



Members of Russian and Syrian forces stand guard near posters of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his Russian counterpart President Vladimir Putin 20 August 2018 at the Abu Duhur crossing on the eastern edge of Idlib Province in Syria. Civilians used the crossing to enter regime-held territory from rebel-controlled areas in the province, some of them returning to their villages that were recaptured by the regime forces earlier that year. (Photo by George Ourfalian, Agence France-Presse)

A Logic All Its Own

Russian Operational Art in the Syrian Campaign

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The plan should be based exclusively on reality.

—Alexandr Svechin

Russia's campaign in Syria appears to have succeeded beyond all expectations. At its outset, many in the West thought Russia was "doomed to fail."¹ To the shock of conventional

wisdom, the Russians achieved their strategic objectives at a relatively low cost in just three and a half years. How did the Russians pull this off? The answer lies in the skillful application of operational art. The Russians planned for Syria by using five elements of the Russian military thought process: (1) historic analysis, (2) trends, (3) foresight and forecasting, (4) forms and methods, and (5) correlation of forces and means. This dialectical thought process produced a feasible, realistic plan that achieved their strategic goals of stabilizing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime and boosting its international prestige. The purpose of this article is to describe the unique logic of Russian military thought and deduce how the Russians applied those five elements of their thought process to the Syrian campaign. Understanding this thought process provides clarity to Russian military strategic planning and the execution of military campaigns. The article describes Russian inputs into military thought and examines Syria from a primarily tactical position. The term "operational art" used throughout the article refers to the U.S. military's definition of the term; it provides context and infers that the Syrian experience is part of Russian military systems analysis.²

Strategic Objectives and Operational Art

Russia's strategic objectives provide the starting point for understanding its campaign design in Syria. Russia's 2015 *National Security Strategy* lists two specific strategic objectives applicable to Syria—the first is security by "strengthening the country's defense," and the second is focused on international recognition and national dignity by "consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power, whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability ... in a polycentric world."³

The first strategic objective, security, is deeply embedded in the minds of Russian leadership. Thomas Wilhelm, director of Fort Leavenworth's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), observed that this national characteristic results in the Russian government favoring a controlled approach to countering chaos.⁴ Instability spreading from the color revolutions caused specific concern to Russian leadership, who typically blame the West for instigating uprisings and deliberately leaving chaos in their wake. These uprisings often lead to regional turmoil and foster

Islamic fundamentalism, which find support in Russia's Caucasus region. Supporting the Assad regime meant Russia provided stability to the region, which prevented a failed-state scenario like Libya and denied sanctuary for up to five thousand Russian-born Islamic fighters.⁵

National pride is the second strategic goal of Russian intervention in Syria. By keeping the Assad regime in power and stabilizing the country, Russia would be seen as a respected global power that could counter America's disruptive global objectives, creating a "polycentric" world order. Recovering Russian prestige is a consistent theme for Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2005, he remarked that the fall of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century."⁶ This perspective highlights the importance of national pride considering the twentieth century also witnessed both world wars and the tens of millions of people who were brutalized by communism.

These two strategic objectives, security and national pride, serve as the foundation upon which the Russian general staff created its operational art to support the Syrian campaign. Russian planning demands planners make a sober assessment of the underlying situation of the operational environment. In other words, Russians see the potential future battlefield as it is, not how they would like it to be.

Russian strategic thought is steeped in the early twentieth-century deep-battle theorists, particularly Aleksandr Svechin.⁷ Svechin argued that historical understanding, realistic goals, and intense preparation for a particular military campaign were required prior to the opening of hostilities.⁸ Russian General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov praised the Soviet theorist's unique approach to understanding the operating environment by quoting him directly, writing: "The outstanding Soviet military scholar A. Svechin wrote: 'It is unusually difficult ... to predict a war situation. For each war it is necessary to work out a special line of strategic behavior, each war represents a specific case that requires the establishment of its

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Russian President Vladimir Putin (*left*) toasts with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu 28 December 2017 at the Kremlin in Moscow after a ceremony to present state awards to military personnel who fought in Syria. (Photo by Kirill Kudryavtsev, Agence France-Presse)

own logic and not the application of some stereotypical pattern.”⁹ Gerasimov’s command philosophy was clearly influenced by Svechin when he stated, “Each war is a unique case, demanding the establishment of a particular logic and not the application of some template.”¹⁰ Wilhelm observed that Russian military planners want to deal with the uncertainty of war and arrive at a plan that is calculable and consistent.¹¹ FMSO’s model of this process inputs the strategic objectives from the national command authority to produce a plan in accordance with five cognitive building blocks of operational art: historical analysis, trends, foresight and forecasting, forms and methods, and correlation of forces and means (COFM). Analyzing each of these mechanisms produces a foundational understanding for Russia’s intervention in Syria.

Historical Analysis

Svechin stressed the importance of historical study, writing, “Isolation from an historical basis is dangerous both for the strategist and the politician.”¹² Former Deputy Defense Minister Andrei Kokoshin emphasized this point, writing, “All of Svechin’s work is penetrated by the idea of the necessity of the strategist’s continuous deliberation on history.”¹³ Svechin believed

that combining the political and military spheres was necessary to develop a comprehensive understanding of the environment. He wrote, “Readers interested in strategy will find more thought-provoking observations in the political history of past wars than in militaries treatises, particularly so-called ‘strategic essays.’”¹⁴

Russian strategic thinkers contextualize events in a political and historical, Russo-centric worldview. George Kennan, an ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Cold War and author of “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” advanced the idea that Russia’s geographic vulnerabilities and history of violent invasions created a paranoid, zero-sum attitude in the minds of its rulers.¹⁵ Russians place security and stability above all else. This might explain why Russian leaders feel threatened by Western-supported regime change efforts and color revolutions, particularly in countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. Russian leaders see the

Western-backed regime changes in Kosovo, Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and Venezuela as destabilizing efforts contributing to a world of human suffering, which is ultimately oriented toward Moscow itself.

The 1999 U.S.-led Kosovo War deeply impacted Russian thinking about contemporary war. Up to that point, Russia was a reluctant junior member of the U.S.-led peacekeeping force in the Balkans. Russia, still loyal to its Slavic brethren in Serbia, looked after Serbian interests despite Russia's relative military and economic weakness. The rules changed when the United States supported the Islamic Kosovars' break-away republics with NATO-led airstrikes and without a United Nations mandate. Russia maintained that the United States fomented a populist revolt, which it sponsored under the guise of humanitarian operations, provided military support in the form of weapons and training, controlled the information domain through media dominance, and avoided direct ground force involvement using multinational, joint airstrikes.¹⁶

Using historical analysis, Russian leaders looked at the civil war raging in Syria and believed it was a foregone conclusion that the Syrian government would collapse without Russian intervention. A humanitarian disaster would likely follow, similar to Iraq and Libya, flooding the region with displaced people and endless internecine conflicts. In their calculation, a successful campaign in Syria, however, would prevent this instability while simultaneously boosting Russia's international prestige and neutralizing America's interests. By coming to the defense of its former client, Russia would both stabilize the region as well as demonstrate to the world that it honors its commitments to its allies.

Russia also saw successful intervention in the region as an opportunity to expand its southern buffer region. Syria is a logical anchor point extending through trading partners, Collective Security Treaty Organization members, and other treaty partners in a loose cooperative effort.¹⁷ If Syria were to fall, Russian leaders reckoned, then Turkey would certainly be at risk, placing the problem at Russia's doorstep. Additionally, impetus for involvement also stemmed in part from reputed ancestral Russian ties to the region that are a combination of folklore and realpolitik. Russia sees itself as the natural inheritor of the Byzantine Empire and its Orthodox Christian religious legacy, very much linked to the Syrian Orthodox Christian Church, which once encompassed

the region. Consequently, in a real sense, Russia viewed involvement in Syria to some extent as something of a religious crusade aimed at protecting the Syrian church and the Orthodox culture it fostered. However, from a realist perspective, the prospect of military basing in Syria with easy access to the Mediterranean was viewed as an opportunity to some extent for overcoming the limitations imposed by Russia's harsh geography, which leaves it trapped in icy Arctic ports or behind the Turkish Straits. As a result, part of the impetus for Russian involvement stemmed from anticipated long-term agreements for use of the Khmeimim Air Base and the naval port in Tartus in Syria, which would extend Russia's operational reach into Eastern Mediterranean, southern Europe, and North Africa.

Foresight and Forecasting

With the broad Russian objectives in mind, its Syrian campaign provides valuable insight into the Russian leadership's views regarding the conduct of modern warfare. Doctrinal emphasis on foresight and forecasting describe how the Russian operational artists think about future war given the contemporary contexts. The Russian military defines foresight as "the process of cognition regarding possible changes in military affairs, the determination of the perspectives of its future deployment."¹⁸ In the Soviet-era book *Forecasting in Military Affairs: A Soviet View*, Yu. V. Chuyev and Yu. B. Mikhaylov state that the "aim of forecasting, which establishes what may occur in the future and under what conditions, is to minimize the effect of uncertainties on the results of decisions being undertaken at the present time."¹⁹ In their *Military Thought* article, authors V. V. Kruglov and V. I. Yakupov capture the essential nature of forecasting by writing, "In this day and age, unleashing or getting involved in a conflict without making sure that one will be ultimately victorious or at least get out of it on acceptable terms is something that only shortsighted people or adventurers can risk doing."²⁰ Foresight and forecasting describe the nature of the conflict.

With regard to Syria, aspects of consideration in the process of conducting foresight consideration and forecasting likely included assessment of the multisided civil war raging within the country. Actors included the Assad regime and supporting militias like Hezbollah, U.S.-backed fighters like the Kurds and the Free Syrian

Army, and Islamic fundamentalist actors like the Islamic State (IS). The Syrian campaign brought the challenge of distance and power projection into consideration. Russian adversaries spanned the spectrum of primitive IS militia forces to highly advanced Western militaries hosting a complement of advanced technological weapons.

The strength of Russian military planning lays in who Russia supports. For example, Russia supported Syria, an established, legitimate, internationally recognized government that enjoyed the support of a plurality of its population. Assad not only enjoyed legitimacy, despite poor press in the West, but he also maintained a standing army and functioning government in the regions he controlled. Thus, Russia supported a suit-wearing, clean-shaven, English-speaking, Western-educated ruler.

Contrast this to the U.S. campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan that overthrew governments and attempted to nurture Western-style democratic republics in regions violently divorced from the principles of Western civilization. As a result, the United States supported an assortment of militias whose ultimately questionable affiliations with Islamic fundamentalism and destabilizing effects on other Middle Eastern countries, such as Turkey and Iraq, further handicapped America's regional goals.

Trends

Trends are the ways a country achieves a military objective. For instance, eighteenth-century warfare leaned toward small, professional, maneuver armies that relied on depots for support, sparing the civilian countryside. Nineteenth-century warfare trends were mass armies, wars of annihilation, and destruction of the countryside. Trends of early twentieth-century warfare were mechanization and combined-arms warfare. A current trend is commonly referred to in the West as hybrid warfare or new-generation warfare (NGW). Initially, NGW was misinterpreted as a new, unique way of warfare concocted by the Russians. However, Bartles demonstrates that NGW is a term Russian thinkers used to describe indirect and asymmetric Western military methods in the late 1990s and early 2000s.²¹ In an article republished by *Military Review*, Gerasimov describes the trends of contemporary war as undeclared, regime-change oriented, nonmilitary in nature, destructive of civilian infrastructure, of short duration, occurring in all physical environments, and characterized by high maneuverability, simultaneity, unified action, and the use of

precision-guided munitions.²² Therefore, Russian trends can be identified as the counteractions to U.S. actions. Since the United States is the perceived instigator of indirect and asymmetric methods, the Russian plan in Syria involved countering what Russia perceived as American hybrid warfare trends. A. A. Bartosh's article in *Military Thought* affirms this line of thinking: "The brilliant operation of joining the Crimea to Russia and the Syrian campaign display the efficiency of Russian nonlinear strategies of countering hybrid warfare."²³

In Syria, there were five prevailing trends that ran counter to Russian objectives and influenced Russian operational art. The first trend to be countered was regime change. Western leaders assumed the Assad regime would fall. President Barack Obama called for Assad's resignation in August 2011, saying, "For the sake of the Syria people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."²⁴ Putin, however, sought to stop the spread of color revolutions by assisting his beleaguered Middle Eastern ally with direct military support in the fall of 2015.²⁵ In 2018, Russian writer and military expert Ye. O. Savchenko wrote that the "United States failed to achieve its goals in Syria, not less because the state of affairs made a U-turn in the second half of 2015, when Russia started rendering lawful military support to the Syrian government."²⁶

The second trend countered by Russia was the influence of nonstate actors. Russians distrust nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), whose operations are seen as clandestine proxies supporting Western aims.²⁷ The Obama administration spent nearly \$10 billion in Syria (much of it funneled through regional NGOs).²⁸ These NGOs were delegitimized by Russian media and regularly denied access to territory under Syrian control. Savchenko wrote that "the dynamics of fighting in Syria in September-December 2017 suggest that the United States is rendering at least indirect support to the Islamic State terrorist organization."²⁹

The third trend Russia countered was an international coalition against Syria. The United States attempted to bring regional allies to its side to strengthen the U.S. position and isolate Assad.³⁰ Russia thwarted U.S. attempts to receive approval from the United Nations and neutralized U.S. alliances in the region by expanding diplomatic and military partnerships with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Israel.³¹



The fourth trend countered by Russia was support to proxy forces. As early as 2012, the Obama administration recognized a coalition of Syrian opposition groups that received military and financial support.³² As a countermeasure, Russia's first airstrikes in support of the Assad regime were aimed mainly against U.S.-backed rebels.³³

The fifth and final trend Russia countered was the avoidance of large ground forces. Russia's economy of force operation in Syria relies on sea, air, special forces, and independent contractors, which left the bulk of the ground fighting to the Syrian Arab Army and its Iranian-backed Hezbollah allies.³⁴ Russia made up for this lack of manpower on the ground with robust command-and-control support. In March 2018, Gerasimov stated, "All troop commanders of military districts, combined arms armies, and Air Force and Air Defense armies, almost all division commanders and more than half of the combined arms brigade and regimental commanders, together with their staffs, have acquired combat experience [in Syria]."³⁵

Forms and Methods

Forms are generally thought of as types of organizations (e.g., whole-of-government, multinational, joint), while methods include techniques applied to contemporary weapons and principles of war (e.g.,

A Tu-22M3 long-range bomber from the Russian Aerospace Forces carries out an air strike on Islamic State targets 1 November 2017 near Abu Kamal, Deir ez-Zor Province, Syria, after flying over Iraq and Iran. The aircraft targeted strongholds and ammunition and armament depots of insurgents as Su-30SM fighters (*not shown*) covered the bombers. (Photo courtesy of the Russian Ministry of Defence)

hypersonic weapons, unmanned aircraft systems, electronic warfare [EW], and hybrid warfare).³⁶ In *Russia Military Strategy: Impacting 21st Century Reform and Geopolitics*, FMSO senior analyst Timothy Thomas wrote that forms and methods "have direct relevance as to how the military takes advantage of war's changing nature, as well as how future war might be conducted."³⁷ According to prevailing forms and methods, Russians determined what they would send to Syria and how they would fight.

The principal form (organization) Russia sent to Syria was the Russian Aerospace Forces, a combined joint, interagency task force. Although common to the U.S. military, this type of operation is unique for the Russian Federation. The specialized nature of the Russian Aerospace Forces to Russian thinkers is observed by V. A. Kiselyov's passage: "A new element in operational formation for a cross-service battle can eventually be the aerospace strike echelon,

which will help solve the problem of combat support of ground troop groupings' actions from aerospace."³⁸ The use of joint fires was of particular interest and demanded significant thought for Russian planners. O. V. Sayapin, O. V. Tikhanychev, and N. A. Chernov wrote in a *Military Thought* article, "The analysis of local wars and armed conflicts (LW&AC) practices of the latter half of the 20th-early 21st centuries has demonstrated the enhanced role of the adversary destruction by fire (ADF)." Techniques include

Russia's use of air defense is an obvious response to Western airpower as Syrian rebels and IS lack any sort of air contingent. Russian air defense systems have the immediate task of not only supporting the Syrian campaign but also serve to extend Russia's anti-access and area denial in a region where the United States has enjoyed air supremacy for the last three decades.⁴¹ Russia's vast EW and cyber networks attack Western systems daily. As stated by Gen. Richard D. Clarke, commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command,

“Unlike the U.S. contractor groups Blackwater or Triple Canopy that principally provided fixed-site or convoy security, private military companies are equipped as combined-arms task forces and maintain an extensive role in Russia's ground combat.”

reconnaissance and striking and reconnaissance and firing, similar to the U.S. targeting methodology. The form to execute adversary destruction by fire is a cross-service strike and fire-capable reconnaissance system, which the authors admitted was difficult for the joint task force to implement in Syria due to a highly mobile enemy, nonstandard structure, and taking sanctuary in built-up, noncombatant areas.³⁹

In a similar fashion, Russian methods appear to embrace their technological prowess by mimicking the U.S.-Kosovo model. Most of Russia's kinetic involvement has been from the sky, either through air or naval forces. Although the results were questionable, the Syrian campaign allowed testing of precision strike weapons to include a volley of rockets from the Caspian Sea as a demonstration of Russian capability.

Special operations forces and mercenary troops are also key components of the Russian military. Their special forces provide on-ground targeting solutions to air and sea assets while the private military companies provide a credible, yet plausibly deniable, Russian land force. Unlike the U.S. contractor groups Blackwater or Triple Canopy that principally provided fixed-site or convoy security, private military companies are equipped as combined-arms task forces and maintain an extensive role in Russia's ground combat.⁴⁰

“We are operating in the most aggressive EW environment on the planet from our adversaries.”⁴²

Correlation of Forces and Means

Correlation of forces and means speaks to the scientific and mathematical nature that Russians use to seek certainty and predictability. Although Russians are well aware of the element of chance that accompanies any military endeavor, they reduce as many uncertainties as possible to reach a manageable level of risk. COFM is a subjective/objective approach to measure two or more sides' relative combat power. It takes into account variables such as type of unit, equipment, training, strength, and morale.

Russia's COFM likely took into account Assad's Syrian forces, Hezbollah, U.S.-backed rebel forces, and military contingents from the United States, Turkey, Israel, and Iraq. Russian force composition suggests different missions for different forces. For instance, Russian forces provided airstrikes in support of Syrian/Hezbollah ground forces to defeat U.S.-backed rebel forces and IS but neutralized U.S., Turkish, and Israeli forces with air defense and EW systems. Diplomatically, through the use of foreign military sales, Russia is fracturing the NATO alliance with sales of its S-400 missile defense system to Turkey, a move the United States declared would jeopardize the sales



of the fifth generation F-35 fighter jets.⁴³ Russia countered the United States by offering Turkey its own fifth generation fighter, the Su-57, a clear demonstration of how Russia's military presence alone forces the West to recalibrate its approach to the Middle East.⁴⁴

By inserting themselves into the competition space, Russian leaders knew the West must respect their presence (assuming no side wants to risk escalation over Syria). Two events indicate Russia's delicate military position in Syria: the 2015 downing of one of Russia's Su-24 aircrafts by Turkish F-16s near the Turkey-Syria border and the 2018 defeat of Russian mercenary forces by the United States, resulting in as many as three hundred casualties.⁴⁵ The Russians were careful not to escalate tensions because the force they sent to Syria was not configured to conduct large-scale ground combat with either the Turkish or U.S. military. The Royal United Services Institute, an independent think tank located in Britain, maintains one of the most detailed estimates on Russian forces deployed to Syria early in the campaign.⁴⁶ Not counting mercenary forces, the Russians maintained fewer than 2,500 personnel in support of ground operations, approximately fifty-five aircraft and twenty helicopters in support of air operations, and roughly forty-one naval vessels at sea.

Russian soldiers on armored vehicles patrol a street on 2 February 2017 in Aleppo, Syria. Russian operational planners ostensibly restricted the requirement for Russian ground forces and focused instead on preparing and supporting Syrian government and Iranian forces for use as the main maneuver and assault forces. Russian involvement in actual combat operations mainly involved aerial bombardment, close air support, transportation, and indirect fires from ground and naval elements, in addition to providing communications and logistical support. (Photo by Omar Sanadiki, Reuters)

This relatively small force—compared to the American experience in the region—demonstrates a precise estimate of forces required to achieve campaign objectives.

Analysis of Russian Operational Art in Syria

The application of operational art linked tactical tasks to strategic objectives according to the “logic” appropriate to Syria. Operational art gave the Russians a consistent, predictable, and reliable plan to successfully intervene in and change the course of the war. Operational art achieved strategic objectives with greater success than anticipated, resulting in IS being largely defeated; Assad remaining in power and consolidating gains; Russian

operational reach extending into the Middle East, southern Europe, and North Africa; the NATO alliance fracturing; U.S. objectives are stymied; and Russia emerging as a force to be reckoned with in world affairs. The full history of Russia's intervention is to be determined, but the initial success that Russia and Syria relished led Putin to announce victory for the initial campaign in late 2017.⁴⁷

Historical analysis led the Russians to believe that the color revolutions would overthrow their ally in the region and spread instability to Russia's borders. Foresight and forecasting allowed Russians to see to a degree the nature of the conflict of a multisided civil war and how supporting Assad would be the decisive strategic move in the theater of operations. The prevailing trends Russia considered were commonly associated with NGW and took into account information operations, paramilitary forces, humanitarian organizations, and a whole-of-government approach to influence the military campaign. Analysis of forms and methods provided the correct joint force to the Syrian theater. By using an economy of force, Russia avoided protracted land force involvement in favor of enablers to support Syrian/Hezbollah infantry. The COFM accurately predicted Russian success of

relative combat power in the long term by defeating rebel forces and neutralizing U.S. forces.

Conclusion

Successful implementation of operational art in Syria will undoubtedly lead to further practice along Russia's periphery such as in Ukraine and the Baltics and in global regions such as the Middle East and Latin America. The shrewd application of military forces in support of strategic objectives are based on clear-eyed assessments and achievable goals. This does not mean that Russia is unstoppable. In addition to having a smaller economy than the United States and a military that is not designed to be projected and sustained beyond its borders, the public approval of the Syrian operation appears to be waning. What must be respected is that when Russia commits combat forces to an operation, it is in accordance with a well-thought-out plan specific to the logic of the campaign. As a result, upsetting a Russian campaign, once it has been initiated, requires Russia to change the variables it based its planning assumptions upon. This can be a delicate move with a nuclear capable and culturally neurotic adversary. ■

Notes

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