

Moscow's missions: Russian expeditionary warfare capabilities

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Russia's military intervention in Syria and its growing footprint around the world have prompted interest in the country's expeditionary capabilities. *Tim Ripley* examines Moscow's recent intervention operations and how they are evolving

When Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) combat aircraft arrived in Syria in September 2015 the implications were not immediately clear. Then-US President Barack Obama predicted that Moscow would soon be bogged down in a Vietnam-War-style “quagmire”, while other observers warned that Russia's military would not be able to change the course of the Syrian civil war.

As events unfolded during the next three years, Russian strike jets, special forces, artillery units, and cruise-missile-firing naval surface vessels and submarines helped Syrian troops roll up one opposition enclave after another, transforming the situation on the ground. Today, Syrian troops have penned in the last major groups of opposition fighters in a small pocket around Idlib city in the northwest of the country.

Russia does not appear to have any intention of leaving its air and naval bases in Syria, giving Moscow a permanent presence in a vital strategic position in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Russian aircraft and warships seem to be using their bases in Syria to conduct operations across the region and further afield into Africa and the Indian Ocean.

Power projection into Syria

The end of the Cold War brought a close to the Soviet Union's military presence around the world and, during the 1990s, the newly formed Russian Federation had little inclination or money to attempt to strut the global stage. Russian troops joined several United Nations peacekeeping operations and later participated in NATO-aligned peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Kosovo. The Russian peacekeepers looked poorly equipped, wore threadbare uniforms, and lived in broken down camps. This symbolised the decline of Russian military power under President Boris Yeltsin.

The arrival into power of President Vladimir Putin in 2000 changed all this, however, as Putin began a series of military reforms to restore Russia's great power status. This ultimately led to the country's intervention in Syria. At the heart of these measures were moves to accelerate the professionalisation of the Russian armed forces and the introduction of modern technology such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for surveillance, precision strike weapons, and satellite communications networks. However, rebuilding Moscow's military is a long-term project and, while the transformation has been

under way, the majority of Russian service personnel have had to make do with Soviet-era aircraft, tanks, and ships until new equipment has come online.



The Russian Ropucha-class large landing ship Azov in transit between Syria and Russia in May 2018. Russia mobilised its amphibious warfare fleet to augment airlift capabilities to Syria. As a result Russian amphibious warfare vessels passed through the Turkish-controlled Bosphorus Strait on a regular basis to move heavy vehicles and cargo to Syria. (Cem Devrim Yaylali)

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The intervention in Syria in 2015 caught Western governments by surprise, although as more information about Moscow's deployment emerged it became clear that the Russian military was fielding important expeditionary capabilities.

When international media were invited to the new Russian airbase in Latakia province on Syria's Mediterranean coast they found a well-organised and well-appointed facility. Russian airmen were housed in pre-fabricated housing units and aircraft were being repaired in new maintenance tents. Meanwhile, soldiers guarding the base sported new uniforms and body armour and drove around in factory-fresh mine-resistant armoured vehicles, including the Gaz Tigr and Kamaz Typhoon.

Alongside veteran Soviet-era Sukhoi Su-24 and Su-25 strike aircraft were new Su-34 multirole jets fitted with precision weapons and Israeli-designed but Russian-assembled Ural Civil Aviation Plant (UZGA) Forpost UAVs. Offshore, meanwhile, Russian warships and submarines fired volleys of Novator Kalibr land attack cruise missiles.

To control and sustain its war in Syria the Russian military also set up an expeditionary command structure and logistics operation. They dubbed their troop contingent the 'Group of Russian Forces in the Syrian Arab Republic', which had a slightly Soviet era feel to it, although the new Russian mission was very different to its Cold War-era counterparts.

A colonel general, or four-star-ranked officer, was sent to oversee the mission in the Syrian capital. The VKS, which was providing the bulk of the combat power in Syria, set up an air operations command centre at Humaymim Air Base with intelligence, surveillance, and communications capabilities, including real-time downloading of video imagery from Forpost UAVs. Moreover, special forces (Spetsnaz) teams were assigned to act as forward air controllers with frontline Syrian army units. Additionally, training teams of Russian officers were attached to selected Syrian units to help them operate newly supplied Russian tanks and artillery and to prepare them for combat. Russian bridge-building, electronic warfare, mine-clearing, and other specialist units were also despatched to Syria when they were needed.

A major feature of the Russian campaign in Syria was the setting up of specialist teams to help the Damascus government win over the population to its cause. Led by an organisation dubbed the 'Centre for Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syrian Arab Republic', this non-kinetic, or soft-power operation organised the delivery of humanitarian aid, sent Russian medical units to run hospitals for refugees, and negotiated surrender deals with opposition-held enclaves.

These operations 'outside the wire' of compounds were backed by small contingents of naval infantry, airborne troops, and artillery units that provided force protection in case the specialist units and personnel came under threat.

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