



What Drives Russia's Unrelenting Position on Syria?

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Introduction

A growing consensus of leaders around the world believe the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is inevitable, yet Russia continues to support the Assad regime and reject international calls to curb its actions. Russia's behavior seems not only morally bankrupt but also damaging to its long-term interests in Syria. So why does Moscow continue to back a faltering increasingly isolated Assad at the expense of relations with Syria's potential future leaders?

Russia's reaction to the Syrian conflict is driven by a complex mixture of political and economic interests in Syria, a fear of destabilization in the Middle East and at home, and a strict interpretation of state sovereignty. This issue brief explores each of these factors in Russia's deeply misplaced but nonetheless continuing support for Assad.

Political and economic interests in Syria

Russia has obvious strategic and economic interests in Syria that offer significant material benefits, such as arms sales revenue and a port location at Tartus to maintain ships. These interests also serve a greater purpose: They allow Russia to maintain a long-standing close relationship with the Assad regime, thereby protecting Russia's political interest of exerting greater influence outside the former Soviet Union. By maintaining a presence in Syria, Russia is bolstering its claim to great power status and perhaps even greater global influence.

Russia has major economic interests in its arms trade with the Assad regime. According to the independent Centre for Analysis of World Arms Trade in Moscow, Russia's arms sales to Syria over the past decade constitute 10 percent of Russia's global arms exports,¹ and Syria is currently Russia's top customer in the Middle East.² A 2011 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute also finds that Syria's demand for Russian-made weapons increased 580 percent from 2007 to 2011.³

Russian President Vladimir Putin has recently declared that Russia's arms sales doubled from \$6 billion in 2005 to more than \$13 billion in 2011, and that an increase in revenues by another \$500 million is expected in 2012.⁴ These arms sales to Syria have been put in jeopardy by the uprising. Under international pressure, Moscow agreed not to supply any more weapons to Syria in July, but it is uncertain whether or not Russia will abandon the recently secured \$4 billion in contracts to supply 36 Yak-130 trainer/combat aircraft to the Syrian military.⁵ If Russia were to cancel its existing arms contracts with Syria it would lose credibility as a reliable supplier among other nations that are not able to purchase weapons from the United States and NATO countries due to their questionable activities.

These states may instead turn to China for weapons, especially since China is quickly improving the quality of its arms and increased arms exports by 95 percent from 2007 to 2011. As a result, Russia's desire to fulfill its arms contracts with Syria in order to retain other customers is not surprising, especially since losing arms sales to a competing China could threaten Russia's claims to great power status.⁶

In addition, if Russia were to lose Syria as an arms sales customer then Russia's arms sales may not continue on an upward trajectory. This loss of funds could undermine President Putin's goals of modernizing Russia's military and reclaiming Russia's status as an influential military power.

In order to bolster its claim to great power status, Russia has sought to expand its naval influence abroad, evidenced by the recently announced \$140 billion plan to rebuild the Russian Navy with 51 modern warships and 24 submarines by 2020.⁷ Russia's naval base at Tartus in Syria plays a critical role in Russia's maritime strategy. Russia's naval commanders have publicly recognized the importance of Tartus to Russia's navy. In June Vice-Admiral Viktor Chirkov, the commander-in-chief of the Russian Navy, said, "The base is essential to us; it has been operating and will continue to operate."⁸

While recent reports have downplayed the military potential of the Tartus port, an examination of history reveals the Tartus base served as a major logistics location for the Soviet military during the Cold War, especially after the Soviet forces left Egypt.⁹ Indeed, recent reports of Moscow sending amphibious ships and Russian marines to Syria via the port at Tartus only confirm its utility as a forward base in a region lacking Russian military presence.¹⁰

The Tartus base also boasts additional important features, including deep-water port capabilities that would allow Russia to dock nuclear submarines as well as access to a sophisticated system of inland roads and highways.¹¹ Tartus is Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union. Losing it would undermine Moscow's ability to project power into the Mediterranean.

Fear of destabilization in the Middle East and at home

In addition to economic and strategic interests, Moscow fears destabilization in Syria could spread to Russia itself via Chechnya and the Northern Caucasus region. Instability in that region could damage Russia's natural resource interests there and in Central Asia, such as access to the estimated 40 billion barrels of oil in the Caspian Sea.¹² Russian foreign ministry spokesmen's repeated references to Syrian rebels as "terrorists" and attempts to link them to Al Qaeda indicates the Russian government views the rebels as a destabilizing force in the region.¹³

From Moscow's perspective, the recent political upheaval in the Middle East has given radical Islamists an opportunity to seize power throughout the area. Given Russia's own experience with such forces in Afghanistan and Chechnya, it is understandable that Moscow would see the rise of Islamist forces (whether armed or nonviolent) as a cause for concern. What's more, support or tolerance for uprisings against central authority in the Middle East may send unwanted signals to Russia's own rebellious regions about the potential success of armed rebellion.

Strict interpretation of sovereignty

Russia's strict interpretation of state sovereignty is the third main reason for Russia's refusal to consider harsher penalties on the Assad regime. As a Moscow-based radio Kommersant FM commentator, Konstantin von Eggert, stated, "The Kremlin's deeply held view of sovereignty as an unlimited right for political regimes to do as they please inside their states is one of the cornerstones of Russian foreign policy, and it has been especially dominant since the war in Libya."¹⁴ President Putin and other Russian leaders believe that setting a precedent for intervention may prove dangerous to Russia's own sovereignty given its own violent suppression of the rebellion in Chechnya over the last two decades.

Additionally, the United States and others have paid considerable attention to human rights violations in Russia itself, as indicated by the recent drafting of the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act in the United States. President Putin reacted to the so-called "color revolutions" in former Soviet states such as Ukraine and Georgia with suspicion, stating, "As far as 'color revolutions' are concerned, I think that everything is clear. It is a well-tested scheme for destabilizing society. I do not think it appeared by itself."¹⁵ He clearly feels that United States and other international efforts to advocate human rights in Russia and other former Soviet states are stealth attempts to foment regime change in Moscow and harm Russian interests.

Such outsized concerns about international criticism of Russia's own human rights record may lead to greater assertions of the sovereignty principle overseas, particularly

when Russia's own material and strategic interests are at stake. As Stephen Sestanovich, a principal State Department officer for the former Soviet Union between 1997 and 2001, noted, "[Putin] hates the idea that the international community has anything to say about who holds power in a country whose leaders have done something awful. He tends to sympathize with those leaders."¹⁶ By asserting a strong argument for state sovereignty, Russia feels it is protecting itself from foreign intervention.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Russia faces a catch-22 in Syria. Opposition forces appear to be gaining strength over time while Assad's military capabilities erode, making the question of Assad's fall seem to be one of "when" rather than "if." As a result of its strong support for the Assad regime, Russia has made itself a villain to the Syrian opposition. But if Russia rescinds its support for Assad then Moscow would lose a significant portion of its annual arms sales and an increasingly important naval base, both critical instruments of influence in the region. To Russian leadership, losing these economic and political interests in Syria threatens Russia's claims to great power status.

Given Russia's concerns over its own sovereignty over the last 20 years, Moscow understands the price of becoming soft on revolutions and allowing for foreign intervention: the possibility of losing control at home. Instability at home threatens President Putin's hold on power and makes Russia vulnerable to international pressure and potential unrest in the Northern Caucasus. Indeed, succumbing to international pressure and abandoning its unwavering emphasis on the integrity of state sovereignty at this point certainly makes Russia appear subordinate to Western powers—a position that President Putin seems to despise as behavior unworthy of the great power he believes Russia to be.

Given the mindset of Russia's leaders and a historical tradition of a strong militarized state led by conquering authoritarian figures Russia's position is understandable. Yet Russia's great power aspirations and lack of cooperation with international actors have resulted in a hardline reaction to Syria's conflict that will likely harm Russia's national interests and tarnish its reputation abroad in the long run.

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Endnotes

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