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Russia's Problem-Prone Aircraft Carrier Heading to Syria

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Deck of the Admiral Kuznetsov. **YouTube**

The flagship of Russia's Northern Fleet, the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier, is bound for the eastern Mediterranean. There, it will rendezvous with a flotilla of Russian ships on combat duty off the coast of Syria, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu said on Wednesday.

Shoigu did not specify what Kuznetsov will be doing once it meets up with the fleet off of Syria, saying the decision is aimed at "bolstering the combat capabilities of the group," which currently consists of six combat vessels and three to four support vessels.

Kuznetsov, a Soviet-built aircraft carrier, will deploy to Syria with a wing of Russia's naval aviation force. But the ship and its air-wing were not designed for land-strike missions, such as the ones flown by Russian planes currently operating out of a Syrian airbase in the region of Latakia.

The planes that fly from the ship are limited in their overall payload and fuel capacity, because the planes must take off without the assistance of a steam-powered catapult, as is seen on Western aircraft carriers. Instead, a ramp at the end of the Kuznetsov's deck vaults the planes into the air.

If Kuznetsov and its air wing are called to support Russian air forces in Syria, they will be performing a completely different mission from the one the ships Soviet designers intended. The air wing is intended to defend Russian ships from American aircraft and submarines, while missile tubes hidden in the aircraft carrier's deck are used to pummel other surface ships from afar.

Russia's Syria adventure, begun almost a year ago, has been as much a demonstration and live-fire exercise for its military forces as it has been a mission with a concrete political goal. The Defense Ministry has used the opportunity of fighting for Syrian President Bashar Assad to test a variety of weapons systems that have never seen actual combat. Kuznetsov appears to be next in line.

The ship has famously broken down several times during its lifetime, and reportedly always sets to sea with an ocean-going tugboat — just in case.

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