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A Ship Leading to Escalation in Syria

By Alexander Shumilin

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On Friday, NBC News, citing U.S. military and intelligence sources, reported that Russia is sending a military ship based in the Black Sea to the port it rents in Tartus, Syria. This was confirmed by Russian diplomatic sources, NTV reported Friday. The official reason for the call was to protect "Russian property and interests" in Syria. Air Force General Vladimir Gradusov also said there may be plans to send other military ships to Syria to help evacuate diplomatic personnel and other Russian citizens from Syria if the conflict escalates.

Sending military ships to Syria is a significant and disturbing development because Russia has always classified the Tartus port as a technical-support base used mainly for maintenance purposes, not a military port in the same sense as the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. So Friday's announcement can only be interpreted as a military escalation on Russia's part in the Syrian conflict.

What's more, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, citing anonymous military sources, reported that the Defense Ministry is considering sending soldiers from the elite Pskov airborne forces and special forces from the "Zapad" and "Vostok" units based in Chechnya to protect Russian

interests in Syria, if necessary.

Despite numerous denials from President Vladimir Putin and the Foreign Ministry, it is clear that Russia is committed to protecting the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad at all costs. If push comes to shove, this could lead to a direct Russian military intervention in Syria's civil war.

No matter how much the Defense Ministry and Kremlin propagandists try to justify sending a military contingent for the "legitimate defense of Russian installations," they overlook the fact that in civil wars, such installations are either dismantled or abandoned. An outside power should never intervene with military force as a means to protect them. If it does, the other side in the conflict will likely view it as the open participation by a foreign army on behalf of its enemy.

What's more, according to international law and conventions, even privately employed civilian specialists working on nonmilitary facilities can be considered "illegal combatants" by the opposition forces. As such, they could be subjected to legal prosecution and punishment, as recently happened to Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian specialists working in Libya. Thus, it is only a matter of time before Syrian rebels classify the Russian military as their armed opponents.

After 40 years of supporting both the Hafez and Bashar Assad regimes, Russia's military escalation in Syria will only exacerbate the Kremlin's current isolation over its pro-Assad policies. This could easily prompt a serious political conflict with the West.

In the Soviet period, Russia sent troops to foreign countries under the banner of struggles for "world peace" and against "imperialist aggression." Now it appears that the only banner Russia is fighting under is that of a hardened dictatorship that is responsible for more than 10,000 civilian deaths.

The next stage in the development of this logic is obvious: Russia needs a complete military victory in Syria — for Putin and Assad alike.

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