/.

[7] S. Rosenberg, 'Syria War: Putin's Russian Mission Accomplished', *BBC News* website, 13 December 2017, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-42330551.

[8] B. McKernan, 'Nato to Join the US-led Coalition Against Isis Fighting in Iraq and Syria', *Independent*, 25 May 2017, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/nato-us-coalition-isis-iraq-syria-donald-trump-jens-stoltenberg-brussels-visit-a7755751.html.

[9] M. Czuperski, et al, 'Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin's War in Syria', *Atlantic Council*, 5 April 2016, publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/.

[10] B. Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era* (London: Palgrave, 2002), p. 53.

ilk, have traditionally been loath to see their country sidelined and have felt compelled, whenever possible, to exhibit Russian power on the international stage.[11] Indeed, because of this sense of *derzhavnost'*, they have come to consider, as Bobo Lo expresses it, that on this international stage they have 'an *ipso facto* "right of involvement" in any matter...deemed important to [their] interests'. This search for *derzhavnost'*, though, has also always included a search for individual political aggrandizement. It was naturally hoped that such involvements would not only garner influence, leverage and prestige for the state entity itself, but also that the political leaders who had ordered such involvements would gain considerable domestic plaudits from an admiring Russian public.[12]

But come the immediate post-Cold War era, of course, and with the power of the Soviet Union a fading memory, the economically weak and militarily inconsequential Russia (certainly in conventional terms) of Boris Yeltsin (president from 1991 to 1999) was in no position to wield any serious international clout. This was a Russia pushed very much to the geopolitical margins as the 'new world order' began.[13] Moscow felt that it was ignored as the Western powers, led by the United States, engaged in their conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; created Kosovo as a state in stark defiance of Russian wishes, and expanded NATO towards the boundaries of Russia.[14] 'Nobody', as Putin was later to lament, 'listened to us'.[15]

This, of course, did not sit easy with a Kremlin still naturally imbued with the DNA of *derzhavnost'* - while finding no means of expressing it. As Dimitry Gorenburg, puts it, 'after the collapse of the Soviet Union…Russian foreign policy [has been] driven by the political elites' search for a new basis for national self-esteem'.[16] And while the administration of Yeltsin was forced to hold this 'search' in abeyance, that of his successor as Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, would not.[17] There came a point, indeed, when he felt he could not. From 2010 onwards, his personal popularity among the Russian people was beginning to wane and he had to look for ways of increasing his domestic approval ratings. To that end, he began to put considerable stress on the great-power credentials of Russia. He wanted to tap into a chord within a Russian population that was still, and despite the demise of the Soviet Union, acculturated into believing

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[11] Ibid.

[12] See M. Light, 'Russian Foreign Policy' in S. White, R. Sakwa and H. Hale (eds), *Developments in Russian Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2010); M. Urnov, 'Greatpowerness as the Key Element of Russian Self-consciousness Under Erosion', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 47(3-4), September-December 2014.

[13] A. Radin and C. Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2017), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1800/RR1826/RAND_RR1826.pdf.

[14] B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Baltimore, MA: Brookings Institution Press 2015), Chapter One.

[15] Quoted in T. Parfitt, 'My Rockets are Bigger and Faster, Boasts Putin', *The Times*, 2 March 2018, p. 30.

[16] D. Gorenburg, 'Russia's Strategic Calculus: Threat Perceptions and Military Doctrine', *PONARS Eurasia*, 448, November 2016, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-strategic-calculus-threat-perceptions-and-military-doctrine/.

[17] Y. E. Fedorov, 'Russia's Foreign Policy: Basic Trends under President Putin', in H. Smith (ed), *Russia and its Foreign Policy* (Helsinki: Aleksanteri Institute, 2005).

in the idea of the country's *derzhavnost'*. Thus in order 'to shore up [Putin's] domestic support…official propaganda started to appeal to the nationalistic sentiments of the population more aggressively'.[18] And here, as Putin understood, it was not just a question of gaining domestic support; it was also about gaining the actual *right* to rule Russia. Such an appeal to nationalistic sentiment would 'provide the ruling elite with a source of legitimacy with their domestic constituency'.[19]

Thus it was that a flag-waving interventionary mission by Russian troops to help a traditional ally, Syria - one wracked by a civil war - seemed to fit the bill here admirably.[20] It was a mission that came 'to symbolize a return to the…supposed "imperial" glory of the Soviet Union'.[21] And, having ordered this intervention, Putin would doubtless hope to bask in some of the 'glory' that would inevitably be reflected back on him.[22]

There were, of course, also more prosaic grounds for establishing a Russian military presence in Syria. It would, for instance, give Moscow leverage in a vitally important area of the world – the Middle East. Here was a region whose oil wealth but underlying instability virtually demanded interference from a host of interloping great-power actors. Russia had to be one of them. It was a region, moreover, that had come to draw added attention post-2011 as the Arab Spring began to have its effects - including the destabilizing of Syria. A host of regional and wider international players sought to have their input as the situation in Syria deteriorated: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Gulf States, Hezbollah and the various Kurdish players all wanted their say; as, of course, did the United States and other NATO member-states.[23] And once Russia itself had become involved in 2015, the leaders of all the above regional states and groupings, along with the representatives of the other great powers, now had to make calls on Kremlin luminaries. The opinion of those luminaries, and of Putin most notably, regarding Syria now came to matter.[24] Such visits - heavily publicized by the

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[18] N. Kozhanov, 'Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods', *The Royal Institute of International Affairs*, February 2018, p. 9, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/russian-policy-across-middle-east-motivations-and-methods.

[19] Gorenburg, 'Russia's Strategic Calculus'.

[20] R. Arnold, 'Surveys Show Russian Nationalism is on the Rise. This Explains a Lot About the Country's Foreign and Domestic Politics', *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/05/30/surveys-show-russian-nationalism-is-on-the-rise-this-explains-a-lot-about-the-countrys-foreign-and-domestic-politics/utm_term=.d016fe8e0e47.

[21] Kozhanov, 'Russian Policy Across the Middle East', p. 9.

[22] V. Ryzhkov, 'Syrian Adventure Will Cost Russians Dearly', *The Moscow Times*, 5 October 2015, https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/syrian-adventure-will-cost-russians-dearly-50080.

[23] Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War'.

[24] P. Wintour, 'Saudi King's Visit to Russia Heralds Shift in Global Power Structures, *The Guardian*, 5 October 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/05/saudi-russia-visit-putin-oil-middle-east; Office of the President of the Russian Federation, 'Meeting with Emir of Qatar Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani', 18 January 2016, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/presidnet/news/51177; A. Luhn, 'Putin Meets With Rex Tillerson in Russia Amid Escalating Tensions Over Syria', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/12/rex-tillerson-russia-moscow-trip-syria-attack.

Russian media - stressed that Putin's 'personal diplomacy [was] a force multiplier'.[25] This augmented for Putin the domestic kudos he was already deriving from having made his initial Syrian intervention. Putin, indeed, delighted in exhibiting to his own people the profile that he had come to create for Russia as a significant power-broker in the Middle East.[26]

A Russian military presence in Syria was also required in order to help ensure that the regime of President Bashir al-Assad remained in power. As noted, Syria had, for many decades, been an ally first of the Soviet Union and then, more latterly, of the new Russia.[27] Moscow, post-Cold War, had very few such allies; at least beyond the confines of its Near Abroad.[28] If the Assad regime had been left unsupported by Russia, and thus liable to be overthrown by Sunni Islamist or by NATO-backed elements in Syria, then other countries around the world would begin to think twice before forming substantive ties with Moscow.[29] Russia, lacking friends in the international arena, needs to attract more allies if it is to truly present itself as the great power it purports to be.[30]

There were thus several benefits for both Russia as a state entity and, perhaps more particularly, for Putin and his government at this geopolitical/political level in having a Russian military presence in Syria. There are risks attached, of course, not least that of being drawn into a wider regional war. President Barack Obama had once predicted that Russia would, in Syria, become 'stuck in a quagmire'. And this may yet, indeed, come to pass.[31] Putin, therefore, having ordered this intervention and having engaged in so much high-profile diplomacy related to it, has to a large degree put his own reputation on the line. If it all goes well then he takes the plaudits; but if it goes wrong then he will have to take the brickbats.

The risks involved, though, seem to be ones worth taking both for Putin and for Russia. This is especially so when the benefits for Moscow at the military-strategic level and below are also factored in. It is these distinctly military benefits that have perhaps received less attention in analyses of the Russian involvement in Syria. They are, though, important in fully understanding why the Russian goal is, indeed, to make this involvement 'permanent'.

Gaining Operational Experience

The first military benefit comes from the fact that vital combat experience is being gained by Russian forces at the operational and tactical levels on the ground in Syria. Whereas, prior to 2008, NATO militaries had been accumulating a vast wealth of such experience post-Cold War in the likes of Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and in any number of African countries, the Russian military had been doing very little apart from some involvement in an internal security role in the Chechen wars of 1999-2009. The Russian military's lack of exposure to actual

[25] Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War'.
[26] S. Blank, 'The Real Reason Putin is Sending Troops to Syria', *Newsweek*, 27 September 2015, www.newsweek.com/real-reason-putin-sending-troops-syria-376682.
[27] R. Donaldson and J. Nogee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (New York: M E Sharpe 1998), p. 307.
[28] Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era*, p. 72.
[29] Kozhanov, 'Russian Policy Across the Middle East', p. 7.
[30] C. Lynch, 'Why Putin is so Committed to Keeping Assad in Power', *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2015, foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/07/putins-russia-is-wedded-to-bashar-al-assad-syria-moscow/.
[31] S. Rosenberg, 'Syria War: Putin's Russian Mission Accomplished'.

warfighting was shown up in its poor performance during its clash with Georgia in 2008.[32] It was, of course, the internal analysis of this conflict and the lessons learned from it that then sparked this military's ongoing modernization process into truly effective life. This has led to the creation today of a Russian armed forces that are markedly more powerful and efficient than they were just 10 years ago.[33] And while this revamped military could conduct as many exercises as it liked within Russia, and engage in a low-level campaign of attrition in Ukraine from 2014 onwards, such activities could not substitute for experience of a fluid combat situation in a joint expeditionary environment involving the use of high-end military capabilities.[34] The mission being conducted now by Russian forces in Syria is ticking this particular box. It is providing a vital opportunity for, in particular, the marines, special forces, air force and even the navy to test not just their own capabilities but also their ability to work jointly. Logisticians are also being provided with severe tests and seemingly passing them comfortably.[35] As the head of the Russian military, General Valerii Gerasimov, put it, his military is 'acquiring priceless combat experience in Syria'.[36] It is an operation that has, moreover, provided a significant proving-ground for testing new equipment and weapons systems. The head of the Russian Duma's defence committee, Vladimir Shamanov, pointed out the (perhaps exaggerated) scale of this testing: 'As we helped the brotherly Syrian people, we tested over 200 new types of weapons'.[37]

Among the weapons it seems were tested (although not 'new') were two types of road-mobile ballistic missiles. There is evidence that the rather-dated Tochka (SS-21) short-range (100km) ballistic missile has been used.[38] More significantly, so, it seems (and confirmed by the Russian Defence Minister[39]), has the Tochka's replacement, the much-vaunted short-range (500km)

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[32] See A. Cohen and R. E. Hamilton, *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, Strategic Studies Institute, 2011, http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pdffiles/pub1069.pdf.

[33] K. Giles, 'Assessing Russia's Reorganized and Rearmed Military', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 May 2017, carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853.

[34] See, for instance, I. Sutyagin and J. Bronk, *Russia's New Ground Forces: Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security*, Whitehall Papers, Royal United Services Institute, 2017, https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-papers/russias-new-ground-forces-capabilties-limitations-and-implications.

[35] D. Sharkov, 'Russian Military Used Syria War to Train Forces and Learn US Combat Moves, Says General', *Newsweek*, 5 January 2018, http://www.newsweek.com/russian-military-used-syria-war-train-forces-and-learn-us-combat-moves-says-772027.

[36] V. Gerasimov, 'Po Opytu Sirii' ['From the Experience of Syria'] *Voyenno-promyshlennyy Kuryer*, 9-15 March 2016, http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_09_624.pdf.

[37] M. Chulov, 'Moscow Mired in Syria as Putin's Gameplan Risks a Deadly Ending', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/24/russia-putin-syrian-war-intervention-assad-ghouta-turkey-iran.

[38] L. Tomlinson, 'Russia Sends Syria its Largest Missile Delivery to Date, US Officials Say', *Fox News World*, 8 February 2017, http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/02/08/russia-sends-syria-its-largest-missile-delivery-to-date-us-officials-say.html.

[39] Sergei Shoigu quoted in 'Russian Defense Minister Confirms Iskander Missiles Were Used Against Terrorists in Syria', Southfront.org, 22 December 2017, https://southfront.org/russian-defense-minister-confirms-iskander-missiles-were-used-against-terrorists-in-syria/.

ballistic missile, the Iskander-M (SS-26). This is seen as one of the most potent weapons in the current Russian military arsenal.[40] It can carry a variety of warheads (including nuclear); has a highly sophisticated guidance system, and is designed to evade missile defences (helped by its sheer speed – Mach 5.9). Its recent deployment to the Kaliningrad region has caused NATO much angst.[41] NATO, indeed, has no missile analogous to this Iskander-M. Its use in Syria, however, seems to carry little operational logic. A highly sophisticated ballistic missile is a very expensive weapon to employ against low-value 'terrorist' targets. It would have made far more sense in cost-effectiveness terms to simply use Russian aircraft based at Hmeimim to hit the same targets.[42] Some utility, of course, will have come from the experience gained from firing these missiles in an operational environment, but this does not seem reason enough to employ such a weapon in such an operational scenario.[43] Here lies a conundrum.

Finding an answer to this conundrum is best considered after first describing the activities of the offshore Russian naval presence. The vessels operating in the Eastern Mediterranean are supporting the Russian troops ashore, yes, but they are also performing a crucial strategic function.

The Tradition of a Russian Naval Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean

In 1964, during the Cold War, the Soviet Navy formed the 5th Eskadra (or squadron) in the Mediterranean. Although not technically a 'fleet', it was quite substantial and at one point consisted of some 95 vessels. This squadron was seen to have three main roles. The first was to act as a physical symbol of Soviet state power: to display *derzhavnost'* in what was at that time becoming an increasingly important part of the world.[44] The second role was diplomatic: it was there to show support for Soviet allies in the region.[45] Indeed, it has been said that the Eastern Mediterranean became 'the first region [in the world] in which the Soviet Navy was used for

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[40] 'Russia May Send More Iskander Missiles to Kaliningrad', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 13 October 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-reported-may-send-iskander-missiles-kanliningrad-us-armored-divisions-poland/28790998.html.

[41] See, for instance, S. Sholli, 'RAF Spy Planes Monitor Vladimir Putin Missiles as Tensions Between Russia and Britain Soar', *Sunday Express*, 25 February 2018, https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/923610/vladimir-putin-raf-spy-planes-ballistic-missiles-uk; Julian Borger, 'Kaliningrad Photos Appear to Show Russia Upgrading Nuclear Weapons Bunker', *The Guardian*, 18 June 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/18/kaliningrad-nuclear-bunker-russia-satellite-photos-report.

[42] M. Thompson, 'Russia's Unguided Weapons in Syria Could Ricochet on Moscow', *Newsweek*, 2 October 2015, time.com/4059442/russia-bombing-syria-isis-assad/.

[43] D. Majumdar, 'Report: Russia's Dangerous Iskander-M Ballistic Missiles Are Now in Syria'. *The National Interest*, 7 January 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/report-russias-dangerous-iskander-m-ballistic-missiles-are-18991.

[44] B. Watson, 'The Mission and Operations of the Soviet Navy, 1956-1977', PhD Thesis (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International 1979), p. 179.

[45] See K. Allen, 'The Black Sea Fleet and Mediterranean Naval Operations' in B. W. Watson and S. M. Watson, *The Soviet Navy: Strengths and Liabilities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1986), pp. 216-227.

foreign policy purposes'.[46] The third main role for the 5th Eskadra - and the most important - was maritime forward defence.

At sea, Russia, whether in its Tsarist or Soviet incarnations, has always sought to maintain maritime forward defensive zones just as, on land, it has sought to maintain defensive 'buffer states' between its own territory and those of its main adversaries.[47] Creating the maritime version of such buffers has historically come in the shape of 'occupying' the maritime approaches to the country. The Eastern Mediterranean is one of these approaches. A Russian naval presence in this particular space was always seen as necessary specifically to protect and prevent the blocking of one of the country's most vital economic and strategic arteries – the Turkish Straits leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean.[48]

It was axiomatic thus to Tsarist (and later to Soviet) strategic planners that a number of their warships needed to be out of the Black Sea and operating forward in the Eastern Mediterranean. It was, as Eric Morris put it, in 'Tsarist and Soviet interests to engage in the perennial search for a way out of narrow seas…[and to]…secure a glacis...to protect [the country's] southern flank'.[49] Hence, the 5th Eskadra's prime role was, as tradition dictated, to provide such a 'southern flank' glacis to help defend the Soviet Union itself from any hostile activity by NATO naval forces operating in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Axiomatic or not, however, during the 1990s the underfunded post-Cold War Russian Navy was in no position to continue to maintain any Eastern Mediterranean naval glacis. With the vast majority of its ships at that time being tied up in port for want of repair, trained crews and, above all, fuel, the 5th Eskadra became a casualty and was officially disbanded in 1992. From then on there were no Russian naval vessels on station in the Mediterranean.[50]

Putin's Naval Commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean

This situation changed as the Russian military's post-2008 modernization programme started to have its effects on the navy. The fleet began to receive new warships and submarines; and training-time, personnel morale and operational deployability all increased.[51] Putin then began,

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[46] C. W. Jones, 'Soviet Access to Port Facilities', in ibid, Watson and Watson, *The Soviet Navy: Strengths and Liabilities*, p. 280.

[47] See M. Bassin and K. E. Aksenov, 'Mackinder and the Heartland Theory in Post-Soviet Geopolitical Discourse', *Geopolitics*, 11, 2006; M. Boulegue, 'The Russia-NATO Relationship Between a Rock and a Hard Place: How the "Defensive Inferiority Syndrome" is Increasing the Potential for Error', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 30(3), 2017, p. 363.

[48] E. Morris, *The Russian Navy: Myth and Reality* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1977), p. 77.

[49] Ibid..

[50] 'Tri Goda Nazad Bylo Sformirovano Operativnoe Komandirovanie Postoyannogo Operativnogo Soedineniya VMF Rossii v Sredizemnom More' [Three Years Ago, the Operational Command of the Permanent Operational Grouping of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea was Formed'], Press Service of the Southern Military Command, 22 September 2016, https//function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096837@egNews#net.

[51] Gudrun Persson (ed), 'Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016', Swedish Defence Ministry (FOI), pp. 68-71, https://www.foi.se/report-search/pdf?fileName=D%3A%5dReportSearch%5CFiles%5C5fa9f89b-8136-4b15-9aaf-1d2227aee90a0.pdf.

in line with the spirit of nationalism then being stoked, to express an interest in using elements of this improved fleet once more in the Mediterranean. In February 2012, and when he was taking his turn as 'only' prime minister instead of president, Putin felt he could boldly aver that the Russian Navy had by now 'resumed its presence…in the Mediterranean'.[52] This 'presence', however, consisted only of one or two vessels temporarily operating there or merely transiting. But it is clear that, as early as 2012, Putin himself was showing an interest not just in the Mediterranean but also in the Middle East region more generally. Nikolay Kozhanov, for one, makes the link: 'After the re-election of Vladimir Putin [as president again]...in 2012, Moscow substantially increased its presence in the region'.[53] It seems that the idea of creating a military presence both in the Mediterranean Sea and ashore in the Middle East (and long before the actual deployment of Russian troops to Syria in 2015) is something that was personally important to Putin.

It was actually to be a year later, in February 2013, that the navy itself announced that there would be a 'permanent' deployment of Russian naval units to the Mediterranean – but this was only to begin in 2015![54] This flotilla was to be officially designated as a 'Permanent Operational Grouping' [*Postoyannoe Operativnoe Soedinenie*].[55] Putin followed this in June 2013 with his own descriptor that this 'grouping' would constitute a 'permanent presence'.[56]

This adjective 'permanent' is key here. It indicates a strong commitment and it is a word that has been used widely and for some time to describe the Russian naval presence in the Mediterranean. It appears, for instance, in the current Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation. This was published in July 2015 and pointed out that in the Mediterranean Sea Russia would 'ensure a sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation in the region *on a permanent basis*' [*na postoyannoi osnove*].[57] This wording is different from the previous iteration of the Maritime Doctrine in 2001. In terms of the goals set then in relation to the Mediterranean Sea, this 2001 version had the same sentence, stating that Russia would 'ensure a sufficient naval presence of the Russian Federation in the region'. The final clause, however, of 'on a permanent basis' was missing. It was added to the 2015 version.[58] The word 'permanent'

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[52] V. Putin, 'Being Strong: Why Russia Needs to Rebuild its Military', *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2012, foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/21/being-strong/.
[53] Kozhanov, 'Russian Policy Across the Middle East', p. 2.
[54] P. Felgenhauer, 'Moscow Attempts to Extend its Strategic Influence from the Black Sea to Mediterranean', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 10(43), 7 March 2013, https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-attempts-to-extend-its-strategic-influence-from-the-black-sea-to-mediterannean/.
[55] 'Tri Goda Nazad Bylo Sformirovano Operativnoe Komandirovanie Postoyannogo Operativnogo Soedineniya VMF Rossii v Sredizemnom More'.
[56] 'Russian President Visits General Staff Central Command Post – TV Report, *Rossiya 1*, Moscow, 1600 GMT, 6 June 2013, BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union – Political, via LexisNexis Academic.
[57] Security Council of the Russian Federation (2015), 'Morskaya Doktrina Rossiyskoi Federatsii' [Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation], http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/18/34.html. Stress added. Hereinafter, 'Russian Maritime Doctrine, 2015'.
[58] Security Council of the Russian Federation (2001), 'Morskaya Doktrina Rossiyskoi Federatsii' [The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation], http://csef.ru.ru/politica-i-geopolitica/510/morskaya-doctrina-rossijskoj-federaczija-na-period-do-2020-goda.

also made an appearance in the Russian Naval Doctrine (as distinct from the Maritime Doctrine) of July 2017. Here, one of the navy's 'major objectives' was listed as being the 'ensuring of a permanent naval presence [*postoyannogo voenno-morskogo prisutstviya*] of the Russian Federation in the Mediterranean Sea'.[59] Indeed, in late 2017, General Gerasimov himself verbally confirmed the status of this presence, saying that, 'We will not withdraw…Our group of vessels is permanently operating in the Mediterranean now'.[60] The word 'permanent', used in regard not only to this naval presence but also to the later Russian mission ashore in Syria, is one, moreover, also given prominence by the Russian media.[61]

All this being said, however, it is wise to remember that this Russian word for 'permanent' - *postoyannyi* - does not necessarily mean 'forever'. In a language like Russian, with its lexical limitations, one word often has to cover for several meanings which a more nuanced language such as English, with its greater profundity of words, can create. *Postoyannyi* thus also has to cover for the English concepts of 'constant' or, in this case, 'standing' – as in 'a standing force' (e.g. in the Eastern Mediterranean). However, while it may not be literally translated as 'forever', *postoyannyi* is still a word that implies a long-term commitment. Its use by Putin; by other senior figures; in doctrine, and by the Russian media in such prominent terms, may be taken to be a form of signalling. This would be directed at both friend and foe alike to make the point that the Russian Navy will be operating in the Eastern Mediterranean and out of its Tartus port (now leased for the extra 49 years) for no little time to come.[62]

Currently, this naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean consists of a flotilla numbering about 15 vessels. Included are surface warships, submarines and support vessels. These come mostly from the Black Sea Fleet but occasionally units will also join it from the Northern and Pacific fleets.[63] This growth of Russian naval power in the Eastern Mediterranean also has to be seen, in a zero-sum sense, in relation to the diminishing US naval activity there.[64] During the Cold War, the size of its Sixth Fleet meant that the United States had considerable regional

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[59] Decree of the President of Russia, 'Ob Utverzhdenii Osnov Gosudarstvennoi Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii v Oblasti Voenno-Morskoi Deyatel'nosti na Period do 2030 Goda' [Concerning the Approval of State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Area of Naval Activities for the Period up to 2030], 20 July 2017, para. 38 (g), publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201707200015?index=0&rangeSize=1. Hereinafter, 'Russian Naval Doctrine, 2017'.

[60] 'Russian Naval Group to be Permanently Deployed in Eastern Mediterranean', *Sputnik News*, 27 December 2017, https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201712271060342229-russian-mediterannean-naval-group-permanent/.

[61] See, for instance, 'Russia Starts Forming Permanent Force Grouping at Syria's Tartus and Hmeymim', *Tass*, 26 December 2017, http://tass.com/defense/983056; 'Russia Starts Forming Permanent Groups in Syria's Tartus, Hmeymim Bases – Shoigu', *Sputnik News*, 26 December 2017, https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201712261060321937-russia-tartus-base-syria/.

[62] The repair and replenishment facilities at Tartus allow Russian vessels to remain on station for longer in the Mediterranean and not have to return so often to Black Sea ports.

[63] 'Russia's Black Sea Fleet to Maintain 15-ship Task Force in Eastern Mediterranean – Navy', *RT News*, 1 June 2017, https://www.rt.com/news/390482-russia-black-sea-fleet-figures/.

[64] J. Altman, 'Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Growing Risk', *Naval War College Review*, 69(1) 2016, digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss1/5/, p.79.

influence but now, with Washington's recent 'turn to Asia', this fleet's strength has been radically diminished as most of its assets have been redeployed to the Pacific.[65]

The Navy's Roles Today in the Eastern Mediterranean

Putin has today created a permanent Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean whose roles overall are really quite similar to those in Soviet times: to advertise Russian power through an exhibition of *derzhavnost'*; to show support for regional allies, and to help secure Russia's 'southern flank'.

The first two roles are covered by what both Russian Maritime and Naval doctrines refer specifically to as the mission to 'show the flag' [*demonstratsii flaga*].[66] It needs to be understood just how important this aspect of 'showing the flag' is in current Russian naval thinking and how such an activity is largely directed at a Russian domestic audience. As Aleksandr Golts points out, the Russian Navy today constitutes a 'main element of the government's "patriotic propaganda".'[67] Two vessels in particular, sent in late 2016, may be said to have been the chief providers of this 'patriotic propaganda' off Syria. These are the navy's only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* (55,000 tonnes), and the world's largest (non-carrier) combatant warship (and allegedly 'the world's most powerful ship') the 25,000-tonne nuclear-powered 'battlecruiser', *Petr Velikii* (*Peter the Great*).[68]

The rather dated *Admiral Kuznetsov* (launched in 1985) was the most high-profile unit dispatched (from the Northern Fleet) to the Eastern Mediterranean. It is clear why this particular ship was tasked. It was sent, not because it or its aircraft could make any significant operational difference in Syria, but rather because it was a vessel that could confer 'prestige [and] create the appearance of [Russia] being a major naval power'. In Syrian waters, as Michael Kofman and Norman Polmar point out, 'the *Admiral Kuznetsov*'s main role has always been "status projection" or political presence rather than power projection'.[69] It was thus acting, in Daniel Thomassen's words, merely as a 'symbolic political instrument'.[70]

It was this symbolism - this *image* of power - that mattered most with the sending of the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, not its ability to provide *physical* power in terms of kinetic combat effect. In essence, this aircraft carrier was simply a floating statement of Russian *derzhavnost'*.[71] In this

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[65] C. Le Mière, 'America's Pivot to East Asia: The Naval Dimension', *Survival*, 53(3), 2012.
[66] 'Russian Maritime Doctrine, 2015', para 43; 'Russian Naval Doctrine, 2017', para 29 (d).
[67] A. Golts, 'The Russian Navy: To Deter the US and to Compete With China', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14(102), 1 August 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/the-russian-navy-to-deter-the-us-and-to-compete-with-china/.
[68] M. Bodner, 'Putin's Great White Fleet', *The Moscow Times*, 26 October 2016, https://themsocowtimes.com/articles/putins-great-white-fleet-55858.
[69] M. Kofman and N. Polmar, '"New" Russian Navy Part 4: Naval Aviation Taking Flight Again…Slowly', *Proceedings*, 143(3), March 2017, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-03, p. 78.
[70] D. Thomassen, 'Russian Blue-water Navy is a Pipe Dream', *Proceedings*, 142(11), November 2016, p. 24, http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016-11/russian-blue-water-navy-pipe-dream.
[71] M. Kofman, 'The Russian Navy's Great Mediterranean Show of Force', *The National Interest*, 21 October 2016, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/moscows-show-force-russian-naval-aviation-goes-war-18134.

respect, and with ideas of reflected 'glory' in mind, it is perhaps significant that Putin claimed that the sending of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the Mediterranean had been on *his* own 'personal initiative'.[72] This, again, points to the fact that Putin himself was looking to be a specific beneficiary of the 'patriotic propaganda' derived from this vessel's operations off the Syrian coast.

The *Admiral Kuznetsov* had, of course, and as part of its image, to be seen to be sending its aircraft on combat sorties.[73] However, from just a brief examination of its overall operational performance in 2016, it is clear why this aircraft carrier was actually better suited to a propaganda role than it was to a combat one.

It actually carried few frontline aircraft. It seems that this was an issue related to a lack of pilots with experience of deck landings rather than to any restrictions of space for aircraft aboard.[74] Its attack aircraft - Su-33 and Mig-29K - were, moreover, limited in their effectiveness in that their ordnance load was reduced by the vessel's lack of a catapult-launch system (with only a 'ski-jump' for lift). A few sorties were flown from the *Admiral Kuznetsov*'s decks before two non-fatal accidents brought about a halt to air operations A Su-33 ended up in the sea after an arrester-gear cable broke as it tried to land and, in a separate incident, a Mig-29K was forced to ditch close to the vessel after running out of fuel. It had been circling for a considerable period while awaiting the freeing of arrester-gear cables that had become entangled. This distinctly unprofessional outcome could have been avoided if the aircraft had simply been diverted to land at the nearby Hmeimim airbase. The fact that it was not sums up the general lack of experience that was evident in many of the activities aboard the *Admiral Kuznetsov*.[75]

In the wake of the Mig-29K incident, it was decided that the better course of action was to have all of the carrier's aircraft operating from Hmeimim.[76] The ship then lost its operational utility and simply steamed off the coast (belching its signature black smoke[77]) as a floating - and by now slightly ironic - 'symbolic political instrument'.

The other major Russian warship that accompanied the *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the Eastern Mediterranean in 2016 was the *Petr Velikii* (launched in 1995). While impressive-looking and with decks bristling with missile tubes, this ship's armaments were never employed off Syria. Again, though, her sheer bulk and the image thus portrayed would have provided the necessary

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[72] 'Putin Nazval Siriiskii Pokhod "Admirala Kuznetsova" Lichnoi Initsiativoi' [Putin Calls Syrian Visit of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* his Personal Initiative], *RBC News*, 23 February 2017, https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/58aef9949a7947f38d2902d2?from=newsfeed.

[73] The *Admiral Kuznetsov* had made a number of previous post-Cold War voyages to the Mediterranean from its northern base (in the winters of 1996-1997, 2007-08, 2008-09, 2011-12 and 2013-14). These were ostensibly for training purposes in order to make use of the greater hours of daylight and better weather in the Mediterranean for on- and off-deck aircraft movements. The 2016 voyage was, however, the first time that its aircraft had engaged in combat operations.

[74] D. Majumdar, 'Russia's Only Aircraft Carrier is Headed for Syria (But Suffers One Big Flaw)', *The National Interest*, 19 September 2016, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russias-only-aircraft-carrier-headed-syria-suffers-one-big-17756.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Like many Soviet vessels of its era, this carrier was designed to run on the poor grade fuel oil that would be found in (the then) Third World ports – hence much smoke is generated.

'patriotic propaganda'. Its mission, like that of the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, was naturally classed as 'successful' by the Russian naval hierarchy.[78]

In terms of the overall Syrian combat mission, there appears to have been no real point in sending these two venerable leviathans, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* and the *Petr Velikii*. Although some experience of carrier-borne aircraft operations would have been gained, the presence of these vessels seems to have been designed merely to impress a domestic Russian audience and to provide a high-profile advertisement of Moscow's support for Assad. But the Russian Navy *has*, though, provided support for Assad in more practical ways. This has been through the activities of what might be looked upon as today's 'modern' Russian Navy. For the true combat potency of this navy (and leaving aside its ballistic-missile submarine capability) lies, not with Soviet-vintage capital ships, but rather with other, much smaller and far more modern vessels: newly built frigates, corvettes and attack submarines.[79]

It is such smaller, modern vessels that have provided (limited) fire support for Assad's forces and for the Russian mission ashore in Syria. Notably, in October 2015, a frigate and three corvettes from the Caspian Sea Flotilla fired at least 26 Kalibr cruise missiles at targets in Syria. These Kalibr missiles are the latest, most flexible and most potent cruise missiles in the Russian naval arsenal (they can also be fired from ground launchers and from aircraft). They are fast (up to Mach 2.5); have a long range (out to 2,500km); are designed to thwart missile defence systems, and can be used in both the anti-ship and land-attack roles. The Kalibr can even carry a nuclear warhead.[80] NATO, as with the Iskander-M, has nothing to match these missiles. In November 2015, more Kalibrs were fired from the same Caspian Sea source.[81] From the Eastern Mediterranean, frigates have also fired their Kalibrs into Syria as have the very latest *Kilo*-class submarines. Another major attack from the Mediterranean by these 'repeatedly used' missiles was in October 2017.[82]

Again, though, as with the use ashore in Syria of the Iskander-M ballistic missiles, firing all these very expensive Kalibrs at insubstantial ground targets (even though they were disingenuously described by Russian sources as 'targets of critical importance'[83]) could be seen as a waste of resources. And while their employment would have again provided some useful experience for the personnel operating them, there is, once more, the conundrum: why not just bomb these targets using conveniently available aircraft at local bases?

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[78] 'Russia's Naval Task Force Back Home after Successful Operation Off Syria's Coast', *Tass*, 9 February 2017, tass.com/defense/929913.

[79] See, for instance, R. Connolly, 'Towards a Dual Fleet? The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation and The Modernisation of Russian Naval Capabilities ', New Research Division Paper NATO Defense College, June 2017, www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1061.

[80] S. Roblin, 'Why Russia's Enemies Fear the Kalibr Cruise Missile', *The National Interest*, 22 January 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-russias-enemies-fear-the-kalibr-cruise-missile-19129.

[81] N. Polmar and M. Kofman, 'Impressive Beneath the Waves', *Proceedings*, 143(2), February 2017, p. 64, https:/.www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-02.

[82] 'Kalibr Missiles in Syria Take Aim Only at "Targets of Critical Importance"', *Sputnik News*, 6 October 2017, https://sputniknews.com/analysis/201710061058007119-russia-syria-kalibr-missiles/.

[83] Ibid.

The first point to make here is that firing the Kalibrs was important because it advertised *actual* Russian military capability. All of the Kalibr launches were filmed. From one perspective, the carefully presented images of these high-tech cruise missiles being fired at targets hundreds of kilometres away can be seen as a means of showing off these weapons to prospective foreign purchasers.[84] They could also be seen in a 'patriotic propaganda' light and designed to impress the important Russian domestic audience. Their use could also be aimed at undermining the morale of those regional players who would think to oppose Assad. Crucially, though, these images would also have been directed at NATO. As Gorenburg points out, 'the real goal [of this display of firepower] was to show NATO military planners that Russia has a new standoff land-attack missile capability that can be difficult to neutralise'.[85]

It will have been the same with the firing of the Iskander-Ms. Their use would also have been sending a warning message to NATO. In the case of the Iskander-Ms, the message would be that since Russia is prepared to utilize these nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles on a backwater Syrian battlefield then it will also be very likely to use them again against NATO forces on any future European battlefield. The Russians are thus advertising not just the capability of the Iskander-M but also the fact that they have a low threshold of use of these weapons.

Here, with this ready use of both Kalibrs and Iskander-Ms in Syria, is a form of strategic messaging designed seemingly to *deter* NATO. That is, if NATO decides to engage in any hostilities with Russia (for whatever reason) then the costs for NATO - brought about by the use of these missiles very early on in any conflict situation - could be profound.

Indeed, the ready use of both of these missiles in Syria fits into a mindset that currently appears to dominate Russian strategic thinking. Overall, when it comes to any possible future clashes with the US and NATO, the Russian military - seeing itself as considerably weaker than its aggressive (in its view) Western rivals - can be seen to have adopted a defensive stance vis-à-vis this particular threat vector.[86] As Gorenburg points out, 'Western planners need to keep in mind that Russian leaders see Russia as weaker than its adversaries and very much on the defensive'.[87] Mathieu Boulegue agrees, saying that Russia sees its strategic stance as being

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[84] The Kalibrs' operational use would certainly encourage their sale to foreign buyers (or at least the sale of the Kalibr's export version, the shorter-range Klub). While the Kalibr can have a range of 2,500km, international treaties limit the sale of cruise missiles with ranges beyond 300km - hence, this is the Klub's maximum range. Foreign arms exports are a vital source of revenue for a Russian economy overly reliant on the sale of hydrocarbons. N. Polmar and M. Kofman, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?', *Proceedings*, 143(1), February 2017, p. 67, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017-01/"new"-russian-navy-part-2.

[85] D. Gorenburg, 'What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell us About Advances in its Capabilities', *PONARS Eurasia*, Policy Memo 424, March 2016, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/advances-russian-military-operations.

[86] See G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov, 'On the Character and Content of New-generation Warfare', *Voennaya Mysl* [Military Thought], 10, 2013, http://elibrary.ru/contents.asp?issueid=1166672; Gen. V. V. Gerasimov, 'The Value of Science to Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations', *Voyenno-Promyshlennyi Kur'er* [Military Industrial Courier], 8, 26 February 2013, p. 3, http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf.

[87] Gorenburg, 'Russia's Strategic Calculus'.

'purely defensive'.[88] This is a Russian military that, fearing military defeat, currently wants to use any and every means to disrupt or deter any possible NATO aggressive action against it.

Ironically, though, in order then to improve its deterrence capacity, this military is one that is now leaning towards an aggressive form of deterrence known as 'active restraint'; or what the Russians call 'strategic deterrence' [*strategicheskoe sderzhivanie*].[89] This is a thinking that seeks to move the idea of deterrence away from the nuclear realm and into the 'non-nuclear sphere'. There are various elements within this notion of strategic deterrence, including activities designed to destabilize potential Western opponents through the likes of cyberattacks and election-result manipulation. Another important element, however, in this particular deterrence posture is the rhetorical stressing of the fact that Russia would make significant use, as part of any future warfighting scenario, of its highly sophisticated missiles – such as the Kalibr and Iskander-M. The threat is that such missiles, using conventional warheads, could achieve not just operational - battlefield - effect but also strategic effect as well. 'Active' demonstrations of Russian power through the use of Kalibrs and Iskander-Ms in Syria - which highlight the damage that the Russian military can theoretically cause to NATO fielded forces - can thus be seen as very much part of this 'strategic deterrence' approach.[90]

Indeed, it is into this form of deterrence as a whole that the activities of the Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean may be seen to fit. This flotilla's Kalibr missiles can threaten not only NATO vessels operating at almost any point across the Mediterranean but also any targets presented on land out to 2,500 km (which covers most of Central and Eastern Europe). These ground targets can range from NATO concentrations of forces, logistics' hubs and communications nodes all the way up to seats of government in capital cities. The threat posed by the Kalibrs (including, indeed, when nuclear-armed) of Russia's Eastern Mediterranean flotilla is bound to generate considerable pause in any future NATO thinking as regards operational activities (either defensive or offensive) against Russian forces in any future conflict.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the units of this 'modern' Russian navy can thus be seen as acting, just as the 5th Eskadra did in Soviet times, to protect Russia's 'southern flank' by deterring any possible hostile activity by NATO. It is present, it can certainly be argued, not so much for the defence of Syria or Assad or of Russian regional interests, but actually of Russia itself. Here lies its major role – its crucial military-strategic function – it is a glacis for the maritime forward defence of Russia.

Of course, and as with many a defensive military system, it can also be seen as providing the basis for offensive operations as well. This point will be returned to.

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[88] Boulegue, 'The Russia-NATO Relationship Between a Rock and a Hard Place', p. 365.

[89] See, 'Russia Military Power', Defense Intelligence Agency, 2017, p. 23, www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications; A. Loukianova Fink, 'Contrasting Russian Perspectives on Coercion and Restraint in Russia's Security Relations with the West', Center of International and Security Studies at Maryland Working Paper, December 2017, www.cissm.umd.edu/publications/contrasting-russian-perspectives-coercion-and-restraint-russia's-security-relations.

[90] 'Ispol'zovanie Robotov i Shirokoe Primenenie Vysokotochnogo Oruzhiya Stanut Osnovnymi Osobennostyami Voin Budushchego - Nachal'nik Genshtaba Rossiiskoi Armii [The Use of Robots and the Widespread Use of Precision Weapons Will be the Main Features of the Wars of the Future: The Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Army], *Interfax-AVN* 24 March 2018, http://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=476975.

Maritime Forward Defence

As it is currently configured, the 'modern' Russian Navy can be seen as one quite suited to this deterrence role such as that in the Eastern Mediterranean. The use of relatively small vessels such as frigates, corvettes and submarines to fire very effective missiles such as the Kalibr is an example of the use, adopted by the Russian Navy, of a 'distributed' naval force structure. It is being noted today that most of the combat effectiveness of modern navies comes from the potency of the missiles fired from platforms and not from the size of the platforms themselves. Indeed, large vessels are actually seen as presenting lumbering, easy targets for modern anti-ship missiles.[91] In line with this logic, Russia's admirals are now, and as pointed out in Naval Doctrine, engaging in the 'balanced development of the Navy with the aim of not allowing the significant superiority of the US Navy'.[92] As part of this 'balanced development' it makes more sense to 'distribute' its most powerful missiles (in considerable numbers[93]) more widely across a larger number of smaller vessels.[94] Such smaller vessels, while they cannot carry as many missiles as their larger brethren (cruisers and destroyers), do have the advantage that they are both harder to target and, even if they are hit, more expendable than the larger warships. It is the small frigates, corvettes and the latest attack submarines that are seen now as representing the principal combat units of the Russian Navy. The likes of the *Admiral Kuznetsov* (under refit now until 2021[95]) and the *Petr Velikii* (sorely itself in need of upgrading) do not carry Kalibrs. They are viewed, as noted, mostly as mere status symbols – but useful in their own right in that role.[96] In part, this move towards smaller platforms reflects the asymmetric philosophy that dominates much of the strategic, operational and tactical thinking of today's Russian armed forces.[97] It is also, though, something of a necessity given that existing Russian shipyards are limited in size and deemed incapable of building the largest surface vessels – such as aircraft carriers. In Soviet

[91] In line with such thinking, a Russian Ministry of Defence spokesman recently called the United Kingdom's new aircraft carrier, a 'large convenient target'. B. Farmer, 'Russia Mocks HMS *Queen Elizabeth* as "Large Convenient Target" as it Warns British Warship to "Keep its Distance"', *The Telegraph*, 29 June 2017, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/06/29/russia-claims-hms-queen-elizabeth-large-convenient-target-warns/.

[92] 'Russian Naval Doctrine, 2017', para. 30 (c).

[93] As Aleksandr Golts points out, the 'key' to current Russian naval strategic thinking is the 'sheer numbers' of Kalibr missiles. Golts, 'The Russian Navy: To Deter the US and to Compete With China'.

[94] A. Rezchiko, 'Rossiya Bol'she ne Mozhet Pozvolit' Sebe Okeanskii Flot' [Russia Can no Longer Maintain an Ocean-going Fleet], *Vzyglad*, 21 April 2017, https://www.vz.ru/politics/2017/4/21/324418.html.

[95] German Kostrinskii, '"Admiral Kuznetsov" Budet Umerenno Modernizirovan' ["Admiral Kuznetsov" Will Be Moderately Upgraded], *Kommersant*, 23 April 2018, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3612722.

[96] Roblin, 'Why Russia's Enemies Fear the Kalibr Cruise Missile'.

[97] See, for instance, R. Thornton, 'The Russian Military's New "Main Emphasis": Asymmetric Warfare', *RUSI Journal*, 162(4), October 2017, https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/russian-military's-new-'main-emphasis'-asymmetric-warfare.

times, such vessels were only ever built at facilities that are now in Ukraine.[98] The lack of suitable yards has contributed to the fact that any decision on the construction of a new carrier(s) has been put back to at least 2025.[99]

Overall, given the combination of the change in combat philosophy and these shipbuilding limitations, the basic strategic outlook of the surface component of today's Russian Navy is no longer geared, as it was in Soviet times, towards blue-water, force-projection activities. Such activities included acting as long-range cover for Soviet ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and the open-ocean hunting of adversary SSBNs. The outlook now for the Navy's surface combatants, as is clear from both current Russian Maritime Doctrine and Naval Doctrine and in line with the overall stance of the Russian military noted earlier, is more defensive in nature.[100]

This navy is now one whose surface (and most of its sub-surface[101]) vessels are thus designed principally to be able to conduct green-water, coastal defence operations close to Russia's shores.[102] It is a navy that is now seen as merely 'an extension of the land-based defence force' and 'designed to provide defence in depth by being the first line, at sea'.[103] Thus, while Stephen Blank points out that the Russian naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean *can* be used for power projection and for 'permanent gunboat diplomacy missions in the region', he also notes that, 'it is primarily configured to keep NATO forces *out* of the region'.[104] Its combination of suitable missiles (the Kalibr) *and* suitable ships means that it is eminently suited, not just to this regional role, but also to the role of providing the 'southern flank' glacis.

These Russian vessels, however, are not performing their deterrence task in isolation. They can only really retain the credibility of the threat they pose (and thus their deterrence capacity) if they are protected from any attack by NATO – particularly from its airpower. Here is where another Russian defensive barrier that has now also been established in the Eastern Mediterranean comes into play. This barrier is better known in contemporary parlance as Russia's Eastern Mediterranean anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) envelope or 'bubble'.

The Eastern Mediterranean A2/AD Bubble

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[98] D. Gorenburg, 'Shipbuilding May Limit Russian Navy's Future', *The Maritime Executive*, 27 November 2015, https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/shipbuilding-may-limit-russian-navys-future#gs.5BEtoOE.

[99] M. Samos, 'Russia Postpones Future Aircraft Carrier Program', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 15(69), 7 May 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/russia-postpones-future-aircraft-carrier-program/

[100] 'Russian Maritime Doctrine, 2015'.

[101] Considerable investment, of course, has been put into the SSBN fleet. Russia now has 12, including three new *Borey* class with one more to be delivered next year. Franz-Stefan Gady, 'Russia Drops Plans for Upgraded *Borei*-class Ballistic Missile Sub', *The Diplomat*, 22 May 2018, https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/russia-drops-plans-for-upgraded-borei-class-ballistic-missile-sub/.

[102] Bodner, 'Putin's Great White Fleet'.

[103] R. Cobb, 'Russia's Naval Policy and the War in Syria', *The Diplomat*, 3 April 2017, https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/russias-naval-policy-and-the-war-in-syria/.

[104] S. Blank, 'The Meaning of Russia's Naval Deployments in the Mediterranean', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 13(44), 4 March 2016, https://jamestown.org/programs/the-meaning-of-russias-naval-deployments-in-the-mediterranean/. Stress added.

In examining the whole Russian military involvement both onshore in Syria and offshore in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea it can be seen that perhaps its most significant outcome has been the establishing of this regional A2/AD bubble. Over the past few years, the Russian armed forces have invested 'considerable energy' into setting up two A2/AD bubbles near the country's maritime borders.[105] These are evident in Kaliningrad and Crimea (since its annexation by Russia in 2014). Another one is slated to be set up over the Kurile Islands.[106] In line with the defensive mindset in regard to NATO, these are designed as protective barriers: to deter ingress and, in times of conflict, to prevent the ingress into Russian airspace/waters/territory of any NATO aircraft, ships, submarines, drones, missiles and, indeed, ground troops. The bubbles consist of a layered and integrated system of defences based overwhelmingly on the use of missiles - anti-ship, ground-to-air and ground-launched ballistic/cruise - along with a series of allied radar systems. The missiles and radars can either be based on land, on ships off the coast or on aircraft.[107]

The Syrian bubble, the one not based on Russian (or Russian-occupied) territory, appears to have a different role. It is there nominally to protect and support the Russian operation in Syria. Its air defence assets guard the airspace above the country in order to allow for the unfettered in-theatre movement of Russian military assets/troops and related friendly forces. The bubble's fire support capabilities, including the Kalibr missiles fired from offshore, are there ostensibly to cover the operations those forces are conducting. The role, however, of this particular bubble can also be viewed through a different lens.

This Syrian A2/AD arrangement would appear to be quite formidable and one perhaps too formidable if its role was merely to provide cover for the relatively limited Russian mission in Syria. Its portfolio of land-based weapons systems includes, for instance, the aforementioned Kalibrs and Iskander-Ms. The point has been made that these missiles are most likely to have NATO targets in mind rather than 'terrorist'. The Kalibrs can strike at points across a good part of Europe and the Iskander-Ms can target the likes of the British air base at Akrotiri in Cyprus and, in Turkey, the US Incirlik airbase and the Kurecik ballistic-missile defence radar station (part of the European Phased Adaptive Approach system). Again, any hostile (or defensive) operational activity in the region that might be contemplated by NATO against Russian interests would have to take into account this missile threat.

This bubble also makes significant use of what is seen as a specialization of the Russian military: ground-based missile air defence.[108] Any NATO aircraft or drone entering a Russian air defence bubble is highly liable to be shot down. Those missiles being employed include the highly sophisticated S-300 (range 150km) and the S-400 (range 400 km). The former systems are sited mostly at Tartus and the latter at the Hmeimim air base.[109] Again, the employment of such

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[105] L. Burton, 'Bubble Trouble: Russia's A2/AD Capabilities', *Foreign Policy Association,* 25 October 2016, https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2016/10/25/bubble-trouble-russia-a2-ad/.

[106] 'Russia, Turkey and the Concept of A2/AD in the Black Sea', *Center for Strategic Assessments and Forecasts,* 12 March 2017, csef.ru/en/oborona-i-bezopasnost/340/rossiya-turcziya-i-konczepcziya-a2ad-v-chernom-more-7499.

[107] I. Williams, 'The Russia-NATO A2AD Environment', *Missile Threat,* 3 January 2017, https://missilethreat.csis.org/russia-nato-a2ad-environment/.

[108] 'Russia Military Power', p. 62.

[109] This whole integrated air defence system does have its flaws, but vital experience is being gained in ironing out these flaws. See 'Russia's Air Defenses in Syria Have Some Big

systems in Syria is no doubt overkill for the alleged counter-terrorist mission. Another weapon integral to the bubble is the ground-based Bastion-P coastal defence system sited both at Tartus and at positions nearby.[110] This employs Oniks (SS-N-26) anti-ship cruise missiles (range 350km).[111] But would the Russian military really need a coastal defence missile designed to target ships at sea if it was in Syria just to deal with 'terrorists' on land?[112]

The argument that this Syrian A2/AD bubble has been overengineered for its stated task holds good. It has thus to be assumed that it has actually been established, not so much to cover Russian operations in Syria, but rather to cover the activities of the ships of the Eastern Mediterranean flotilla in their 'southern flank' glacis role. For the deterrent quality these ships possess would certainly be enhanced if, in a conflict situation, NATO planners thought they would have difficulty neutralizing (presumably through airpower) the threat they posed. And they would, indeed, have such a difficulty if these vessels were operating beneath the protective envelope of the air cover provided by this Syrian-based A2/AD bubble's shore-based air defence systems (which stretches out 400km into the Mediterranean). Moreover, any encroaching NATO surface vessels would also have to face the anti-ship threat provided by the Bastion-P anti-ship coastal batteries. Thus these Russian ships of the 'southern front' glacis can be provided with what appears to be a very high level of protection under the umbrella of this Syrian A2/AD bubble – thereby, and importantly, increasing their strategic deterrence capacity.

A point needs to be made about the Russian aircraft involved in counter-terrorist operations in Syria. Most are based in the country, although occasionally strategic bombers fly in from Russia itself to conduct strikes.[113] The aircraft located in Syria actually have only a small part to play in the A2/AD arrangement. They are employed in Syria really to shape tactical events on the ground rather than to contribute to the strategic bubble. This is because the Russians have long acknowledged that their aircraft - of all types - are dated and lack survivability in modern combat situations where NATO is the opponent.[114] There is thus a tendency just to rely on missiles to

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Problems', *War is Boring*, 6 October 2017, warisboring.com/russias-air-defences-in-syria-have-some-big-problems/.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Burton, 'Bubble Trouble: Russia's A2/AD Capabilities'.

[112] That being said, it seems that the Oniks missiles based in Syria have also been modified in order to be able to fire at land targets within the country - and with a range increased to 450km. But this really cannot be their designated role. This flexibility in the use of such weapon systems, which has also been evident elsewhere in Syria, is actually one of the characteristics of today's Russian military capabilities overall. 'This is how Russia Could use Bastion Systems against Ground Targets in Syria', *Sputnik News*, 15 November 2016, https://sputniknews.com/military/201611151047466677-russia-syria-bastion-missiles/.

[113] Either Tu-160, Tu-95 or Tu-22 bombers have been used in this long-range strategic role. Again, vital experience is being gained in such missions. See, for instance, Ben Farmer, 'Russian Bombers Fly Around Europe to Strike Syria in 8,000 Mile Show of Strength', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 November 2015, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12009123; 'Russian Strategic Bombers Hammer Terrorists' Facilities in Syria', TASS, 1 November 2017, tass.com/defense/973686.

[114] Although some of the very latest Russian stealth fighters, the Su-57 (or T-50), have recently been sent on operations to Syria. Their capabilities are largely unknown. David Axe, 'Putin

provide the firepower in all of Russia's A2/AD bubbles and not to try and augment them by using vulnerable Russian interceptor aircraft.[115] Indeed, any air defence bubble utilizing ground-based missiles will work best when operating in a free-fire scenario – that is, on the premise that any aircraft in the sky will not be 'friendly'. The tragedy of MH17 in 2014 illustrates this point.[116]

Defence Becomes Threat

Of course, there is a classic 'security dilemma' situation here. The capabilities of the ships of the 'southern flank' glacis can just as easily be employed in an offensive manner as they can in a defensive, deterrent one. The missiles on these ships, as noted, can cover much of Europe. They carry a threat to NATO. The same thinking applies with this Syrian A2/AD bubble. While it may be seen as constituting a highly effective defensive arrangement - designed to protect the ships of the Eastern Mediterranean flotilla, Russian interests in Syria and Russia itself - it can also be looked upon as representing a threat to the interests of other regional actors. For it can be used as a tool by Russia to create tremendous regional diplomatic and military leverage. Moscow can, theoretically and if needs be, effectively dictate the movements of any other countries' ships and especially aircraft in the Eastern Mediterranean/Levant area. Actors, therefore, such as Israel, Turkey and the US and its NATO allies that might wish to use their airpower assets against their own specific targets in Syria would first need to alert the local Russian air defence authorities in order to avoid any possible mishaps. Put another way, they need to ask for Russian 'permission' to carry out these operations.[117] In essence, the Russians now have the power to create a 'no-fly zone in the Eastern Mediterranean'.[118]

And, of course, once such a no-fly zone is operationalized then it would allow its creator *carte blanche* for its *own* operations. This A2/AD bubble can be utilized to provide cover for any bellicose Russian actions in the region (as, theoretically, they could also do in the Kaliningrad and Crimea areas). As one source puts it, 'If fully realized, [this Syrian] A2/AD envelope would put Western access to the Suez Canal, the Black Sea, and the resource-rich eastern Mediterranean at the mercy of an increasingly aggressive Russian regime.'[119] This is a particularly pertinent point when it comes to the Black Sea region. Here the capabilities of the Syrian A2/AD bubble can work in tandem with those of the bubble now established over Crimea.

Sends his Stealth Jets into Air War over Syria', *The Daily Beast*, 23 February 2018, https://www.thedailybeast.com/putin-sends-his-stealth-jets-into-air-war-over-syria.

[115] R. Beckhusen, 'Russia's Air Corps is a Powerful but Fading Force, Reuters, 18 March 2015, blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/03/17/russias-air-corps-is-a-powerful-but-fading-force/

[116] L. Dearden, 'MH17 Crash Report: Dutch Investigators Say Plane was Downed by Russian-Made Buk Missile', *The Independent*, 13 October 2015, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/mh17-report-dutch-investigators-release-findings-on-cause-of-disaster-in-ukraine-live-updates-a6691996.html.

[117] See, for instance, L. Issaev, 'Why is Russia Helping Turkey in Afrin? *Al Jazeera Online*, 29 January 2018, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russia-helping-turkey-afrin-180125122718953.html.

[118] Altman, 'Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean', p. 80.

[119] 'Russian A2/AD in the Eastern Mediterranean: A Growing Risk', *Naval Open Source Intelligence*, 7 January 2016, https://nosi.org/2016/01/07/russian-a2ad-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-a-growing-risk/.

The combination of these two means that any forceful military activity that NATO might contemplate, and for whatever reason, in or around the Black Sea could be severely compromised.

Most effected, of course, is Turkey. For Ankara, the existence of these two Russian A2/AD systems on its doorstep can represent a significant threat to its interests. The relationship (at the time of writing) between Ankara and Moscow is good and has improved markedly since the downing of a Russian Su-24M by a Turkish F-16 near the Turkish/Syrian border in November 2015. There is no guarantee, however, that the current rapprochement between these traditional rivals can be maintained. At the very least, Ankara would be nervous. The joint effect of these two bubbles can provide Russia with the possibility of, if necessary, effectively stymying any Turkish military operations in both the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean regions. The ability to do this naturally generates, again, a profound degree of leverage for Moscow over Ankara and the latter would have to think twice before carrying out any anti-Russian actions: such as restricting Russian military access to the Turkish Straits.[120]

The caveat, of course, in terms of the A2/AD bubbles linked to Russian offensive manoeuvres is that effective activity *beyond* the confines of the bubble will be limited. Russian air power, given its relative weakness against peer competitors, will not alone be able to provide reliable cover for the forward ground movement of Russian troops.

Russia's 'Permanent' Syrian Presence

Putin has used the word 'permanent' to characterize both the presence of Russian naval vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean and of Russian troops ashore in Syria. This would appear to imply - and however the word 'permanent' is translated - that both are very much for the long haul. There are, as indicated in this article, several reasons why this should be so. First, Putin gains much domestically in terms of the reflected 'glory' that this manifestation of Russian *derzhavnost'* is providing for him. Displays by the Russian military - from ageing aircraft carriers steaming offshore to state-of-the-art missiles crashing into 'terrorist' targets - all serve to underscore that the Russia of President Vladimir Putin has significant sabres to rattle and power to wield. Putin also benefits from the kudos of presenting himself as leader of a Russia that matters as a major player in the Middle East. The succession of regional and state leaders making their way to the Kremlin to discuss the situation in Syria presents to the Russian population an image of a state leader who carries considerable international heft.

This military presence is, of course, not just about creating images that suit Putin. Moscow gains substantive advantages from the fact that its involvement provides it with a significant ability to shape events to its geopolitical advantage in Syria; in the Eastern Mediterranean region, and across the wider Middle East more generally.

It would seem unlikely then that Putin would want to put this all at risk. This is especially so given that he seems to have invested so much personal political capital in this Syrian adventure. He will inevitably want to make sure that nothing goes awry and that events in Syria can, as far as possible, be controlled so that they continue to serve both his and Russia's interests. In particular, he will want to ensure that President Assad (or at least a state leader of Moscow's choosing) is not removed from power by anti-government elements in Syria. The maintenance,

[120] B. Kurtdarcan and B. Kayaoglu, 'Russia, Turkey and the Black Sea A2/AD Arms Race', *The National Interest,* 5 March 2017, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-turkey-the-black-sea-a2-ad-arms-race-19673?page=3.

thus, of a significant Russian on-the-ground troop and airpower presence in Syria for some time into the future would appear to be necessary to ensure that nothing, indeed, does go awry.

Troop numbers will need to be maintained in order, in particular, to both man and to guard the various weapons systems that together form what appears to be this very important Syrian A2/AD bubble. And while this does provide protection for Russian operations in Syria and help create important degrees of diplomatic and military leverage in the region, it is perhaps its deterrence qualities at the military-strategic level that may be seen to have the greater resonance for Moscow. The true importance of this A2/AD arrangement comes from the way that it acts as a protective envelope for the Eastern Mediterranean naval flotilla in its 'southern flank' glacis role. Such a glacis has, for centuries, figured as part of Russian/Soviet defence thinking. It is thus hard to imagine that any leader in Moscow - be it Putin or whoever - would want to diminish the ability of this flotilla to continue acting as this glacis. This would happen if Russian troops left Syria and the A2/AD bubble could no longer be maintained. The troops, it must be assumed, have to stay. Indeed, the very fact that the lease on the port of Tartus has recently been extended by 49 years and that much upgrading work is to be undertaken is itself indicative of a very long-term Russian commitment. The Eastern Mediterranean flotilla is certainly not going to be reduced in size and most probably it will be reinforced.

There are dangers, of course, for Putin and for other senior Russian figures in advertising this commitment to Syria as 'permanent'. It makes Russia, and particularly, of course, the president himself, a hostage to fortune.[121] The Syrian imbroglio is one characterized by profound complexities and false steps by any or all of the international actors who are seeking to influence the situation there seem inevitable. It is hard to imagine that Moscow can control events to its advantage indefinitely; particularly when it is trying to prop up a regime seemingly as unpopular domestically and internationally as Assad's. An irony here seems to lie in the fact that Putin has declared a permanent Russian military presence to help support a regime that has itself been described as 'permanently insecure'.[122]

Syria is very far from being stable. Indeed, as of early 2018, events within Syria, and despite Putin having declared 'victory' in December 2017, appear now to be 'draw[ing] Russia further into the war'.[123] Moscow is currently finding that its 'ability to control the complex Syrian conflict…[is]…much diminished' as the range of competing regional actors try to influence events to their own advantage and in defiance of Russian wishes.[124] Obama may well be proved right: Russia could, indeed, become 'stuck in a quagmire'. And a major casualty of such a situation might be Putin himself.

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[121] P. K. Baev, 'Putin's Road from Damascus: After the "Victory," What?' *The Brookings Institution*, 8 January 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/08/putins-road-from-damascus-after-the-victory-what/.
[122] Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War'.
[123] Chulov, 'Moscow Mired in Syria'.
[124] Baev, 'Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War'.