



THE RETURN OF RUSSIA THROUGH MILITARY DIPLOMACY



Chandra Rekha*
Associate Fellow, CAPS

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The ongoing Syrian crisis has pushed Russia to take upon itself the role of a reliable actor in bringing regional security and stability. What is interesting to note is that the return of Russia in global politics has been achieved mainly through military diplomacy in promoting its national interests— a shift from its long term dependence on energy diplomacy. In other words, Russia's current military diplomacy includes well equipped armed forces, well coordinated defence manoeuvres and a revamped defence industrial complex— all successfully used as tools for coercive diplomacy. The role of Russia in the Syrian crisis and the ongoing anti-Islamic State military campaign provides few key take aways: a reliable partner to its allies, a field test for Russian weapons system, boost to its global arms market and a re-assertion as a regional and global player.

Post Georgian War (2008), critics had written off the once superpower bloc Russia as a military power as it plummeted in the modernisation of its conventional armed forces and defence capabilities. Having realised that it can no longer depend on defence economy— given the dismal performance of its defence industrial complex post Soviet collapse—Russia shifted its focus to energy markets for the much need economic growth and funds for its overall development. However, post Ukraine crisis (2014), the economic sanctions imposed on Russia impacted its economic growth as a result of fall of oil prices and currency value of the Rouble. Despite the economic crisis and well aware of the turmoil in West Asia (not a stronghold of Russia), Russia re-focused on using military diplomacy as a leverage in West Asian geopolitics when the Bashar Al Assad regime was under threat from Western countries alongside the spread of Islamic State across Syria.

How has military diplomacy in Syria rewarded Russia?

To begin with, despite the call by the US led western allies for global isolation of Russia post re-claiming of Crimea, the committed allies of the US have begun to embrace Russia with the realisation that it is a force to reckon with. For instance, countries such as France, Germany, Italy and other members of the European Union are drifting away from US influence in determining their foreign policy towards Russia as seen post imposition of second round of economic sanctions on 2 August 2017.

Additionally, there is growing demand for Russian state of the art weapons since its military performance in Syria. Not only did Syria yield the most cost-effective outcome for Russia, the Kremlin was able to display its efficient and advanced weapons system (such as the accurate launch of Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea on IS targets in Syria and the use of Su-34 and Su 35 fighter aircraft). This has boosted the demand for Russian weapons as seen with the sale of S-400 missiles to Turkey and among key Western allies in West Asia such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia, in July 2017, agreed to buy weapons worth \$3.5 billion.¹ Algeria has ordered for 12 Russian SU-34 jets in January 2016, and many other countries have expressed interest, including Indonesia, Malaysia as well as Nigeria, Uganda and Ethiopia and others. China purchased 24 Russian Su-35s in November 2015, followed by Indonesia (10) in April 2016, and the United Arab Emirates (10) in March. Many other designs, including the SU-30M, have been in great demand since Russia's successful military campaign in Syria.² The annual Army Forum 2016 conducted in Russia saw the participation of over 1000 Russian enterprises and organisations and more than 80 foreign delegations. It is important to note that those countries that were not thought of as prospective equipment clients for Russia, showed keen interest in purchasing Russian weapons; Bahrain— one of the most loyal and important non-NATO ally of the US, and which also hosts the US' Fifth Fleet in Manama- is one such example.³ While some of the defence agreements are small in number, the signalling however has accelerated Russia's confidence in military diplomacy.

Another important take away is the positive outcome of defence revival programmes introduced to revamp Russia's defence industrial complex. Since 2000, Russia has regularly introduced State Armaments Programmes as state revenues continued to increase significantly as energy, arms and ammunition, and trade exports soared. This has resulted in large scale defence procurement and additional development and manufacture of internationally competitive weaponry for its global arms trade.

Given the fact that Russia cannot assert itself through a Soviet era economic aid and investment policy, military diplomacy has come as a boon to revive its status in international relations. In the face of the strategic pay off of military diplomacy for Russia in Syria, it should be noted that military confrontation against an enemy state is different from the cost effective outcome of the military operation such as the anti-IS campaign. The real challenge for Russian military diplomacy is however from its hostile neighbourhood comprising of NATO members. Regardless of development of advanced weapons, Russia still lags behind Western offensive-defensive capabilities. Apart from diplomatic acumen, paramount focus should thus be on the up gradation of its defence industrial complex which has today emerged as the backbone of Russia's military diplomacy both in terms of its defensive capabilities and as a defence partner. While Russia is committed to increase its defence spending, it however depends largely on the revenues from the unpredictable energy markets and has a long way to go to shift back to defence economy as the primary source of economic growth. Hence, for Russia to rely on military diplomacy for pursuing its national interests and influence in global affairs in the coming years, it needs to insulate some of the drawbacks at the domestic level such as its fragile economic growth.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: Russia, Military Diplomacy, Syrian crisis, Defence Industrial Complex

Notes

¹ Russia and Saudi Arabia Agree \$3.5 Bln Arms Deal, Mosckva News Agency, 11 July 2017. <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/saudi-arabia-russia-arms-deal-58360>

²Daniel Brown, "Russia is using Syria as a testing ground for some of its most advanced weapons", Business Insider India, 25 May 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.in/Russia-is-using-Syria-as-a-testing-ground-for-some-of-its-most-advanced-weapons/articleshow/58831683.cms>

³Andrew Korybko, "Army Expo 2016 Showcases Russia's Success at Military Diplomacy", Sputnik, 07 September 2016.