

THE IMPORTANCE OF AIR DEFENSE SYSTEM IN THE MODERN WARFARE: THE CASE OF RUSSIA'S AIR SUPERIORITY IN SYRIA

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ABSTRAK — *This study aims to determine the extent to which the most strategic area as Russian air defense. The Eastern Mediterranean region is now the most strategic area for the advancement of Russian air defense. After its intervention in the Syrian theater, Russia seems to be able to maintain its military footprint by deploying an integrated surveillance system that has succeeded in inviting world attention to the development of A2/AD (anti access/area denial) capabilities. Russia seems to have ensured the improvement of war technology with its involvement in the Syrian war. By becoming the boss of the Syrian airspace, Russia also took the opportunity to conduct some military training in actual combat experience. Thus, this article then finds that from the perspective of military improvement and refinement, the Russian military presence is in the most advantageous position in relation to the opportunity to use the permissive environment of Syria. Overall, this article believes that the emergence and continuation of Russian military action in the global arena will always be rooted in its threat perception towards the Western tribe.*

Keywords: *Air Defense System, Threat Perception, Syrian War.*

ABSTRAK — *Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui sejauh mana kawasan yang paling strategis sebagai pertahanan udara Rusia. Wilayah Mediterania Timur kini menjadi kawasan paling strategis bagi kemajuan pertahanan udara Rusia. Setelah intervensinya di teater Suriah, Rusia terlihat dapat mempertahankan jejak militernya dengan menyebarkan sistem pengawasan terintegrasi yang berhasil mengundang perhatian dunia terhadap pembangunan kapabilitas A2/AD (anti access/area denial). Rusia tampaknya telah memastikan peningkatan teknologi perang dengan keterlibatannya di perang Suriah. Dengan menjadi bos wilayah udara Suriah, Rusia pun mengambil kesempatan tersebut untuk melakukan beberapa pelatihan militer dalam pengalaman tempur yang sebenarnya. Dengan demikian, artikel ini kemudian menemukan bahwa dari sudut pandang peningkatan dan penyempurnaan militer, kehadiran militer Rusia berada pada posisi yang paling diuntungkan terkait dengan peluang untuk menggunakan lingkungan permisif Suriah. Secara keseluruhan, artikel ini meyakini bahwa kemunculan dan kelanjutan aksi militer Rusia di kancah global akan selalu berakar pada persepsi ancamannya terhadap suku Barat.*

Kata kunci: *Sistem Pertahanan Udara, Persepsi Ancaman, Perang Suriah.*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the real implications of the importance for having an air defense system can be seen in the presence of the Russian in the Syrian war. By rooted with the great-power competition, Russia seems to aggressively investing a significant step to advance its regional A2/AD, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is indeed important to ensure one nation for having a robust air and missile defense system. The strategy will be to develop multiple battle forces with integrated ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) as a form to apply an overwhelming force (Giare and Miller 2021, 506). This capability of anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) that Russia builds in the region have developed a more competitive situation especially to its western rivals in terms of the capabilities in deterring an adversary aggression. Thus, this form of threat perception of Russia towards the western global domination is then released into the advancement of a defense system in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Believed it to be the most strategic and realistic way to the Russian air and naval domination in regional arena. Talking about its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region which undoubtedly almost dominated every existing conflict zone. According to Ulgen and Kasapoglu (2021) in their research about Russia's ambitious in the Mediterranean, both have concluded that the massive expansion of Russia's military components has defined a new reality in which it has successfully capitalized in the past decade (Ulgen and Kasapoglu 2021, 7). As a brief elaboration of this so-called success, the experiences of the Russian troops in the Syrian war have allowed them to gain more personnel trainings and not to mention the opportunities to test some range of new capabilities both through air and sea in which gives them an easy

mobility to transpose to other strategic geographies, for example the Eastern Europe (Ulgen and Kasapoglu 2021, 8). Moreover, by simple terms, the privilege it has for taking the advantage of the Turkish Straits does give a big impact for the establishment of Russia's strategic naval bridge which now extends to Libya. In the context of this study, the deployment in the Syrian theater served as the breakthrough for the nation's comeback stage in the global arena to show its air supremacy. The Russian air forces have been deployed gradually ever since its intervention and has been experiencing a peak deployment right after the US decided to withdraw from the battlefield in 2019. The majority of its deployment is dominated by the Aerospace that includes special armed forces and a limited naval deployment (Clark 2021, 11). These forces are deployed alongside the Syrian Arab Army to prevent the Syrian regime from collapsing. Besides, the military campaign that had been conducted and the whole interests of Russia in Syria are only intended to be the main supporter for the Syrian army not for Russia to take a direct part as the front line to fight against the rebels. As what has been stated by President Putin that "Russia will not take part in any field operations on the territory of Syria. It means that our armed forces will not take part in hostilities directly and they will not fight. We will support al-Assad's army" (Russian Government, 2015). As the result of this deployment, the Kremlin sees a significant success as it has strengthened Russia's prestige to neutral the attempts of "geopolitical competitors to isolate our country" – as what has been stated by the Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu (Ministry of Defense of Russia, 2020). Many military experts argued that the importance of air power has been started in the beginning of the twenty-first century in which air power has just begun to dominate war on land and sea (Meilinger, 2018). This phenomenon was also pertinent to the technological development of air power and the adoption of the new air power strategy

and doctrines. This article then will show that air power is playing an increasingly important role in modern warfare. Meilinger has further even argued that air superiority is “the single most important factor in deciding the outcome of a modern conventional war” (2016). To borrow Meilinger’s words, air superiority can be broadly defined as the ability to conduct air operations “without prohibitive interference by the opposing force.” (2016). Based on this military reality, the authors are then designed this article to have furthered exploring more about the importance of having an advanced air defense system by choosing the study in the Syrian theater. This study will qualitatively use the concept of threat perceptions as the authors believed that the fundamental cause of the advancement of the Russian air defense system in the Eastern Mediterranean is because of the power competition between them and the Western. Thus, the authors will provide the analysis on several points such as; (1) Discussing the deployment of the Russian military components in the Hmeimim airbase following the bilateral agreement between the Russian and Syrian government; (2) The beginning of Russia’s intervention in the Syrian war by joining as the major backer of the pro-Assad team in 2015; (3) Ever since that, there were several airstrikes incident involving the actors that believed was conducted to challenge the Russian air power assets in the battlefield; (4) With this elaboration, the authors would also discuss about the lesson learned behind this air defense advancement of the Russian Federation in the region.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. The concept of Threat Perceptions

The concept of threat perceptions can be defined as a situation of negative consequences inflicted by certain countries as an act to gain power (Garcia-Retamero and Rousseau, 2007, 745). In

their journal of *Threat Perception*, both have elaborated this concept with several sub-concepts that are believed as the factors that supports a threat. One of them is the relation between power and threat perception. In understanding of this concept, the term power is always in line as the tool to define it. In this anarchical international system, there is no state that wants to help when other states are at risk from the powerful enemies. In the perspective of neorealist (Waltz, 1979), threats are a function of power asymmetries that needs to be contained (Doyle 1997, 168). Therefore, in this self-help world, whenever there is a negative consequence inflicted by the powerful state, relying on the military spending and the international alliances are the very important ways for states to survive (Doyle 1997, 746). One point that can be put out in the definition of threat perception by another scholar, Robert O. Tilman, is that the states’ behaviour in responding to the existing threat is usually influenced by several dimensions such as geopolitical, structural, historical, socio-cultural, and economic (Tilman 1984). To put it in the context of this study, ever since the collapsed of the Soviet Union in the year of 1991, Russia lost its powerful position in the Eastern Mediterranean. By the time, the region was ruled by the Western – NATO and the U.S. The economic falldown of Russia triggers it to regain its throne in the region through expanding its military influence in Syria which marked as Russia’s threat policy against NATO and the U.S. Russia’s military advancement in the region marks as a huge geopolitical interest to pursuit its actualization of a multipolar international structural system. Having an advanced military facility can be said as a manifestation of superpower ambition which not to mention had become the priority for Russia’s national interest after 1991.

2.2. The Air Base in Kmeimim

Soon after Russia began its intervention in

the war, it has equipped all the air weapons on the airbase in Latakia province at the city of Hmeimim. Referring to the invitation by the Syrian government to help its troops fighting the rebels, the government agreed to grant eight hectares of land to Russia with the same number of coastal waters. This is for Russia to establish its healthcare facilities in the Latakia province (Syrian Government, 2020). Moreover, all these recent agreements are based on the 2017 agreement that resulted for the extension of the lease of naval and air base to Russia for another 49 years. At their first arrival, four large aircraft had been deployed with unspecified equipment. As for 2015, the plan seemed to be uncertain on what Russia would do in developing this air hub (Martinuz, 2015). Russia's air power build-up in Latakia rose the concern of the adversaries which is specifically the U.S that was stressing about the possibility of that built-up which "could further escalate the conflict in Syria" (The U.S Government, 2015). At those times, no one could predict which path Russia would choose whether to use their military power by going after rebel forces and boost Syria's air defense system or directly intended to strike the rebel forces (Martinez, 2015). However, as the time goes by, Russia seems to keep developing its forces expansion in the base. The base at Hmeimim is capable of accepting Russian super-jumbo Antonov An-124 and Tupolev Tu-76 transport aircrafts, and capable to accommodate for more than 50 military aircrafts in its bays (Russia Today, 2015). As in the year of 2016, both Russia and Syria have concluded the agreement that was dated on August 26, 2015, to be longed for an indefinite period. "To accommodate the Russian aviation group, the Syrian side provides the Khmeimim airfield (Latakia province) with its infrastructure, as well as the necessary territory as agreed by the Parties. This agreement is concluded for an indefinite

period. If one of the Parties intends to terminate this agreement, it must inform the other Party in writing."-The Russian-Syrian agreement on the deployment of the Russian air group (January 2016). Thereafter, it is believed that Moscow has deployed some 4,000 troops which stationed at the base. Pursuing this further, the agreement was then being ratified in October 2016 under the consideration by the State Duma to stipulate the Russian aviation group to be stationed in Syria following to the request of the Syrian government which has granted free of charge to the lease (TASS, 2016). On the whole, the air base at Hmeimim is primarily used to accommodate the aviation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in every offensive measure that has been held. The map below shows Russian air base in Khmeimim.

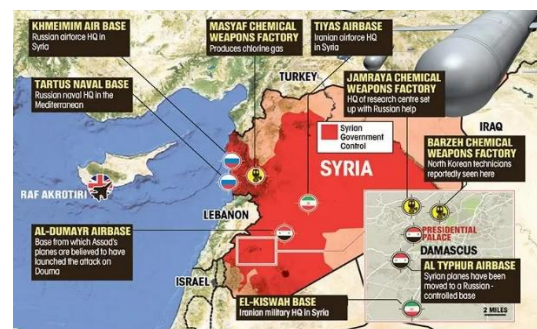


Figure 1. Russia's Air Base in Khmeimim
(<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6051539/syria-bombing-map-uk-us-air-strikes-russia/>)

In the same year, while declaring that Russia had achieved its objectives on the battlefield which has successfully helped the regime to regain over 10.000 km² territories, under the announcement of the Russian President Vladimir Putin, he ordered the withdrawal of the main part of the Russian aviation group from Syria (TASS, 2016). Moreover, as the Russian has still decided to keep maintaining the battlefield by keeping several of its military air system at the base. This is in purpose to step up the Syrian airspace with the presence of the Russian surface-to-air missile (SAM) system (Kasapoglu 2018, 4). As per February 2022, by referring to the

compilation of the AD (anti denial) forces that Russia and Syria have deployed, it is comprising of:

System	Variant	Role
S-400		Long-range surface-to-air-missile (SAM)
S-300	V4	ABM system
S-300	FM	Naval SAM system
S-200	VE	SAM system
Pantsir-S1		SAM/anti-aircraft system
Osa-AKM		SAM system
S-125 Pechora		Short-range air defense (SHORAD) system
Buk-M2E		Medium-range SAM system
K-300	Bastion-P	Coastal defense missile system

Based on the table above, it is believed that in the Syrian battlefield, there must be at least three layers in the SAM-based air defense of the Hmeimim air base (TASS, 2022). (1) With the role of being the long-range systems, the first layer is provided by the S-400 and S-200 (VE); (2) As a medium range system, it's provided by the S-300 (FM) and Buk-M2E; (3) It's handled by the Osa-AKM and S-125 Pechora as the short-range air defense systems. The Pantsir-S1 one is considered as the strategy to cover the air base and S-400.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The emergence of the Russian Air Forces in Syria

The beginning of Russia's intervention in the Syrian theater was in August 2015 after both states signed a bilateral agreement. The agreement includes the permission of Russian aviation to remain in Syria's bases for an indefinite period as well as granting full immunity for Russian forces in the case of any infractions committed in the country (Russian Government 2017). With that being said, Russia has ensured its military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean region for at least until 2066 (Lund 2019, 39). "The Syrian side shall allow the Russian side to use land plots and real-estate properties free of charge for deploying the Russian air group. The agreement shall remain in force for a period of 49 years, and that it can automatically be extended for 25-year

periods." Federal Law on Ratifying the Protocol between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic (2017)

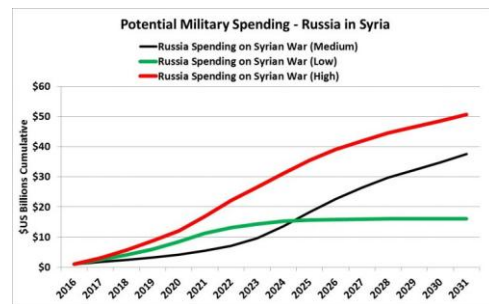


Figure 2.
Russia's potential military spending in Syria (Mawji 2017)

Russia's foreign aid in Syria is to help the government recapture several key cities from the rebel groups. The cost is expected to increase as Russia's support for the re-establishment of Assad's government will require the rebuild of Syria's institutions and infrastructure (Mawji, 2017). Russia is believed to be struggling to sustain its defense budget knowing that the oil prices that are decreasing in these past years. Concerning the tremendous pushback from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the threat of Turkey and Israel regarding their geopolitical interests in the region would cost Russia tens of billions of dollars over a decade (Mawji, 2017). Therefore, Russia needs to rely its domestic economy on the countries' reliance on its oil and petroleum products. The obstacle is the competition between Russia and Saudi Arabia as the largest oil exporter in the world knowing that Saudi Arabia has been openly against Syria's regime (Mawji, 2017).

3.2. The Airstrikes

Right after the deployment of its military components, the Russians have took control the airspace in Syria and extended to the Mediterranean sea. There are several attacks that happened during the intervention in which have been responded with Russia beefing up its SAM system capabilities in Syria (Kasapoglu 2018, 1). Following the list of military defense system existing in the battlefield, the idea of Russia

attempting to build an A2/AD zone in the Eastern Mediterranean had been an expected strategy already among the Western and its allies. Thus, it is safe to believe that the incidents following to that deployment were for the superiority challenge (Kasapoglu 2018, 2).

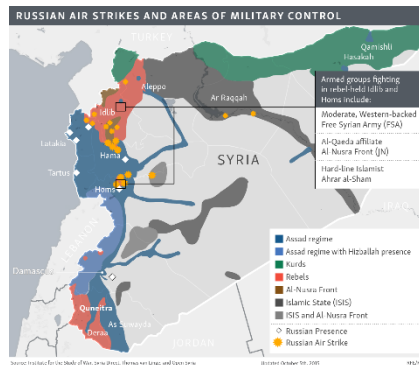


Figure. 3. Russian Airstrikes in Syria
(<https://www.rferl.org/a/27281794.html>)

The first strike was happened between the Turkish F-16s that shot down the Russian fighter jet Su-24 in the Turkish-Syrian border on November 24th, 2015. The crisis marked as the downfall of Russian-Turkish relations as Russia's response towards the shot down was to put economic sanctions on Turkey (ERŞEN 2017, 87). In regard of the Syrian war, Russia and Turkey are in a different position where Turkey opposes the Syrian regime while Russia on the other hand joined the war to support the regime with its military intervention. Russia's economic sanctions on Turkey caused a loss between \$9-11 billion to Turkey's economy (ERŞEN 2017, 92). In the same period, it was also impacted by the trade flow of both countries where it rapidly decreased to \$8 billion following the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey that was also decreased by 87 percent (ERŞEN 2017, 92). It had ended with the reconciliation letter of President Erdogan concerning the loss of military relations with Russia caused too much for Turkey's economic since they are heavily depended on Russian gas (Kasapoglu and Ulgen 2018, 1). Especially, the

interests of Turkey in the Northern Syria which has a lot to deal with the Russian as the major supporter in the battlefield. One real example is the Operation Olive Branch campaign of Turkey in the Western Syria which marked as a direct turning point in the Russian-Turkish relations following the support of Russia to allow Turkish troops to enter the Syrian airspace (Kasapoglu and Ulgen 2018, 1). The other incident was in 2017 when the US strike one of the most important bases of the Syrian forces after the regime's chemical weapons use in Idlib. It was a huge debate regarding the Russian response towards the U.S attack on the Syria's al-Shayrat air base with a salvo of 59 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (Kasapoglu 2018, 2). Responding to that, the Russian government decided to bolster the Syrian air defense by deploying additional SAMs which consists of three additional air defense battalions like the S-400 (2 units) and S-300 (1 unit) (Reuters 2018). Having successfully made a heavily contested arena in Syria makes the Russia's A2/AD in the position of not even the Western aircraft can fly confidently within the Russia's SAM range (Kasapoglu 2018, 3). As of now, there is not much of airstrike incident ever since that, despite of that, the Russians keep on making sure to patrol the Syria-Turkey border.

3.3. Air Defense Advancement: Lessons Learned

explained above. By referring to the research by Mason Clark (2021), high lighting the definition of air supremacy following the incident of the US and Israel's attacks. It has been analysed that the Russian had been implementing the concept of reflexive control in achieving air supremacy (Clark 2021, 25). In simple terms, this concept has been used to shape the perception of an adversary to incline itself voluntarily chose the decisions that will bring the Russian in the position of the most advantageous to its own objectives (Thomas 2004). It is shown in the undisturbable Russian after one of the

Syrian bases was being targeted whereas some of its platforms were also being deployed there (Kasapoglu 2018, 2). The U.S believed that the Russian has not achieved air supremacy in Syria because of the lack of its forces to conduct air operations that make the adversary would not want to target its assets. However, looking at the stance of the Russian air defense system such as, the deployed electronic warfare, the never used S-300 and S-400 in combat – with all of this power existence that turned out made the Western and its allies chose not to destroy is assumed to be enough for the Russian to consider they succeed to gain air supremacy in the battlefield (Clark 2021, 25). Many scholars believed that the weakness of the Syrian airspace that is backed by the Russian, is belong to the lower altitudes of the airspace. It might be the greatest threat to Russian aircraft in which according to Mason Clark (2021) needed some attention in facing against the man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS). It is supported by the real incident elaboration in the research of Can Kasapoglu (2018), explaining about the downed Russian Su-25 aircraft that was allegedly by MANPADS fire (Kasapoglu 2018, 2). In the Syrian battlefield, some of the terrorist groups hold MANPADS that is used to against the low-flying aircraft, especially knowing that the MANPADS technology in the present world is improving. That is believed to be another threat for the Russian commercial aviation (Kasapoglu 2018,3). Talking about the impact of this power projection through air defense system by Russia in the Syrian battlefield, it might be clearer in the case of Turkey. With the airspace ruler is fully belong to the Russian, being a state that has a lot of interests in Syria makes Turkey depended a lot on Russian influence to conduct its campaign in Afrin (as what has been discussed previously). One great thing about being close to Russia – militarily – has made Turkey enjoyed the advantage of the Russian

A2/AD capabilities providing it with the operational tempo during its cross-border campaigns (Akturk 2019).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Russia's air defense system is resulted to the creation of a heavily contested Syrian airspace as part of its air superiority in the region. By choosing a smart way to invest in the country that they believed is economically and politically effective to their national interests, the Russian have finally reaped its effort. Being the big boss of the Syrian airspace, allowing it to freely deployed troops for a combat experience which eventually providing them a platform to have an even more advanced military force. Not to mention the military assets and bases it has in Syria that could be used to some tests of their new air power capabilities. It is indeed a great breakthrough ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By concerning to the great power competition behind this air defense advancement, this study then concludes that the Russian involvement in the war is seemed to drive out the adversaries even though there were not much of use for their deployed SAM system to that. It is so far seen that the Kremlin is still consistent in its stance not to be the front liner when it comes to a combat attack in which could escalate a more offensive situation in this hybrid war of Syria by utilizing its air superiority. The authors see the pattern behind this is for Russia to not have made a same situation as what resulted in the Libyan war. It seemed that this time, those military investment are successfully ensured the Syrian regime knowing that it is the Russian major ally in the Middle East. It is the Western power that is questioning now, following the close military relations between the Russian and the Turkish in this war. Regarding the Russian military assets in the theater, there is a critical lesson learned that needs to be pointed out. Having to develop an

advanced MANPADS is believed to be one of the important homeworks to be done reflecting to the downing of its Su-25. However, when it comes to having had a military footprint, it is no longer a worry for the foreseeable future.

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