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Lessons learned in the Levant

Russia's arms in the Syrian conflict

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Tupolev Tu-160 RF-94109. Source: Alex Beltyukov

In an interview on 19 April 2020, the Russian Minister of Trade and Industry Denis Manturov stated that the country recently field-tested its new T-14 Armata main battle tank in Syria. Manturov also talked about potential export orders for the T-14, and being able to say that it has now been "combat-proven" in Syria will obviously help the Kremlin in marketing its new tank abroad.[1] The T-14 Armata is being used as a common chassis for the Russian Army's heavy armoured vehicles, including a heavy infantry fighting vehicle and a self-propelled howitzer besides a main battle tank.[2] According to the Chief Executive Officer of the T-14's manufacturer Uralvagonzavod, Alexander Potapov, the company will deliver the first production batch of T-14 tanks for field trials to the Russian Army sometime this year.[3]

1 Joseph Trevithick, "Russian Government Says it Sent its New T-14 Tanks to Syria for Combat Testing", *The War Zone*, 20 April 2020, accessed 21 April 2020, https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/33088/russian-government-says-it-sent-its-new-t-14-tanks-to-syria-for-combat-testing

2 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2017), p. 83.

3 Anton Novoderzhkin, "Russian T-14 Armata Tanks Tested in Syria", *Tass News Agency*, 19 April 2020, accessed 5 May 2020, https://tass.com/defense/1146855

These are testing times

Ever since Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war in support of the Assad government in September 2015, observers have noted that the Kremlin has also used the conflict as an opportunity to test new weapons and other military equipment in an armed conflict environment, as well as to develop the corresponding tactics and procedures for using them.[4] A significant number of weapon systems that have been developed by the Russian defence industry over the past decade, as well as some that are still under development, were for the first time operationally deployed and tested during the course of the Syrian campaign.[5] The Russian Army, Air Force and Navy have all taken the opportunity to test their new weapon systems in this conflict.[6]

In January 2018, Russian president Vladimir Putin visited the National Defence Control Centre, taking part in a conference on the results and lessons learned from the military campaign in Syria. There, Putin noted that the campaign had been priceless for the Russian armed forces, and that it should be seen alongside the experience gained in operations relating to the conflict in Ukraine and the thousands of exercises conducted by the Russian military.[7] Perhaps equally important, experience in Syria is now explicitly seen as an essential element of the career of every aspiring officer. According to Russia's Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, all commanders of Russia's military districts, its combined arms armies, air force and air defence armies, along with many of the divisional commanders, have gained experience in Syria.[8] This comes on top of the many practical and conceptual lessons that the Russian armed forces have undoubtedly learned from their campaign in Syria. The experiences in Syria will likely shape Russian military thinking for years to come.[9] But what lessons can the West draw from Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war?

How the Bear goes to war

To destroy targets located deep in Syria it was necessary to involve Russia's long-range aviation in the war. Tu-95MS Bear and Tu-160 Blackjack bombers were used to launch cruise missiles at targets in the Aleppo, Idlib and Raqqa provinces.[10] Two types of air-launched cruise missiles were used in the strikes: firstly, the Kh-555 (AS-22 Kluge), a conventionally-armed variant of the Cold War-era nuclear Kh-55 (AS-15 Kent), with a maximum range of 2,000 km; secondly, the more modern Kh-101 (AS-23 Kodiak), a conventionally-armed variant of the nuclear Kh-102, with a maximum range of 4,000 km. Both weapons use a combination of inertial, terrain-reference and satellite navigation for guidance for

4 Sebastien Roblin, "Test War: How Russia's Air Force Brutally Used Syria for Target Practice", *The National Interest*, 1 March 2020, accessed 20 April 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/test-war-how-russias-air-force-brutally-used-syria-target-practice-128737

5 Dave Majumdar, "Russia's Military Used 215 New Weapons Systems in Syria", *The National Interest*, 30 January 2018, accessed 5 May 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russias-military-used-215-new-weapons-systems-syria-24283

6 Douglas Barrie and Howard Gethin, "Russian Weapons in the Syrian Conflict", *Military Balance Blog*, 8 May 2018, accessed 21 April 2020, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/05/russian-weapons-in-syrian-conflict

7 Military-practical conference on the results of the special operation in Syria, Kremlin Press Release of 30 January 2018, accessed 23 April 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56750

8 Valery Gerasimov, "We Broke the Back of Terrorists," interview by Victor Baranets, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 26 December 2017, accessed 5 May 2020, https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/

9 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?", *Military Review*, 24 January 2018, accessed 23 April 2020, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/

10 Sebastien Roblin, "Russia's Bombers Have Been Doing Serious Damage All Over Syria", *The National Interest*, 7 March 2020, accessed 5 May 2020, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russias-bombers-have-been-doing-serious-damage-all-over-syria-130732

high accuracy, with a circular error probable (CEP) of 5-10 m.[11] Besides viewing these cruise missile strikes simply as combat tests to gain experience with them, they can also be perceived as strategic messaging to boost Russian credibility vis-à-vis the West writ large. Both missiles, which also have nuclear-tipped variants, will remain Russia's primary long-range stand-off land-attack capability for the coming decades. Their employment in the Syrian campaign has clearly demonstrated Russia's capability and resolve to use such weapons that are capable of striking targets anywhere in Europe.

An indispensable accessory

The Syrian campaign has also provided the Russian military with the opportunity to operate a range of tactical Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in an operational environment. It has led Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu to describe them as "indispensable in modern conflicts".[12] At the same time, however, it has shown how the Russian defence industry has fallen behind in this area of modern warfare.

The most capable UAV deployed was the Forpost, which is the Russian name for the Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI) Searcher Mk2.[13] The Forpost has become the mainstay of Russian battlefield air surveillance operations and there has been a significant increase in orders for them.[14] What is certain is that the Russian military has gained valuable operational experience in Syria that will be fed back into the domestic UAV developments. However, the Syrian campaign also highlighted the need for Russia's armed forces to invest further in the development of unmanned strike UAVs, particularly for tactical employment. At present Russia still has no armed UAVs, and thus lacks a reconnaissance-strike option for its drones. Therefore, the experience gained in the Syrian campaign may facilitate the development of a second generation of Russian reconnaissance drones and spur the arrival of attack drones.

11 Douglas Barrie, "Kh-101 Missile Test Highlights Russian Bomber Firepower", *Military Balance Blog*, 8 February 2019, accessed 5 May 2020, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2019/02/russian-bomber-firepower

12 Anton Lavrov, "Russian UAVs in Syria", *Centre for the Analysis of Strategy and Technology*, accessed 5 May 2020, http://cast.ru/products/articles/russian-uavs-in-syria.html

13 Patrick Hilsman, "How Israeli-Designed Drones Became Russia's Eyes in the Sky for Defending Bashar Al-Assad", *The Intercept*, 16 July 2019, accessed 5 May 2020, https://theintercept.com/2019/07/16/syria-war-israel-russia-drones/

14 Tim Ripley, "Russia Orders Upgraded Forpost Tactical UAV", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 6 February 2020, accessed 5 May 2020, https://www.janes.com/article/94155/russia-orders-upgraded-forpost-tactical-uav

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