



→ Air Route  
- - - Cruise Missile Path  
By Hugo Spaulding  
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Russia confronted NATO with new rigor in the Middle East as NATO took steps to counter Russian power projection efforts. Russia expanded the scope of its operations in Syria, officially claiming its first submarine cruise missile strikes from the eastern Mediterranean on December 8. This step change underscores Russia's intent to assert its freedom of action to the U.S. and its allies in Syria. Moscow flexed military muscle against Turkey in response to the November 24 downing of a Russian bomber, concentrating airstrikes on Syrian rebel supply routes to Turkey and displaying a man-portable air defense system on a warship in the Bosphorus one week after deploying the long-range S-400 surface-to-air missile system to its airbase on the Syrian coast. Moscow also deployed attack and transport helicopters to a Russian airbase near Armenia's border with Turkey. Russia launched a smear campaign implicating Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in oil trade with ISIS, part of its broader information operations aiming to cast its adversaries as obstacles to the defeat of ISIS. NATO pledged new security assistance to Turkey, reportedly including naval, air and air defense deployments. Russia warned that NATO deployments to bolster Turkey's defenses could undermine efforts to build an anti-ISIS coalition with the West. Russia continues to use aggression to portray itself as a necessary anti-ISIS partner in order to shape the operations of the U.S. and its NATO allies in the region.

Russia's escalating confrontation with NATO in the Middle East threatens to accelerate Russian-NATO competition globally. The U.S. pledged to impose increasing costs on Moscow for continued military operations in eastern Ukraine and announced investment in new weapons in response to Russia's violation of a Cold War-era nuclear arms control agreement. Moscow pledged "retaliatory actions" in response to NATO's offer of membership to Montenegro on December 2 in order to restore the balance between Russia and the transatlantic alliance and announced its intent to increase security cooperation with neighboring Serbia. Russia continues to project military force against the U.S. and its allies in the Arctic, including with the deployment of S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile systems to the region over the past year. Some NATO members, including France, Germany and the UK, have pursued reengagement with Moscow in response to Russia's aggressive intervention in Syria. Russia's simultaneous aggression on NATO's eastern and southern flanks and posturing as a necessary anti-ISIS partner threatens to divide NATO and divorce the alliance from U.S. grand strategic objectives.

**1 Syria.** 26 NOV-08 DEC: Russia's Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed airstrikes on targets in Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zour and ar-Raqqa provinces including from long-range strategic bombers. ISW assesses that Russia also carried out airstrikes against Syrian rebels in the southwestern province of Dera'a. Additionally, Russia intensified its targeting of rebel lines of communication between Turkey and Aleppo Province.

**5 Germany.** 02 DEC: German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for the resumption of the NATO-Russia Council, a special communication channel that was suspended in the wake of Russia's March 2014 annexation of Crimea. Steinmeier praised Russia's efforts to find a resolution to the Syrian Civil War as "constructive."

08 DEC: Russia claimed its first submarine cruise missile strikes in Syria, allegedly firing on targets near ISIS's stronghold of ar-Raqqa from the Rostov-on-Don submarine in the eastern Mediterranean. Previous reports indicated that the submarine launched unclaimed cruise missile strikes on November 17.

**6 Balkans.** 02 DEC: NATO invited Montenegro to begin formal talks to join the transatlantic military alliance. The Kremlin promised "retaliatory actions" to restore Russia's "parity" with NATO after the alliance's accession invitation to the western Balkan country, which gained independence from Russian ally Serbia in 2006. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced Russia's readiness to expand security cooperation with Serbia.

**2 Turkey.** 01, 07 DEC: NATO foreign ministers pledged to bolster Turkey's defenses in the wake of the downing of a Russian bomber on November 24 by Turkish fighter jets, reportedly including the deployment of additional naval, air and air defense assets. The Russian envoy to NATO said these plans could pose an "obstacle to the establishment of an international coalition against terrorism" if they aim to "contain Russia."

**7 Ukraine.** 04 DEC: Around 100 Russian-backed separatists reportedly clashed with Ukrainian forces near the separatist stronghold of Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast amidst daily direct and indirect fire attacks on Ukrainian positions along the frontline in the province.

02, 04 DEC: The Russian MoD released imagery it claimed demonstrate Turkey's import of oil smuggled from ISIS-controlled facilities. A senior U.S. State Department official said that there was not a "significant" amount of oil smuggling from ISIS-controlled territory to Turkey.

08 DEC: U.S. Vice President Joe Biden pledged increasing costs for Moscow "if Russian aggression persists" in eastern Ukraine during the most senior U.S. official speech to the Ukrainian parliament since 1991.

07 DEC: Turkey accused Russia of violating the 1936 Montreux Convention, which governs foreign maritime traffic in the Bosphorus, after a Russian serviceman was photographed with a man-portable air defense system aboard a Russian warship in the strait. Moscow argued that its crews had the right to defend Russian vessels in the Bosphorus.

**8 India.** 07 DEC: Russia and India launched a six-day joint naval exercise in the Bay of Bengal. Russia's *Varyag* Pacific Fleet guided-missile cruiser will reportedly provide air defense to Russia's airbase in Latakia Province, Syria after taking part in the naval exercise, replacing the *Moskva* cruiser.

02, 08 DEC: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called Russia a "strategic partner" on December 2 and pledged to not retaliate against Russian economic sanctions. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu walked back that pledge on December 8 when he revealed that Turkey was considering "retaliatory sanctions" against Russia amidst their escalating rhetorical confrontation.

**9 Iran.** 03 DEC: President Vladimir Putin's arms trade advisor stated that the delivery of Russian S-300 air defense systems to Iran was underway, after a long-standing agreement for the systems was reportedly finalized in November.

03 DEC: President Vladimir Putin promised retaliation beyond economic sanctions in response to Turkey's downing of a Russian bomber in his annual "state of the nation" address before the Russian parliament.

**10 UK.** 04 DEC: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that the UK's newly launched air campaign in Syria was illegitimate because London had not received the permission of the Assad regime.

07-08 DEC: Russia reportedly requested a closed-door United Nations Security Council meeting to discuss Turkey's military operations in Iraq and Syria. Russia's Foreign Ministry called the deployment of Turkish forces near the ISIS-controlled Iraqi city of Mosul "illegal" and "unacceptable."

09 DEC: Prime Minister David Cameron agreed to "work together" with Russian President Vladimir Putin to combat ISIS in a phone call less than a week after launching air operations in Syria.

**3 Armenia.** 08 DEC: Russia deployed seven attack and transport helicopters to its airbase outside the Armenian capital of Yerevan, 15 kilometers from the Turkish border, possibly in a show of force to Turkey.

**11 Cyprus.** 07 DEC: Cypriot Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulidis announced that Russia was negotiating a deal to allow Russian warplanes in Syria emergency access to Cyprus's airports.

**4 United States.** 01 DEC: A senior U.S. defense official said that the U.S. was responding to Russia's violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty by investing in new weapons systems, reportedly including new drones, long-range cruise missiles, strategic bombers and an upgraded nuclear gravity bomb. NATO commander General Philip Breedlove previously reported that Russia may have violated the INF in a September missile test.

**12 Arctic.** 07-08 DEC: Sources in the Russian General Staff reported that Russia deployed S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile systems to the Arctic Circle at an unspecified time in 2015 and had completed military infrastructure projects at six military bases in the Arctic.

**13 Iraq.** 08 DEC: Iraqi Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani urged Russia to stop disrupting commercial air traffic after the regional government suspended some flights due to Russian air activity related to Syria.