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The Russian Fleet in the Mediterranean: Exercise or Military Operation?

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A joint Russian naval exercise in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, off the Syrian coast, began on January 22, 2013 and is scheduled to end today, January 29, 2013. The Russians are calling this the largest exercise since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and vessels from three different naval theaters – the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the North Sea – have reached the region. The exercise is taking place simultaneously in two naval theaters: the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, with 23 vessels, strategic air force units, and air defense units participating. The force includes 10 warships: a missile cruiser; an anti-submarine ship; two escort vessels; four landing craft carrying 300 marines and 10 armored vehicles each; two submarines, one nuclear-powered and one diesel-powered, and auxiliary ships. This naval force carries nuclear weapons (tactical nuclear missiles carried by the submarines were also mentioned). In an extraordinary measure, the Russian chief of staff is commanding the exercise directly. A similar exercise, albeit of smaller scope, took place in the summer of 2012, and Russian vessels have been operating in this region in an ongoing manner over the past two years.

Concomitant with the start of the exercise, 77 Russian civilians were evacuated from Syria via Lebanon on two airplanes sent for this purpose by the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations. It is unclear whether this evacuation was an actual emergency or a drill. It is possible that the evacuees are part of the Russian diplomatic mission in Aleppo, which is currently closing due to the security situation there. In any case, the Russian authorities emphatically denied any intention of evacuating their citizens from Syria – some eight thousand people were mentioned, and the actual number is probably higher. The Russian authorities also deny any intention of using the fleet in the exercise for evacuation missions, but they have not denied the existence of shelf plans for this purpose.

An additional intriguing aspect of the exercise is the recent host of messages in the Russian media indicating that the exercise was actually designed as a deterrent in the Syrian theater. Several comments are particularly noteworthy:

- a. The exercise is not routine; it is a demonstration of Russian power, accompanied by an enhanced presence in the Mediterranean.

- b. The exercise is related to the global conflict and reflects Russia's intentions to act as a superpower.
- c. The exercise is related to the Middle East situation, which poses a threat along the borders of Russia and its allies.
- d. The exercise is related to the grave situation in Syria, and is designed to forestall any plans (by the West, Sunni countries, or Turkey) for intervention in Syria. The Russians interpret reports on Assad's potential use of chemical weapons as a cover for such intervention.
- e. Finally, the exercise guards the Alawite coast ahead of a possible move there by Assad for the purpose of fortifying it as a defense line and creating an Alawite state.

With the beginning of the Russian naval exercise, at a press conference on the Middle East, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that Russia's policy on the Syrian question had not changed. The Russians believe in achieving a solution through dialogue between the parties, and are continuing their efforts to initiate contacts with the Syrian opposition (on this occasion, Lavrov also warned the US and Israel against attacking Iran). In addition, the Russian authorities reiterated that Russia had no plans to intervene militarily in Syria, and did not intend to supply it with offensive weapons or send experts or military systems operators there. At the same time, President Putin promised aid to Lebanese President Suleiman, currently visiting Moscow.

Against this background, the question arises whether the naval activity is indeed an exercise, or an operation designed to promote Russian strategic objectives. Is it related to recent events in Syria, despite the fact that exercise was planned far in advance with no connection to these events? If so, are the messages accompanying it a way of exploiting the fleet's presence in the region, or were they also prepared in advance? In any event, it seems that new objectives, at least at the declaratory level, were added to an exercise planned previously to wave the Russian flag and bolster the presence in a region of importance to the Russians.

More specifically, the statements issued in strident tones may reflect Russian willingness to raise the ante in its conflict with the West, given the recent worsening of relations between Russia and the US, not only in the Syrian context, but also and primarily, in both global and bilateral contexts. In addition, Russia seems to assess that preparations are indeed underway for military intervention in Syria, including through use of the chemical weapons issue, and it is in Russia's interest to deter any such intentions. Another possible factor is the deterioration of Assad's position, which is liable to require a retreat to the Alawite region, a move that the Russians would have to secure from the sea. Finally, aspects other than Syria cannot be ruled out, such as use of the exercise as a means of applying pressure against Turkey, Russia's enemy, which poses a growing challenge to Russian interests in the region. Russia is also interested in expanding its presence and activity in the

Mediterranean Sea for the purpose of promoting cooperation with additional regional partners, such as Greece, Cyprus, and perhaps Malta, all of which are being visited by Russian ships during the exercise.

An analysis of these possible actions suggests what may come next. Under the camouflage of an exercise, Russia sent a large naval force to a sensitive region of fighting. The fact of the recurring presence of the Russian fleet in a region in which a conflict is growing hotter constitutes a statement in and of itself. This Russian measure, accompanied by blunt rhetoric, indicates an effort at deterrence in the Syrian theater, as well as a general demonstration of force. On the other hand, however, Russian capabilities in this sphere are limited, in comparison with its rivals in the Middle East, and certainly in the global arena. Of interest here is the silence of the Western media, which arouses reflection on the Russian side. It appears that the West, meaning the US, is hinting that it does not find this Russian behavior overly impressive. The Russian demonstration of force, therefore, may seem somewhat pathetic.

The presence of Russian force in the region may thus be exploited in two ways. The first is to impel the US to reach understandings with Russia about a settlement in Syria. In this context, it is more correct to see this as a dispute about the price that the US will have to pay Russia for the understandings in Syria. Two, in the absence of the desired understandings with the West, Russia plans, beyond its general support for Assad, to create conditions enabling it to deploy its forces in the Alawite area by securing the coastline and creating a deterrent against intervention. If this is the case, it appears that preparations are underway for the beginning of the dissolution of Syria.

