

Russia's Strategic Mobility and its Military Deployment in Syria

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Russia's ability to project power beyond its immediate border has been questioned since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. On 30 September 2015, Russia launched its first out-of-area military operation since the Soviet-Afghanistan War. It witnessed remarkable speed and sophisticated planning advances to support the reinforcement of the Tartus naval depot and form a de facto forward operating airbase in Latakia. Such movements of air assets and military hardware and weapons also aimed at boosting military-technical aid to the Syrian government and sustaining Russia's air campaign was made possible by recent advances in Russia's combat service support system. The pre-existing logistics and supply system was reformed in 2010 into Materiel-Technical Support (materialno-tekhnicheskogo obespechniia —MTO); additional improvements resulted from testing the MTO during strategic-operational military exercises and in conducting service level exercises. In this case, Moscow has overcome traditional reliance upon railway infrastructure, geographically impossible in its Syria intervention, and greatly enhanced its use of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and air lines of communication (ALOCs).

In this context Tsentr 2015, 14–20 September, placed strategic mobility high on its priority list. The exercise held in six regions focused on Central Military District and involved up to 95 000 personnel and 7 000 units of arms and equipment. Tsentr 2015 was preceded by a large MTO exercise in the Central Military District in late August and again in the snap inspection announced on 7 September in the same military district. While most elements of the MTO were tested ALOC support was prioritized with 40 Il-76 transporter aircraft, approximately one third of the military transport aviation inventory, rehearsing mass movements of troops, hardware and supplies. As these exercises unfolded it

became evident that Moscow used this partly as cover to move military assets to Syria as its build-up continued.

Analysis of the MTO exercise and its support for the snap inspection and Tsentr 2015 reveals both advances made since its inception in 2010 and a level of innovation. Chief among these was the attention given to ALOCs, as the MTO supported building a field airstrip to receive heavy transport aircraft. A Central Military District engineer-airfield battalion was redeployed from Altaiskii Krai to Orenburgskaia Oblast, to build an airstrip 1 800 meters long and 40 meters wide and 12 helipads at the Totsk test range; also constructing camouflaged dumps for fuel, lubricants and aircraft armaments. The logistic support airfields rehearsed actual landings on concrete and dirt runways involving aircraft such as Il-76MD transporters, as well as An-12, An-26 and helicopter Mi-8 platforms.

In addition, on the banks of the Volga River the MTO assisted in loading and unloading flat-top ferries. MTO innovative advances included the use of an automated system for monitoring moving objects (based on the GLONASS system for satellite navigation), which was recently introduced into service in Central Military District MTO brigades. The system is designed to function in all-weather conditions, allowing automated monitoring of vehicle convoys and goods deliveries and facilitating communication between drivers and dispatchers. Army-General Dmitrii Bulgakov, Russian Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of the MTO, confirmed the continued introduction of portable protective structures to end the practice of storing equipment out in the open. Bulgakov also noted that the MTO was building five state-of-the-art refuelling facilities at airfields (Domna, Akhtubinsk, Chkalovskii, Koltsovo and Kursk) with plans for six more facilities in 2016.



However, since mid-August the MTO and the military transport aviation were becoming more actively involved in the real military build-up in Syria and in supplying and resupplying the deployed forces. A critical part of this combat service support work in developing supply routes to Syria began to emerge in August and September with reported Russian transport aircraft (especially IL-76MDs and An-124s) stepping up the frequency of flights to Syria, not least using an East-Southeast European route, with Bulgaria later denying access to its airspace. Nonetheless, this route continued to function, operating through alternative countries, mainly for Il-76MD flights. Additional air routes were also in use, flying from airfields such as Sochi, Mozdok or Krymsk using Azeri airspace or bypassing it by flying over the Caspian Sea and through Iran and Iraq to Latakia. The ALOCs therefore are diverse and function well in support of the Syria operation.

The bedrock of the supply effort for the mission is provided through the less costly Black Sea-Turkish Straits-East Mediterranean Sea SLOC using the Black Sea Fleet. By mid-August local Turkish observers such as Alper Böler and Işık Yörük using social media recorded a spike in the Black Sea Fleet sending large landing ships through the Turkish Straits using what was referred to as the “Syria Express.” Black Sea Fleet Ropucha and Alligator class ships were frequently witnessed exiting or re-entering the Turkish Straits with top-deck loading and apparent tarpaulin covered military hardware bound for the Tartus logistical supply facility. These vessels included the Saratov and the Tsezar Kunikov.

The Black Sea Fleet SLOC originates in Sevastopol and additional support from the commercial port of Novorossiisk. Turkish commercial vessels were also purchased by Moscow and used in this route under the

Russian naval flag (Vologda-50 and Dvinitza River-50) as part of plans to use at least eight such auxiliary vessels. Placing these under the navy is an indicator of the scale of military hardware transferred to Syria using this route. The Northern Fleet’s large landing ship Alexander Otrakovskii was seen passing northbound through the Turkish Straits in early July 2015 and headed southbound for Syria on 21 October. Moreover, the Black Sea Fleet’s KIL-158 lifting and mooring barge was used in Tartus for fairway clearing and dredging in order to greatly expand port capacity in a certain sign that Moscow intends to maintain this SLOC to support its military operations.

Moscow has honed combat service support and avoided over-reliance upon any one line of communication. This stems from the formation of the MTO, continued use and testing of its capabilities during exercises, investment in its infrastructure and assets, as well as analysis of the challenges that faced ISAF in Afghanistan. Consequently, Russia is able, albeit on a small scale, to project power well beyond its borders and break out of its recent restriction to act only on its periphery. The sophistication and diversity of these ALOCs and SLOCs also implies considerable pre-planning since at least early 2015, and an indication that the Kremlin is prepared to sustain this effort as long as deemed necessary.

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