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Status and security: how Russian media is spinning airstrikes in Syria

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Putin talks, Russia listens. EPA/Yuri Kochetov

Even before the Russian air force launched its first strikes over Syria, there was already a Russian presence on the battleground. These were not the *spetsnaz*, Kremlin's special forces, but war correspondents from the leading Russian media outlets. This was as clear a sign as any that the Russia's priority has shifted from Ukraine, where these reporters spent most of the past 18 months, to Syria.

There is, however, no unanimity on Russia's latest escalation in Syria. As Russian state TV stations report successes of Russia's high-precision weapons projecting an image of a high-tech Russian military equal to the US, doubts persist about the latest adventure in the Middle East.

First, the good news for the Kremlin. Most outlets agree that Russia's interventions in Syria have made it impossible for the US to ignore Russia there. By bringing its military power to the country, Russia has made itself a part of any future solution and re-established itself as a global power.



Obama and Putin together in New York. RIA Novosti

The US president, Barack Obama, has repeatedly claimed that Russia was just a regional power. So, by undertaking an unprecedented military build-up in the Middle East, not seen since the height of the Cold War in the 1970s, Moscow has made it clear it is one of the few powers which doesn't ask the US for permission for the way it conducts its foreign policy.

What's more, when he met his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in New York recently, Obama demonstrated the absurdity of putting Russia on the same list of world's greatest threats as IS and Ebola in his UN address last year.

This change in status was made possible largely by Russia's deployment in Syria.

But while the increased assertiveness and global status of Russia – certainly as perceived in Russia itself – has clearly been boosted by intervention in Syria, doubts persist about the potential costs and inherent dangers of this policy.

Russia's Middle East axis

There is some unease about Russia's close alliance with a group of Shia powers demonstrated by the establishment of a coordination centre in Baghdad between Russia, Iraq, Iran and Syria. While a major blow to the US – it's yet another indication of the shambles of the US policy in the region – this move may well alienate Sunni powers as well as increasing discontent among Russia's own Muslims, the vast majority of whom are Sunni.

Authority: Vladimir Putin giving TV interview in Moscow on September 28. RIA Novosti

The recent fall of Kunduz, on the Afghan border with Tajikistan, to the Taliban has also set off alarm bells in Central Asian capitals – and also in Moscow.

A new Afghanistan?

Of course, the biggest concern in the Russian media is on the danger of getting bogged down in a complex regional conflict. Public opinion remains sceptical about Russia's military involvement in the Middle East and there are many parallels made with the way the Soviet Union collapsed under the burden of its military commitments – thanks, above all, to the ill-fated military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979-89.

The Kremlin has tried to alleviate these fears by insisting on the limited nature of Russian military involvement in Syria. Putin confirmed that he will only use airpower and ruled out ground operations by Russian troops.

To ease doubts about the effectiveness of Russia's strategy in Syria (after all Moscow criticised the airstrikes by the US-led coalition as ineffective), a coordination with the Syrian ground troops is emphasised as the key to the success of Russia's effort. The immediate aim seems to be the recapture of the road between Homs and Hama.

Western failure

Criticism of the US policy in the Middle East remains a widespread reference point for all Russian analysis. US and Western interventionism is almost universally blamed for the de facto breakup of Iraq, Libya and Syria and for the way the power vacuum this created has been filled by Islamic State. Even pro-Western analysts in Russia have criticised the fundamental failure by the US to understand the nature of the conflict in Syria and the Middle East and its reluctance to acknowledge this mistake.

Looking both ways: a Russian woman interrupts her English lesson to watch Vladimir Putin announce the beginning of airstrikes in Syria. EPA/Anatoly Maltsev

In stark contrast to the West, where Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, is often associated with the barrel bombs and is seen as the main cause of the refugee crisis, the actions of the Syrian government are not seen as being markedly worse than of any other side in the conflict. Perhaps, this is a reflection of Russia's own experience of fighting Islamic insurgency in Chechnya: all-out use of force against Islamic militants is seen as effective and necessary. In Syria's context, all eyes are on IS as the ultimate evil.

There is also some scepticism about the actual strength of moderate opposition touted by the West. One joke that did the rounds when Russia was accused of targeting moderates with its airstrikes was that that the US couldn't find the moderate opposition for three years – but Russia managed it in 24 hours.

The US position is seen as exceptionally weak: it can't accept Assad staying for prestige reasons (otherwise it would have to admit the failure of its Middle East strategy over the past four years) but also it can't fight him and IS at the same time.

Ironically, given some of the rhetoric after the Russian airstrikes began, many are seeing this as an opportunity to fix relations with the West. The meeting with Obama in New York is being seen inside Russia as an end to its isolation. Even limited cooperation driven by necessity is seen as better than none at all.