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Russia redirected criticism over its operations in Syria toward Turkey with the U.S.-backed cessation of hostilities agreement, which came into effect on February 27. Russia has temporarily reduced the intensity of its air campaign following February 27, after weeks of heavily targeting opposition groups in Syria's northwestern province of Aleppo. ISW assesses that Russia continues to strike mainstream armed opposition groups, however, despite claiming it would only target terrorist groups after the cessation of hostilities. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry agreed on February 28 to limit their public debate over alleged breaches of the cessation of hostilities, a significant achievement for Moscow following widespread Western criticism over its air campaign in Aleppo Province. Nevertheless, Russia presented Turkey as the primary obstacle to the cessation of hostilities, with a series of accusations that Turkey was shelling Kurdish forces and facilitating the flow of weapons and militants into Syria. Foreign Minister Lavrov called for the closure of Turkey's border with Syria, a measure that would advance Russia's objective of undermining the Aleppo-based opposition by isolating it from international support. Russian efforts to portray Turkey as a principle opponent to the cessation of hostilities resemble its presentation of the Ukrainian government as the main obstacle to the successful implementation February 2015 "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement. Russia has successfully lobbied the West to pressure Kyiv into fulfilling political concessions, including elections in occupied southeastern Ukraine, which Germany called for before the UN Security Council on February 29. As in Ukraine, Russia remains a forward-deployed belligerent in the Syrian Civil War and retains the capability to rapidly escalate offensive operations if the U.S. or its allies seek to shift the balance of power out of Russia's favor. As U.S. European Command Commander General Philip Breedlove highlighted on March 1, Russia's intervention in Syria has allowed it to set the groundwork for an anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) zone in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia may be developing an additional A2/AD zone beyond the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean with the deployment of supersonic anti-ship missiles to the Arctic on February 21. These zones enable Russia to deny the U.S. freedom of movement and increase the Kremlin's ability to pressure the U.S. into accepting its expansionist military agenda.

1 United States. 25 FEB, 01 MAR: U.S. EUCOM commander General Philip Breedlove called Russia a "long-term existential threat" to the U.S. and Europe and accused Russia of attempting to subvert European unity and "deliberately weaponizing migration" during testimony before U.S. congressional committees. Gen. Breedlove said that the U.S. should be prepared to "puncture" and "rapidly reinforce" its positions around Russia's anti-access and area denial zones, which he said included Kaliningrad, the Black Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

29 FEB: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed to limit their public debate of alleged violations of the cessation of hostilities in Syria.

22 FEB, 03 MAR: Russia reportedly asked for approval to fly surveillance aircraft equipped with advanced cameras over the U.S. under the 2002 Open Skies Treaty. Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart said that advanced Russian surveillance aircraft would give Russia a "significant advantage" if allowed to collect intelligence on the U.S.

2 Algeria. 29 FEB: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algiers to discuss economic cooperation and security issues in Libya and Syria amidst ongoing negotiations over the sale of Russia's Su-34 fighter-bomber.

3 Syria. 24 FEB: Russian President Vladimir Putin held a series of phone calls with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, King Salman of Saudi Arabia, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the cessation of hostilities agreement in Syria.

27 FEB: The Russian military's general staff announced that it had halted airstrikes in regions occupied by opposition groups that allegedly pledged to support the U.S. and Russia-backed cessation of hostilities, which began on February 27.

01 MAR: Russia's Ministry of Defense reported that it had deployed three new surveillance drone complexes and two radar systems to the Russian airbase in Latakia Province allegedly to monitor ceasefire violations.

4 Turkey. 25 FEB: The Russian Foreign Ministry criticized Turkey for conditionally pledging to uphold the cessation of hostilities agreement following Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's announcement that Turkey would ignore the agreement if its security came under threat.

28 FEB: Lt. Gen. Sergey Kuralenko, the head of Russia's new ceasefire coordination center at its airbase in Latakia Province, accused Turkey of shelling Syrian Kurds in support of militants who he claimed crossed into northern Syria from Turkey.

29 FEB: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov claimed that Turkey had not given up the idea of cross-border strikes into Syria and that Turkey's behavior threatened to create a "very dangerous situation" in Syria.

01 MAR: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that it was "necessary to close" the Turkish-Syrian border in order to prevent arms shipments to "bandits" operating in Syria.

5 Ukraine. 29 FEB: German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for elections to be held in Russian-backed separatist-held eastern Ukraine during the first half of 2016, maintaining pressure on Ukraine's fragile government to fulfill divisive political concessions to Russia tied to the "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement.

02 MAR: The U.S. and EU extended sanctions on Ukrainian and Russian individuals linked to the misappropriation of Ukrainian government funds, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in eastern Ukraine.

03 MAR: Russian-backed separatists escalated indirect fire attacks, launching rare "Grad" rocket artillery strikes at Ukrainian positions west of Donetsk, as German, French, Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers met in Paris to discuss the "Minsk II" ceasefire.

6 Arctic. 21 FEB: Russia's Northern Fleet announced that two "Bastion" coastal defense missile system batteries armed with supersonic missiles were deployed to the Barents Sea in northwestern Russia.

7 Russia. 26 FEB: President Vladimir Putin accused Russia's foreign adversaries of preparing to violate the country's sovereignty by interfering in September parliamentary elections during an annual meeting outlining the priorities for the Federal Security Service (FSB). Putin's comments suggest that he will continue to use the pretext of Western interference to justify his crackdown on the liberal opposition.

8 Thailand. 24 FEB: Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu met with Thai Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan to discuss military-technical and counterterrorism cooperation between the countries amidst reported Thai interest in advanced Russian T-90 tanks.

9 Korean Peninsula. 03 MAR: Russia's Foreign Ministry warned the U.S. against deploying THAAD anti-ballistic missile systems to South Korea in response to North Korean weapons tests, suggesting that the deployment could cause an "arms race" in the region.