

Not Everything Is Wrong with Russia's Syria Strategy

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Russia's position on Syria's civil war has been criticized so devastatingly in the Western media and proven wrong by so many political analyses so convincingly that it might appear useless and impolitic to re-open the issue. Yet Russia's allegedly self-defeating position has turned out to be remarkably defensible. By adopting a contrarian stance, Russia has managed to score more than a few points in the complex diplomatic maneuvering around this protracted humanitarian disaster. It may, therefore, be useful to re-examine the combination of interests and ambitions that shapes the Russian course in order to gain some foresight on its change following the probable collapse of the al-Assad regime. This is without any intention to wax lyrical about President Vladimir Putin's wisdom in charting this course—but with the aim of assessing the impact of this discord on the presently indeterminate fate of Russian-U.S. relations.

Russia's Initial Response

The explosion of turmoil across the wider Middle East since 2011 took the Russian leadership as much by surprise as it did policy-makers in Washington, Paris, or Rome. Moscow's immediate concerns were less about the survivability of allied regimes or security risks in the immediate neighborhood than about the re-emergence of the "specter of revolution." The Kremlin had hoped that Georgia's defeat in the August 2008 war and the failure of the "orange" coalition in the January 2010 elections in Ukraine would eliminate the threat of "color revolutions." With the Arab Spring, however, this threat now manifested itself with a new power that could lead it to resonate in the post-Soviet space. Moscow's determination to take the lead in countering a fresh wave of revolutions was reinforced by intense fears of state collapse rooted in Russia's painful experience in the Chechen wars.

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This ideological stance was buttressed by the lesson Russia learned in the violent conflict in Libya, when the United States and NATO freely abused the mandate it received from UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and orchestrated the change of Muammar Gaddafi's regime. Putin placed the blame for that blunder squarely on then-President Dmitry Medvedev's feeble shoulders, but he also saw the opportunity to take a firm stance against the West's interpretation of "humanitarian intervention."

From the early days of the uprising in Syria, Moscow argued that the violent conflict should be treated not as a brutal repression against innocent civilians but as a civil war, which could only be brought to an end through internationally supervised negotiations. This position was not without merit. It was, however, a dual gamble. It depended on the capacity of Bashar al-Assad's regime to withstand the revolutionary tide and keep fighting against the opposition in the absence of external military intervention. It also depended on the reluctance of the United States and NATO to intervene forcefully without proper UN authorization (which was out of the question). As of late April 2013, both gambles can be called a success.

Losses and Gains in the Wider Middle East

It is often argued that by backing the losing horse Russia has lost a great deal of international prestige and influence in the Middle East. However, Moscow has reason to calculate the balance of losses and gains differently. Taking a firm counter-revolutionary and counter-interventionist stance, Russia has made no friends among states that experienced revolutions, including Egypt, but their governments are so unstable that building permanent ties with them makes little sense. Russia's relations with the Gulf monarchies have also gone sour, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov discovered visiting Saudi Arabia in November 2012, but they were never cordial to begin with and the petro-kings cannot pretend that the Arab Spring hasn't compromised their legitimacy. Most worrisome for Moscow is the deep disagreement it has with Turkey, a major sponsor of the anti-Assad forces; nonetheless, Putin has managed to exploit what personal chemistry he has with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to isolate the two countries' differences on Syria from their blossoming economic partnership.

What adds credibility to the Russian leadership's course, at least in their own eyes, is the supposition that only violent chaos and state failure can follow the collapse of the al-Assad regime. Every month of the civil war makes this more plausible. As the internecine fighting escalates, the rebel groups and factions inevitably grow more radicalized, which is a major worry for Israel, among others. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu was far from enthusiastic at the outset of the Arab Spring, and he must take into account the prospect of an Islamic state emerging in Syria. For Moscow, a decisive defeat of al-Assad, who to all intents and purposes has been written off as a useful ally, would not signify the failure of its gamble, but an opportunity to demonstrate that its risk assessment has been right all along.

One particular twist in the Syrian conflict concerns Russia's varied but indeterminate energy interests in the Middle East, from Cyprus offshore gas projects to joint oil ventures in Iraq to nuclear power plants in Turkey. Russia's sharp disagreement

with Qatar over Syria has effectively paralyzed the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, but this loose proto-organization has anyway never had much of a chance to fulfill the promise of becoming the “gas OPEC.” Russia is as confused as the Gulf states by the revolutionary changes in the global energy market, and tensions over Syria prevent any coordination of plans among major producers. An assessment of the risks emanating from Syria leads policy-makers in Moscow to the troubling conclusion that only a spread of turmoil, including a confrontation centered on the Iranian nuclear program, could rescue Russia’s petro-economy from sinking into protracted recession.

Real and Imaginary Interplays with Domestic Instability

The revolutionary dynamics in the Middle East have generated remarkably weak resonance in post-Soviet Eurasia, even in Muslim Central Asia. Putin’s posture as a counter-revolutionary champion has thus not impressed the seasoned dictators of the region all that much. They are, nonetheless, broadly in agreement on the need to counter Western propensity to foment revolutions and launch interventions in support of rebels in distress. They are content to delegate to Russia responsibility for checking such tendencies.

Putin seeks to convert this hesitant consensus into a driver for implementing his vision of a “Eurasian union,” but his leadership has weakened the erosion of political stability in Russia. The degradation of power structures has nothing to do with the turbulent processes in the Middle East and a lot to do with super-corruption, but it has become a major determining factor of foreign policy objectives. From this distorted perspective, a firm stance against external intervention in Syria not only becomes part of the struggle for the rights of dictators to treat their subjects as they see fit but an element of Putin’s course in overcoming the crisis of his regime by suppressing the opposition. The scope of repression against street protesters and virtual “saboteurs” has so far been limited and selective, but Putin’s conviction that these “agents” have Western sponsorship underpins his readiness to disregard disappointment in the United States and the EU with Russia’s curtailing of democratic freedoms.

In the meantime, despite the particular connection between the Kremlin and Chechnya (as emphasized by Fiona Hill²), Moscow pays scant political attention to the mutation of low-intensity civil war in the North Caucasus, which serves as a key reference point for analysis of the Syrian calamity. Russian authorities are still aiming to pacify Dagestan and other troubled republics through counter-terrorist operations, but networks of resistance are re-inventing themselves as channels of newly-energized political Islam, rather than as “al-Qaeda franchises.” The uprising in Syria looks very different in Makhachkala and Nalchik than in Moscow.

Is There any Space for Cooperation?

Assessing the impact of the Syrian crisis on Russia’s relations with the West may be more complicated than merely gauging the depth of their irreconcilable disagreements.

² See: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139079/fiona-hill/the-real-reason-putin-supports-assad>

No progress on the Syrian problem was registered during a visit of Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to London in March 2013, but their “strategic dialogue” with the British government marked an improvement of relations that had been tense since the late 2000s. Similarly, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry found no common ground on Syria in a meeting with Lavrov in late February 2013, but both parties found the exchange useful in overcoming bilateral complications. Moscow has every reason to assume that its “principled” position on Syria has secured it a central place in the international arena and has made its Western partners, irritated as they may be, more attentive to Russia’s opinion.

The key question in evaluating the controversy is whether Russian objections have in fact prevented a U.S.-led international “humanitarian intervention” aimed at protecting lives and human rights--or been used as a convenient excuse for not intervening in the impossibly complex civil war. Moscow is increasingly inclined to subscribe to the second view, which fits into its geopolitical picture of an introverted EU preoccupied with its financial crisis, a weakened NATO damaged by defeat in Afghanistan, and a hesitant United States unable to afford the costs of another “boots on the ground” engagement. There is a dose of wishful thinking in such assessments, but the bottom line is that Washington and Brussels are unable to form a coherent response to the Syrian challenge (except for drawing a “red line” on the use of chemical weapons), while harboring a grudge against Russia for its stubbornness. They are ready to “agree to disagree” as long as the war runs its course, blaming Moscow in the meantime for the hopeless mess, while the Kremlin will condemn the West’s mindless support for revolutions, which tend to bring only chaos and state failure. In this case, the heavily recycled expectation that Russia will soften its attitude and become a part of the solution in Syria has little if any justification.

In Moscow there is little concern about being isolated thanks to its alleged support for the al-Assad regime. At the same time, there is plenty of confidence that Russia’s global indispensability has been reconfirmed in a way that makes it imperative for the West to approach Russia with greater respect. The pronounced desire of the Barack Obama administration to generate a new momentum in arms control and political engagement with the Kremlin (which we can perhaps define as “Reset 2.0”) is seen as proof positive for this proposition. It remains to be seen whether the removal of the stumbling block over European missile defense will suffice to ensure proper momentum, and Putin’s initial response is far from encouraging. As far as Syria is concerned, no rapprochement is in the cards as Russia is intent to demonstrate that the U.S. course can only lead to disaster. Moscow cannot expect to benefit from such a disaster, but it calculates that the loss of its last client state would not necessarily be a major setback for Russia’s interests, and it would be more than compensated for by the damage that a badly mishandled “regime change” would do to U.S. interests.

Conclusions

By drawing a firm negative line on international intervention in the Syrian civil war, Russia believes it has raised its profile and advanced to the position of an “indispensable

power,” while actually doing very little, other than staging some naval exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean (such a “show of flag” is already beyond the shrinking capacity of most European navies). The Kremlin may – and quite possibly does – underestimate the resentment toward Russia that exists in Western capitals. However, it has reason to believe that it has earned the respect of China, which is firmly set against Western interventionism while preferring Russia to make the case and take the blame (to a certain degree, the same goes for other emerging powers, including Brazil and India). Moscow is confident in its ability to scorn the Arab League’s anti-Assad position, but it is seriously concerned about tensions with Turkey, knowing that this valued partnership is most affected by the protracted crisis. New efforts at damage limitation may thus follow in the months to come.

Russia is keen to demonstrate that the seemingly unified Western policy in the Syrian crisis is merely a combination of the misguided embrace of “democratic” revolutions, hypocritical concern about human rights in the absence of any readiness to assume responsibility to protect, and disappearing U.S. leadership. This is satisfactory as long as the delayed but pre-determined collapse of the al-Assad regime really does leave Syria as a failed state, out of which Islamist radicalism could spread toward every potential fault line, including the North Caucasus, which remains an acute security threat to Russia. Here lies the deepest flaw in Russia’s position: any satisfaction it might find in proving that its disapproval of revolutions was justified would be spoiled by the dire need to face the consequences. Posturing aside, a festering war zone in the geopolitical place of Syria is extremely dangerous, and there is an obvious parallel in the U.S. and Russian interests to prevent such an outcome, which optimistically leaves space for cooperation past the current acrimonious cross-checking.

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