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Russian Military Options in Syria and the Ukraine

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The past two weeks have been rich in military developments directly affecting Russia:

Syria:

- 1) Russia has announced that **she will transform the Khmeimim airfield into a full-fledged military base with a permanently deployed task force.**

2) Russia will deploy her heavy aircraft-carrying missile cruiser (often referred to in the West as an “aircraft carrier”) **Admiral Kuznetsov** to the eastern Mediterranean to to check the combat capabilities of the ship and its strike group and to engage, for the very first time, the state-of-the-art **Ka-52K Katran helicopters**.

The Ukraine:

1) Following **the failure of the Ukronazis to infiltrate saboteurs on the Crimean Peninsula**, which President Putin called “*stupid and criminal*”, Poroshenko has now ordered a **reinforcement of his military forces on border with Crimea and eastern Ukraine and placed its military on its highest alert**.

2) The authorities in Kiev decided **not to accept the credentials of the new Russian ambassador to the Ukraine**.

3) President Putin declared that in this context, negotiations with Kiev are “**pointless**”.

While not directly connected, all of these news items point to a possible military escalation which could result in Russia having to engaged her military in combat operations in Syria, Crimea and Novorussia. Thus it makes sense at this point to review the Russian options in all these theaters of war.

The Syrian theater:

There is a great deal of misunderstanding about the Russian military options in Syria. Just as the major Russian military intervention which was initially expected failed to materialize (the actual Russian intervention was very limited in both size and time), the reinforcement of the Khmeimim airbase will not result in a major strategic shift in the regional balance of power. A couple of reminders:

First, the Russian naval base at Tartus is not really a “naval base” at all. It is a port which the Russian Navy has been using, but it lack the capability to dock large ships and it is not defended in a way a normal Russian military base would be. In fact, the Russian refer to it as a “пункт материально-технического обеспечения” or “material-technical supply point”. It is possible, even likely, that in time Russia will expand and reinforce Tartus, but for the foreseeable future Tartus will not be a major military outpost for the Russian Navy.

Second, the airbase in Khmeimin is located in a very dangerous spot: roughly 1000km from the Russian border and only 50km from the Turkish border. It is also nicely wedged right between the CENTCOM “area of responsibility” and NATO. This is most definitely not a location you want to try to threaten US forces from. Finally, this is also **not a location which Russia would defend with nuclear forces**.

Defense Minister Shoigu did, in fact, **clearly spell out** what the purpose of the Russian presence in Khmeimim will be: a) to attack terrorists and b) to defend Russian nationals. Again, these are very limited goals which will be attained by using limited means. To be sure, Khmeimim will also become a crucial intelligence hub for Russia and, once the airbase is expanded, the Russian search and rescue capabilities will be dramatically

enhanced. For both of these tasks Russian special forces will be permanently stationed at the airbase. Finally, the Russians will increase the size of the runways to make it accessible to the heaviest Russian transport aircraft. But the fundamental characteristic of the Khmeimim airbase will always remind that it will remain vulnerable due to its location and long distance from Russia.

As for the deployment of the Kuznetsov, which is primarily a formidable air defense ship, it will allow the Russians to get a much fuller signal intelligence picture of the region and will provide solid protection for both Tartus and Khmeimim. The first-time deployment of the Ka-52K (which were initially commissioned to be deployed on the French “Mistrals”) will be a testing side show but not a crucial game changer in the war.

All in all, the Russians are most definitely increasing their capabilities and the range of options to choose from different options depending on the evolution of the situation. At this point, there are no signs of a major shift in the Russian position: ever since the “semi-withdrawal” of Russian Aerospace forces from Syria, Russia is still counting primarily on her long-range bombers (Tu-22M3). These can, if needed, be supplemented by Su-34/Su-30/Su-35 strike groups flying out of southern Russia.

The Ukrainian theater:

The situation in the Ukraine is much more unpredictable than the one in Syria and it has been so for a long while now. Almost every week we saw warnings about a possible Ukrainian attack, sometimes even announced as “imminent” and then that attack fails to materialize. The dangerous thing about these false warnings is that they were not false at all and that these attacks truly could have happened almost any week. Worst of all, there is now a “**boy who cried wolf**” phenomenon taking place where everybody is becoming bored with the endless warnings about an imminent Ukronazi attack. The problem is that, of course, such attack is becoming more and more likely with every passing day.

There are those who argue that an Ukronazi attack against Crimea would be suicidal, and they are absolutely correct, and that an Ukronazi attack against Novorussia would be exceedingly unlikely to succeed, and they are correct again. The assumption here is that the regime in Kiev is capable of rational calculation and that the purpose of such an attack would be victory. But, in reality, *victory was never a Ukronazi goal*. Instead, the goal was always to draw Russia into an open war. The Ukronazis themselves are deluding themselves in the hope that they will get to do what the Croats did in 1995 when they, backed by the full airpower of NATO, attacked the (disarmed) Croatian Serbs in the so-called “Krajinas”. In reality, the situation in the Donbass is totally different: not only are the Novorussians not disarmed like the Krajina Serbs were (all their “heavy weapons” were in UNPROFOR controlled depots), but unlike the poor Serbs (who were betrayed by Milosevic), the Novorussians know that if things get tough Russia will back them, including by deniable long-range artillery strikes (as she did in July 2014). As for Crimea, even the most deluded Ukrainians must realize by now, even if they don’t admit this, that **they will never re-take Crimea**.

The problem for Russia is that while the regime in Kiev is slowly rotting into irrelevance, there is only one thing which the Ukraine can offer the AngloZionist Empire: to become the sacrificial lamb in a desperate effort to provoke Russia into an intervention and thereby make the current “tepid war” between NATO and Russia fully irreversible or even “hot”. An overt Russian counter-attack in the Donbass, or even from Crimea, is every Neocon’s dream come true.

So far, all the Ukronazis were capable of doing is constantly shelling the civilians of the Donetsk and Lugansk republics which, being 100% dependent on Moscow, had to put up with this infamy even though scores of innocents civilians have been killed every day. There is also a lot of indirect evidence that the military capabilities of the Novorussians have dramatically increased over the past year or so and that makes it even more frustrating for them to put up with the constant provocations and murders of civilians. The Kremlin, however, has evidently decided that a small and steady stream of murdered civilians in the Donbass is still preferable to a full-scale military operation followed by, and this is often overlooked, the occupation of some part of the Ukrainian territory. Indeed, once you occupy it – you own it and you are responsible for it. Nobody in Russia is willing to shoulder the costs of a war and the subsequent occupation and reconstruction of a territory currently under Ukronazi control. Finally, why give the regime in Kiev a life-saving distraction when it does such a world-class job of slowly but surely destroying itself?

The paradox here is that the Russian strength is also the Russian weakness: chances are that the Novorussians are capable of not only stopping a Ukronazi attack, but even of an operationally deep counter-attack. Thus, it is most likely that Russia herself would not be pulled into an overt war over the Donbass. But in Crimea there are no Novorussians, no Donetsk or Lugansk people’s republics. In Crimea there are only Russians and Crimea is Russia. Thus any Ukronazi attack on Crimea would be a direct act of war against Russia which Russia could not ignore or reply to by using a “*voentorg*” + “northern wind” combo (*voentorg*: covert supplying of weapons; “northern wind” covert supplying of military specialists). If Crimea is attacked, the Russians will have to strike back, whether they want it or not.

If that happens, the Russian counter-strike will most likely be limited and will probably focus on the forces directly responsible for the attack. But if the Ukronazis use their artillery from well-entrenched positions to unleash a steady barrage on the towns of northern Crimea or if, God forbid, the Ukronazis use ballistic missiles to target major urban centers in Crimea, the Russians will have no choice but to counter-attack swiftly and decisively. And since 8/8/8 it is become clear that the West will **always** blame Russia, even if she is first attacked by another party.

In purely military terms, any conflict between the Russian armed forces and the Ukronazis would be a massacre: all the Ukrainians can bring to the battlefield are numbers, but they are completely out-gunned, quantitatively and, even more so, qualitatively by the Russians. The Russian artillery is currently the most capable on the planet, it is even far superior to anything in the West, and its effects on the Ukrainian military have been absolutely devastating in the past. Russia has a unique combination of UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) and EW (Electronic Warfare) capabilities which are directly plugged-in into the

targeting systems of Russian multiple-rocket launchers which can reach as far as 90km into the enemy's rear. Finally, the Russians have been working for years on advanced submunitions and thermobaric warheads which can be used with devastating effect on armored forces and fortified positions.

This combo of UAV and advanced multiple-rocket launchers form what the Russians call a "reconnaissance-strike complex" or RSC (разведывательно-ударный комплекс) which is a concept first developed by the Soviets as far back as the 1960s. The RSC fully integrates all the following elements: reconnaissance, guidance, electronic counter-measures, navigation and engagement of high-precision weapons.

Now, with the advent of new UAV and counter-battery radars, this concept has reached its full maturity and is now the cornerstone of Russian combined-arms operations. What this all means in practical terms is that the Russians now have the capability completely destroy several mechanized battalions in only 2-3 minutes. And there is nothing, nothing at all, which the Ukrainians could do against this.

The Russians also have vastly superior armor, electronic warfare capabilities, aerospace forces, intelligence and reconnaissance capabilities, training – you name it. The Ukrainians don't stand a chance.

One big canard is the notion that US deliveries of "lethal weapons" to the Ukraine would somehow tip the balance. In reality, no amount of weapons would make any difference. Russian capabilities today are as far superior to the Ukrainian ones as the capabilities of the US military were superior to the Iraqi military in 1990 during Desert Storm. While in 1991 the Ukrainian military was nominally larger than the Russian one (the Ukraine inherited the entire Soviet strategic 2nd echelon forces), it did not have a war in Chechnia to force it to begin reorganizing like the Russian one had to, nor did it have a President like Putin who as soon as he came to power embarked on an immense military reform whose fruits are now finally showing. As a result, the Russians have now achieved several generational breakthroughs while the Ukrainians are basically stuck with 1980s gear and a completely disorganized, corrupt and incompetent military. It will take the Ukraine decades to catch-up to the Russians, and that only if some kind of highly improbable economic miracle happens.

Conclusion:

The wars in the Syria and the Ukraine are, as is so often the case, largely predetermined by geography. There is really nothing Russia could do to meaningfully and directly oppose the US military in the Middle-East or the Mediterranean. Likewise, there is nothing the US can do to meaningfully and directly oppose the Russian armed forces in eastern Ukraine. This is why both sides will try to act indirectly, on the margins, via proxies but without getting directly exposed. While this strategy is fundamentally sound, it is also dangerous because indirect warfare by proxy is harder to control and leaves both sides open to provocations, false flag operations and the covert involvement of third parties. This is why both wars are so frustrating to follow: on one hand all sorts of highly speculative scenarios cannot be simply dismissed, but on the other hand, nothing much seems to be happening. And when something finally does happen, it is unclear as to what the possible consequences might be.

Finally, both wars involve highly ideological and fundamentally irrational actors (the Ukronazis, the Daesh crazies, the Neocons) who cannot be counted on to act rationally. Alas, all the theories of deterrence always assume a rational actor. But how do you deter a delusional maniac?

The Russian options in both of these conflicts are limited by objective circumstances and by larger political considerations. I would argue that Russia has done an absolutely amazing job in Syria with very limited means and in a supremely dangerous environment. As for the Donbass, I would be much more nuanced. And while I do believe that Russia took the right decision by not overtly sending her armed forces in the eastern Ukraine, I also have to admit that she also showed poor timing and even indecision in dealing with the Nazi crazies in Kiev: it took the Russians a long time to get the *Voentorg* and “Northern Wind” up and running and while this was the correct response, it was also one which took a long time to become fully effective. Then there is the issue of the (now former) Russian ambassador to Kiev, Mikhail Zurabov, who was totally ineffective in getting anything done at all (while he was left in place for so long is still a mystery to me). True, Zurabov had nobody to speak to, but that does not justify him cozying up and playing buddies with Poroshenko as he reportedly did. Now that the Russians have finally appointed a competent person to this role, **Mikhail Babich, the Ukrainians are refusing to accredit him** which, apparently, the Kremlin is accepting with bizarre equanimity. In December, Putin also appointed another very powerful figure, **Boris Gryzlov**, a permanent member of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, as the plenipotentiary representative of the Russian Federation in the Contact Group on settlement of the situation in Ukraine. It took Russia a very long time, but now with Gryzlov and Babich involved, Russia is finally involving some high octane personalities in the negotiations process dealing with the war in the Ukraine. Again, a good decision, but a very belated one.

Could this also indicate that the Russians have information that something major will happen with the Ukraine? Possibly. I sure don't know, but it does look to me that they are preparing for something.

As for Syria, the Russian are trying to increase their options, but it is unlikely that anything major happens before the next US administration comes in. Besides, with Erdogan still busy with his crackdown on any opposition, it is also unclear what course Turkey will take once the purges are completed.

And then this, just in:

According to al Masdar news (<https://www.almasdarnews.com>), **Iran has just granted Russia the right to use the Hamedan Air Base in western Iran.** The original article entitled “*Russia deploys jets at Iranian Airbase to combat insurgents in Syria (Pictures)*” (<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russia-deploys-jets-iranian-airbase-combat-insurgents-syria-pictures/>) even claims to show pictures of Russian Tu-22M3s already deployed in Iran. IF this is true, this is very significant. Unlike Khmeimim, Hamedan is safe and is perfectly located to conduct military strikes in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle-East. One problem though: al Masdar is an Israeli project, part the **Israel Project**, a “*pro-Israel public diplomacy organization founded in the United States at the height of the*

second intifada”. I checked with a well-informed Iranian source, and it is not confirming any of this at this time. The Russian blogger “Colonel Cassad”, however, **did some investigating of his own** and seems to consider that information as plausible. **Other Russian sources** are confirming that Russia has asked Iran to allow Russian cruise missiles to fly through Iranian airspace. It does appear like the collaboration between Iran and Russia is strengthening which is, of course, very good news.

Finally, if Erdogan is serious about collaborating with Russia and Iran against Daesh, then one way for Turkey to do that would be to open the Turkish airspace to Russian air and missile strikes against Daesh. If that happens, Russia will have the choice of four locations to launch strikes: Crimea, southern Russia (Abkhazia), Khmeimim in Syria and, hopefully, Hamedan in Iran.



Bombora Military Airport

A place to keep a special eye on is the Bombora military airfield near Gudauta, in Abkhazia. **According to Lentra.ru**, the length of the main runway is 4km (this is a mistake, **the actual length is 3km**) and this runway ends right on the seashore allowing aircraft to take off at very low altitudes and thereby remain under enemy radar coverage (see image next page). This airfield is currently protected by some 4’000 Russian soldiers deployed in Abkhazia who are equipped by the newest Russian weapon systems and who form the backbone of the Russian 7th Base [for more on this base, see **here** (from an anti-Russian source) and **here** (including some pretty interesting photographs)]. This airfield is ideally located to become a major hub for the operations of Russian Aerospace forces.