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Middle East Strategic Landscape Goes Through Drastic Changes (II)

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Events in and around Syria: geopolitical perspective

The attitude of international actors and the correlation of forces in general create favorable conditions for Russian military operation into the Syrian conflict.

President Obama has made clear that the situation in Syria will not escalate into a so-called

“indirect” war between the United States and Russia. A clash between Russia and the European Union is out of the question. In case of the European Union, an attempt to exert pressure on Russia will only help the victory of the Islamic State and create millions of refugees, not hundreds of thousands as we see today. A number of European states face upcoming elections. It’s hard to believe that their leaders would like to give the voters such a “pleasant surprise”. Some people try to make Russia responsible for the migration crisis in Europe, although evidently, the crisis is the price to pay for the absence of European coherent Middle East strategy and its adherence to the usual policy of following in the United States footsteps.

Beijing has clearly shown its support of Russia’s actions. China is a leading consumer of Middle East hydrocarbons. Some Israeli sources rushed to report that Chinese air force and navy are going to join the Russian operation. It was reported that that China is going to send out to Syria J-15 Flying Shark fighters and Z-18F anti-submarine helicopters and Z-18J airborne early warning helicopters. According to the reports, the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning-CV-16 (former Varyag) has docked at the Syrian port of Tartus, accompanied by a guided missile cruiser. The Chinese air force is ready to provide some protection of the transit air routes in Iranian and Iraqi space. This information has not been confirmed so far. It’s worth to mention that Hong Kong-based media outlets have also reported about these plans citing their own military sources in Beijing. There is something in the air.



The position of Tel Aviv is critically important for the success of Russian operation. Israel is the only state in the region which possesses a military potential to greatly complicate things. And it is located close to the battlefield in Syria.

Until recently, Israel had taken an ambivalent stance. It had neither supported, nor opposed Assad. Israeli strategists had thought the fragmentation of Syria was the best outcome for Israel. According to them, the Islamic State was a guerilla movement that posed no threat to the Israel’s defense forces (Tsayal). It looks like Moscow has successfully used its contacts with Tel Aviv, including at the highest level, to convince Israelis that the Islamic State effectively uses cutting edge technology and is able to spread its control beyond the territory of just one state.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated this position clear: “We don't want to go back to the days when, you know, Russia and Israel were in an adversarial position. I think we've changed the relationship. And it's, on the whole, good.” He refused to comment on potential consequences of Russian operation in Syria. According to him, he does not know if it will degenerate into a further escalation of tension. Time will tell. It is important to note that Israeli Defense Forces Deputy Chief of Staff Maj.-Gen. Yair Golan met with his Russian counterpart, Col.-Gen. Nikolai Bogdanovski, at General Staff Headquarters in Tel Aviv on October 6 to launch talks on regional security and the Russian military presence in Syria.

Turkey is concerned over the new development in Syria. It has condemned Moscow and overreacted when a Russian aircraft accidentally violated its air space. There are many reasons why Erdogan could not go farther, even if he wanted to. The November 1 parliamentary election will be an acid test for his Justice and Development Party. Last time it lost the majority in parliament and failed to form a coalition government. This time polls do not predict great success for the party of Erdogan. It would be suicidal to get embroiled in a new adventure in Syria. Turkish voters fully realize how heavy the burden of refugee problem is. No doubt, they have little desire to see asylum seekers flows grow. Large-scale economic projects and trade with Russia are important for Turkey's economy.

The United States is frustrated with the forces it has supported so far and Turkey is very much concerned over the Washington's intent to reorient its efforts and bank on Syrian Kurds. The Kurdish Democratic Unity Party, the leading political force, is affiliated with the radical Kurdistan Workers' Party. From Turkey's perspective, an electoral success of Kurdish Democratic Unity Party is much worse than the prospect of Bashar Assad remaining at the helm. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Dovutoglu has stated, “We keep all the communication channels open with Russia. I don't think it will take steps that will arouse our concerns.” He admitted that Russia had given an advance warning to Turkey before it started its military operation in Syria. The Prime Minister did not elaborate.

Jordan also has made no statements on the plans to obstruct Russia. Along with Turkey it has done a lot to deteriorate the Syria crisis. Jordan hosts the operational headquarters of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State. The opposition operating in the south of Syria gets reinforcements from Jordan. Its activities have become much less intensive recently. As soon as the Russian Aerospace Forces launched their strikes, 700 militants in the south surrendered to the government, over three thousand left the battlefield to cross the Jordanian border. Jordan may become the next victim of the Islamic State. It is interested in all kinds of cooperation to rout the group.

In Beirut the majority of people welcomed the news about the Russian military operation with no lesser enthusiasm than in Damascus. Lebanon has failed to put an end to the activities of armed jihadists on its soil. With Russian help Lebanon wants to rearm and finally do away with this problem. Thus, not Hezbollah only, but regular Lebanese army may be indirectly involved in the combat actions in Syria if one takes a broader look at the problem. Addressing the Lebanon Support Group at the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that Russia had “recently signed supplementary agreements on the

supplies of specialized equipment to Lebanon.”

The coalition of Russia-Syria-Iran-Iraq starts to take practical steps. For instance, on October 7, Russia launched cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea to strike the positions of the Islamic State. The missiles flew over the territories of Iran and Iraq to prove that the coalition partners boast a high level of mutual trust.



The attempts to separate Iraq from the anti-jihadist coalition will hardly produce any results, no matter the country still greatly depends on the United States. They are likely to widen the gap between Baghdad and Washington. Iraq is frustrated with the US actions in recent years, including the fight against the Islamic State. Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi has already rebutted the criticism of the intelligence information exchange agreement signed between Iraq, Iran, Syria and Russia on September 28. He believes that without such an agreement the Islamic State cannot be defeated.

Saudi Arabia is the only regional actor firm in its desire to oppose Russia’s activities in Syria. Under the circumstances, it has limited resources. Its main weapon is oil. It has used it to address different situations and to serve the interests of other countries. This weapon is not effective anymore. The Saudi army got bogged down in the south of the country fighting poorly equipped Yemeni insurgents without major success. Open cooperation between Saudi Kingdom and the Islamic State is impossible. Al Baghdadi, an alleged descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, believes that the Saudi kings are nobody else but rootless usurpers. His cherished dream is the liberation of Mecca and Medina. He even wanted to destroy the Black Stone, the eastern cornerstone of Kaaba, the ancient stone building located in the center of Grand Mosque in Mecca. He believes that its veneration is a pagan superstition. There is an opinion that, no matter the kingdom’s hostile rhetoric, to some degree, the Russia’s emergence in the Middle East serves the interests of the Saudi Arabia. It reduces the dependence of Syria on Shia Iran, something that scares Riyadh much more than the Russia’s military presence.

The prediction that the pattern of Russia’s intervention in Afghanistan will repeat itself in Syria is based on a superficial comparison. It is totally unfounded. All major actors deeply involved in

the activities to obstruct the Soviet operation there, have no intent to get seriously involved in the current Syria conflict. Some of them, China and Iran in particular, side with Russia. The operation of the newly created coalition will block the routes by which the Islamic State gets its supplies. As a result, the IS gangs will not be able to hold out for a long time.

As experience shows, sometimes the window of opportunity opens only for a brief moment in time. The art of strategic thinking presupposes the ability to see a rare chance presented by history and seize the opportunity. In Syria Moscow made absolutely precise calculations to estimate the time for action. Some people may predict failure. More perspicacious analysts in the West think about other things. What if the Russians are right? What if the whole world will see how Russia and its coalition partners eliminate the common terrorist threat in Syria and the whole Middle East in general? The West has failed to do the job and will owe Russia if it accomplishes the mission against the background of the West's failure.