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Putin Isn't Winning in Syria

By Ilan Berman

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Don't believe the hype surrounding Russia's involvement in Syria. Ever since President Vladimir Putin launched a major escalation of the 4 1/2-year-old conflict there last month, Western media has been awash with commentary about the Kremlin's strategy, with most interpreting it as a function of Moscow's strength — and Washington's weakness.

It's an image that the Kremlin is eager to stoke, for obvious political reasons. Yet Russia's intervention in Syria also carries serious downsides for the Kremlin — negatives that are likely to come back to haunt Russia's leaders in the not-too-distant future.

First, Russia's escalation is unsustainable in the long run. Russia's current, predominantly aerial, campaign indeed appears to be having some effect on the ground.

But it is commonly understood that a lasting rollback of the Islamic State terrorist group, as well as other assorted threats to the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, requires a far deeper investment of both personnel and hardware.

Here, Moscow is liable to find it difficult to deliver. Russia's armed forces are currently made

up of some 770,000 active duty personnel, with more than double that number available in reserve.

But extensive deployments in the Russian Far East tie up a good number of those troops, while more than 50,000 are currently said to be massed on Russia's common border with Ukraine. That makes it difficult for Putin to fulfill his promise of sending 150,000 soldiers to Syria — at least without giving up serious strategic equities closer to home.

Second, Russia's Syria strategy could end up causing major domestic economic dislocation.

Last summer, in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, European nations suspended work on the "South Stream" natural gas pipeline, which had been designed as a new and important conduit to bring Russian energy to European markets. In response, Russia pinned its hopes on an alternative route — dubbed "Turkish Stream" — that would skirt Eastern European territory altogether in favor of an outlet in Turkey.

But now, those plans are in peril. In response to Russia's actions in Syria, the Turkish government — itself a staunch opponent of the Assad regime — in early September formally froze talks with the Kremlin over the energy project.

That state of affairs, moreover, is likely to persist for some time; in early October, Turkish President Recep Erdogan took the unprecedented step of warning publicly that relations between Ankara and Moscow are now "at risk" as a result of Russia's actions in neighboring Syria.

That augurs ill for Russia's domestic economic situation, which has already been significantly impacted by the cumulative impact of low world oil prices and Western sanctions levied in response to its aggression in Ukraine.

Finally, by deploying its forces to fight Islamic extremism in Syria, the Kremlin risks breeding much more of the same.

Already, dozens of Saudi clerics have issued a public letter urging Sunni militants to travel to Syria to join the fight against the "Crusader/Shiite alliance" of Russia and Iran. The echoes of Moscow's earlier — and ruinous — engagement in Afghanistan are unmistakable, and suggest that any Russian forces deployed to the Syrian front will soon face a growing cadre of extremists now flocking to what has truly become the new global jihad.

This state of affairs could create domestic dangers, too. Russia faces a significant problem with extremism among its swelling Muslim minority, and this summer the country's most potent jihadi group, the Caucasus Emirate, formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

Given that state of affairs, it's reasonable to expect an uptick in terrorism within the Russian Federation itself — especially if Moscow begins gaining ground in earnest against the Islamic State on the Syrian battlefield.

For all of these reasons, the conventional wisdom surrounding Russia's Syria strategy is liable to turn out to be profoundly wrong. Putin's decision to intervene on the Syrian battlefield may have been motivated by sound strategic interests, but its side effects could end up being ruinous for Russia.

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