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President Vladimir Putin presented Russia's active military campaign in Syria as complete with the announced withdrawal of the "main part" of the Russian air group beginning March 15. The reported withdrawal of roughly 15 Russian bombers and close-support aircraft, however, represents a drawdown rather than Russia's extrication from the Syrian Civil War, the intended message behind Putin's announcement. The withdrawal of idle strike aircraft from Syria does not inhibit the continuation of Russia's air campaign, which had already been reduced following the February start of the U.S. and Russian-backed cessation of hostilities. As Putin himself later admitted, the withdrawal also does not preclude the rapid redeployment of aircraft and the escalation of airstrikes. Russia's Latakia Province airbase remains operational, retaining a fleet of around 20 bombers, close-support aircraft, and fighter jets, including advanced Su-35s, in addition to the S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile system. Accordingly, Russia has preserved its capability to defend its strategic foothold on the Eastern Mediterranean, project force against NATO's southern flank, and target the Syrian armed opposition. Putin declared that Russia had achieved its primary objectives in Syria by 'reversing' the fight against terrorism and setting the conditions for peace talks, likely in order to message the West that the drawdown marked a phase change in the Russian intervention. Putin claimed that the remaining Russian military contingent in Syria would only act to enforce the cessation of hostilities in order to obfuscate Russia's continued role as the guarantor of its client regime's security and add a new veneer of legitimacy to Russian claims of targeting only terrorist groups. Russian officials have subsequently confirmed that Russia's remaining bombers in Syria will continue striking 'terrorists,' a label they have frequently applied to the Syrian armed opposition. While resumed airstrikes on the opposition would erode Russia's narrative, Putin has already asserted Russia as a rival great power security broker to the U.S. in the Middle East.

Russia has also repostured in order to redirect Western attention towards Turkey as a destabilizing force in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused Turkish troops of "digging in" inside the Syrian border and pursuing a "creeping expansion" in Syria. Lavrov called on the international community on March 16 to take a strong response to Turkish shelling of Kurdish positions in northern Syria, which he said was undermining the cessation of hostilities, the delivery of humanitarian aid, and the start of the Syrian political settlement process. Much as it deflects Western criticism for its continued military actions in eastern Ukraine onto Kyiv, Russia seeks to present Turkey as an obstacle to a peaceful settlement of the Syrian Civil War. Russia's persistent antagonization of Turkey is nested within its grand strategic objective of straining ties within NATO and its theater objective of isolating the Syrian armed opposition from its foreign backers. Russian hostility towards Turkey has driven Ankara to pursue a strategic partnership with Kyiv that may seek to counterbalance Russia's expanding capabilities in the Black Sea. Turkey's growing security cooperation with Ukraine runs in parallel with Russian efforts to build cross-border ties with Kurdish groups as a means to pressure Ankara.

1 Russia. 05, 11 MAR: Russian Deputy Defense Minister Tatiana Shevtsova announced a planned five percent cut in Russia's 2016 defense budget (approximately \$2.2 billion), reportedly out of conventional weapons development programs. The director of a major Russian state industrial conglomerate said that he expected the Russian government to cut its defense orders by 10 percent in 2016 due to oil price-driven budget constraints.

17 MAR: An anonymous Russian defense industry official reported that Russia had conducted its first tests on its new "Zircon" anti-shiping missile from an unspecified ground launch site. The missile reportedly travels twice as fast as the supersonic "Oniks" anti-shiping missile and will be mountable on nuclear submarines.

2 Ukraine. 03 MAR: The foreign ministers of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine met in Paris to discuss the implementation of the "Minsk II" ceasefire agreement. French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault echoed his German counterpart's call for elections in occupied eastern Ukraine in the first half of 2016, a plan Kyiv refuses to support as long as Russia retains forces and hardware in the conflict zone.

03 MAR: Russian-backed separatists fired a "Grad" multiple launch rocket system on a government position for only the second time in 2016 near the occupied city of Donetsk, according to Ukrainian military reports. Separatists subsequently escalated attacks north of the city with tank and self-propelled artillery fire.

06-10 MAR: Hundreds of protestors demonstrated outside of and vandalized Russian diplomatic facilities across Ukraine in support of Russian-held Ukrainian POW Nadiya Savchenko, who had announced a hunger strike in connection with her trial. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the West of failing to take a proportionate response to the "outrageous" vandalism.

07, 9-10 MAR: Ukraine and Turkey held a joint naval exercise between the Turkish Straits. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko met with top officials in Turkey, where he agreed to boost bilateral defense cooperation. Ankara gifted Kyiv five military hospitals for deployment to eastern Ukraine.

09 MAR: A Ukrainian delegation in Tehran signed a memorandum of understanding to expand bilateral economic cooperation with Iran. The delegation also discussed cooperation on joint energy infrastructure projects.

3 Turkey. 04 MAR: The Russian Ministry of Defense accused Turkey of undermining the peace process by shelling Kurdish forces in northwestern Syria and sending supplies to support al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.

13, 16 MAR: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov alleged that Russia had proof that Turkish troops were "digging in" inside the Syrian border and accused Turkey of conducting a "creeping expansion" into Syria. Lavrov called on the international community to respond to Turkish cross-border shelling of Kurdish positions in northern Syria, which he said were jeopardizing the cessation of hostilities.

4 Syria. 05 MAR: An anonymous senior Russian naval source reported that Russia's only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, would be deployed to the Mediterranean Sea in summer 2016. It remains unclear whether the announced drawdown of the Russian air contingent will affect this deployment.

13 MAR: Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov indicated that the Assad regime no longer views U.S.-led coalition's air campaign as a violation of Syrian sovereignty if conducted in coordination with Russia.

14 MAR: Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the withdrawal of the "main part" of Russia's air group from Syria beginning on March 15. Putin claimed that the Russia had successfully "reversed" the fight against terrorism and set the conditions for Syrian peace talks.

15 MAR: Russian Deputy Defense Minister Nikolay Pankov confirmed that Russia's remaining air group in Syria would continue to target "terrorists," a label Moscow has often used to describe Syrian armed opposition groups.

15 MAR: Russian parliamentary defense council head Viktor Ozerov revealed that Russia would maintain around 800 military personnel at its Tartus naval facility and Latakia Province airbase, where he indicated that the S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile system would likely remain.

15-16 MAR: Russia reportedly withdrew around 15 fixed-wing aircraft from Syria, including a Su-30 fighter, several Su-24 and Su-34 bombers, and Su-25 close-support aircraft, leaving around 20 warplanes at its Latakia Province airbase.

17 MAR: President Putin warned that Russia could redeploy its withdrawn air contingent to Syria "within a few hours" if the peace process and cessation of hostilities collapsed.

5 Iraq. 14 MAR: Russia delivered five ZU-23-2 anti-aircraft cannons, which are also designed to target armored vehicles, to the Kurdish Peshmerga. A Russian diplomat in Erbil stated the weapons were intended to support Peshmerga anti-ISIS operations and that Russia had previously sent several other sets of anti-aircraft guns to Iraqi Kurdistan.

6 Tajikistan. 10-17 MAR: A reported 50,000 Tajik and 2,000 Russian troops conducted joint 'anti-terror' drills in Tajikistan. Russia deployed strategic bombers and Su-25 close-support aircraft to participate in the drills, reportedly the first time Russian forces and hardware based outside Tajikistan have taken part in an exercise in the former Soviet republic.

7 Korean Peninsula. 07, 11 MAR: Russia's Foreign Ministry criticized the ongoing U.S.-South Korean joint military drills and described Pyongyang's security concerns as "reasonable." Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart condemned the U.S. proposal to deploy THAAD anti-ballistic missile systems to South Korea, claiming the deployment would infringe upon their strategic security interests.