In the Bear’s Shadow
Russian Intervention in Syria

Prof Sanu Kainikara
Air Power Strategist – RAAF

Guiding the Air Force into the Future
‘If we speak calmly, in a businesslike fashion, let me draw your attention to the fact that Russia supplies arms to the legitimate government of Syria in full compliance with the norms of international law. We are not breaching any rules and norms.’

- Vladimir Putin

President of the Russian Federation
Presentation Structure

- Historical Background
- Story of the Civil War
- The Belligerents
- Russian Military Campaign
- Universal Lessons
- Geo-strategic Implications
- Conclusion
Syria as part of the Roman Empire – 210 A.D.
The Byzantine Empire
The Ottoman Empire

- in 1683 AD, at its greatest extent
- Turkey today
French Mandate of Syria-Lebanon 1922

Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon 1922
States created during the French Mandate

- Capitals of the states
- State borders established until 1945
Hafez al-Assad - The Dictator 1970-2000
Basher al-Assad
Pro-Democracy Protests
Syria – Demography 2011

- Total population – 21 million
- Sunni Muslims 74%
- Other Muslim groups 13% (incl Alawites)
- Druze 3%
- Various Christian denominations 10%
The Beginning – 2011

- 15 March 2011 – protests in Damascus
- 20 March – 7 police officers and 15 protesters – die in violence
- Early April – demand for overthrow of Assad regime
- 25 April – Syrian Army on large-scale offensive
- 7 July – Formation of Free Syrian Army (FSA) by deserters
Escalation

• January 2012 – raging conflict
• 12 June – UN declares Syria in a ‘state of war’; more than 16,000 casualties
• Early 2013 – subtle change in the rebel force constitution
  • FSA – remained secular
  • Islamic groups – notably Al-Nusra Front
    • Definitive religious slant
Rebel – Loss of Focus

• Rebels – now more Islamist forces
• Kurds – enhancing own position
• Mid-2013 – ISIS enters the fray
  • Overran FSA controlled areas
• Changed the agenda of the Civil War
  • From democracy to Caliphate
  • Demand to become medieval fundamentalist religious state
Syria before ISIS and 1-year later
ISIS – On the Front Foot

- Changed the dynamics of the Civil War
- ISIS, Government and FSA
  - Fighting each other
- June 2014 – established HQ at Raqqa
- August 2014 – US-led air strikes on ISIS
  - Arab nations joined the coalition strikes
- Early 2015 – Syrian Government offensive
  - Not very successful
‘Syria had descended into the classic Middle-East quagmire where neighbours, religious extremists, fundamentalist groups, and ethnic collaborators pursued their independent agendas and fought the state and each other using methods that are abhorrent to basic human decency.’

– Sanu Kainikara, *In the Bear’s Shadow*, p. 33
The Belligerents Mid-2015

On the Government Side

- Syrian Armed Forces
- National Defence Force
- Shabiha
- Christian Militia
- Hezbollah
- Iran
- Foreign Shia Militia
- Russia
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The Belligerents Mid-2015

The Opposition

- Free Syrian Army
- The Islamic Front
- Al-Nusra Front
- Salafists
- Syrian Democratic Forces
- The Islamic State/ISIS
- US-led Western Coalition
Syria asks Russia for Assistance

Syria areas of control - 1 June 2015
Initial Phase October 2015

- First air strikes – 30 September 2015

Immediate Objectives:
1. Blunt the effectiveness of US-supported rebel groups
2. Neutralise tangible threat to Assad regime

- IS was secondary at this stage
The Russian Military Campaign

Escalation Phase Nov-Dec 2015

- November – realignment of targeting priorities
- Less stringent ROE – greater effectiveness
- 24 November – Turkey shoots down a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft
- End 2015 – Syrian Government Forces – on the offensive
The Russian Military Campaign

Consolidation Phase Jan-Feb 2016

- 25 Jan 2016 – UN mediated Geneva Peace talks
  - Commenced 1 February
- Syrian Government forces – start of recapturing towns and territories
  - With direct air support from Russian AF
- Syrian AF – rebuilt – started operations
  - Increased the fire power of the Joint air campaign
Russian Military Contingent

March 2016

- 40 Fixed wing ac (Su-25, Su-30 & bombers)
- Over 40 Helicopters (attack & utility)
- One Aircraft Carrier
  - 15 MiG-29 fighters; 10 helicopters
- Three guided-missile cruisers
- Large number ground-based AD assets
  - S-400 ‘Triumph’ long-range system
  - Pantsyr-S short-range system
  - Osa-AKM and Buh-M2E
The Russian Military Campaign

Offensive Phase Mar-Oct 2016

- Russia in possession of:
  - Naval base at Tartus
  - Air base at Latakia
- Focused assistance for recapture of Palmyra
- Russian air assets – op from Iran’s Hamedan air base
The Russian Military Campaign

Battle for Aleppo Sep-Dec 2016

• Operation *Dawn of Victory*
• Highest sustained air effort
  • 40-50 attack sorties per day
• Fierce ground offensive led by Palestine militias
• End of four-year resistance
• High civilian casualties
• Culminated 16 December
The Russian Military Campaign

Negotiation Phase 2017

- January – Syrian forces – control of Wadi Barada
- March – Raqqa under siege
- May – Damascus-Palmyra Highway recaptured from the IS
- Peace efforts throughout the year
- November – Basher al-Assad declared ‘winner’ by Israeli government
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Universal Lessons

- Whole-of-Nation Approach
- Selection and maintenance of aim
- No open-ended intervention
- Irregular Wars – pre-emption
- Employment of air power – Effect
- ROE & LOAC
- Role of diplomacy in IW
- Host nation morale
Geo-Strategic Implications

- Russia – Permanent footprint in ME
- Demonstration of military competence
- ‘Reflexive Control’
- No ‘good’ and ‘bad’ jihadists
- Decisive action at the operational level
- Long-term game of patience & persistence
- Only political solution to Syrian Civil War
Concluding Remarks...

The Bear in the Neighbourhood...

- Russia’s Grand Strategy
- Forceful Actions in Syria:
  1. Has Russia become a threat to the West?
  2. Has Russia assumed the position of the primary anti-Western power once again?
- Calculated strategy to question status quo vis-à-vis US hegemony in ME
‘In the Middle-East it has become apparent that the world has stopped playing the game according to the US rules.’

‘The international order is no longer uni-polar, even if it has not become recognisably bi-polar.’