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Raising the stakes: Russian military support for Syria

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Russia is stepping up military support for Syria; reinforcing its opposition to international efforts to force President Bashar al-Assad to halt his eight-month-old crackdown on anti-government protesters. In so doing, Russia is turning the Syrian crisis into an international test of wills.

Commentary

RUSSIA IS reinforcing its opposition to international efforts to tighten the economic embargo on Syria by sending a Russian battle group of three vessels led by an aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean. The flotilla, expected in the region at the end of this week, is likely to dock in the Syrian port of Tartus, Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean, before the end of the month, according to Russian defence officials. The arrival of the flotilla comes on the heels of the delivery to Syria of supersonic anti-ship Yakhont cruise missiles as part of an agreement signed in 2007 and a Russian promise to go ahead with the training of Syrian personnel in the use of the state-of-the-art weapons.

As Syria teeters on the brink of civil war, Russia, in sending a flotilla to the eastern Mediterranean and maintaining arms supplies to Syria, is in effect bolstering President Bashar Al Assad's resolve not to give in to international demands that he halts his brutal eight-month-old crackdown on anti-government protesters. That corner of the Mediterranean is already being patrolled by US 6th Fleet warships led by an aircraft carrier. By raising the bar, Russia is signalling its determination to foil attempts to strangle the Syrian leader's regime and also hopes to reduce the chances of a military intervention in Syria, possibly spearheaded by Turkey. In a defiant show of force, Syria last week held war games that included test-firing of missiles and air force and ground troop operations.

Capitalising on influence in Damascus

In an ironic twist, Russia's breaking of ranks with the international community could position it alongside the Arab League as the only power potentially capable of coaxing Assad to moderate his hard line towards his opponents. Russia has consistently resisted efforts in the United Nations Security Council to condemn Turkey as has China, which however, unlike Russia, has declared its support for sanctions imposed by the Arab League.

Syria this week conditionally agreed to allow Arab observers into the country to monitor compliance with a government ceasefire in a bid to fend off stepped up Arab sanctions and an Arab push for UN involvement in the crisis. With Syria having repeatedly broken its earlier pledges to halt the crackdown, it remains to be seen

how serious Assad is this time around. Moreover, the battle lines in Syria have hardened to a degree that opposition forces may be unwilling to settle for anything less than Assad's demise.

Russia's defiant resistance to allowing Syria to be internationally isolated is fuelled by the fact that it has far more to lose politically, strategically and economically in Syria than it did in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen - the four Arab nations whose autocratic leaders were this year swept aside by the wave of anti-government protests sweeping the Middle East and North Africa.

The naval base in Tartus is operated by the Russian military under an agreement signed in 1971 between Syria and the then Soviet Union even though the Soviet Navy's Mediterranean Fleet was disbanded after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result, the port's floating docks fell into disrepair and Russian naval vessels rarely visited. That changed four years ago when Russia decided to renovate the base and turn it again into its window on the Mediterranean. Some 600 Russian technicians are upgrading facilities, dredging the harbour, and preparing it for Russian Navy port calls of which the Admiral Kuznetsov would be the first.

Political risk outstrips economic and strategic stakes

Russia's economic stakes in Syria are equally high. Russia has concluded US\$4 billion worth of arms contracts with Syria and has invested some \$20 billion in Syrian infrastructure, energy and tourism. Russia's Stroitransgaz is building a natural gas processing plant and supporting an Arab gas pipeline while Tatneft, which is already pumping Syrian oil, announced earlier this year that it would invest \$12.8m in oil exploration near the Iraqi border.

If the economic and strategic stakes are high, they pale from Russia's perspective compared to the potential fallout if Assad's opponents prevail in the face of a crackdown that has so far cost 4,000 lives, wounded thousands, and led to the arrest of even greater numbers. Russian forces have this year killed some 300 militants in the northern Caucasus, a patchwork of ethnic and religious groups where Islamists regularly attack Russian targets. They could well be encouraged by the toppling of Assad. Alternatively, a Syria that disintegrates as a result of civil war could equally inspire militants in Russian republics like Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia.

Syrian acceptance of Arab League observers, if implemented, offers Russia the opportunity to align support for Assad with Arab efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis peacefully. The question is whether a negotiated solution that seeks to meet protesters' demands for an end to repression and corruption and a transition to democracy, is possible as long as Assad remains in office given that the Syrian leader and his cohorts are unlikely to risk a political opening after so much bloodshed.

At the very least, Russia hopes that by positioning itself alongside the Arab League as a key player with influence in Damascus it will be able to protect its interests by shaping whatever negotiated resolution is achieved whether or not it maintains Assad in office. The alternative - the overthrow of the Assad regime - would constitute a significant setback for Russia not only in the Eastern Mediterranean but also across the Middle East and North Africa.

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