

The Syria Crisis and the Making of Russia's Foreign Policy

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 199

June 2012

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Russia's policy on the Syria crisis has been a litmus test revealing the more general pattern of Russian foreign policy thinking and behavior. This policy can hardly be understood fully if it is reduced to a mere "outcome" of some static "causes" or well-defined "interests." Rather, it should be seen as part of an actor-centered process that is activated and driven by a combination of several key factors and influences, including external and internal developments and constraints.

Three General Policy Drivers

Russian foreign policy appears to be increasingly caught between three main drivers that are specific to Russia and frequently in conflict with one another.

Slow to Move: General System Inflexibility

The first "driver" is related to a need to promptly react to dynamic transnational processes and developments of global significance in an increasingly complex, interdependent, information-intense, and media-open world – even though these are typically events over which Russia has limited, if any, influence (such as the wave of "Arab revolutions" of 2011-2012). While many lead international players are also increasingly subject to this "pressure to react," what makes Russia a specific case is that this pressure is at times disproportionately high – not only in comparison to Russia's real capacities and interests, more typical of a regional power, but also in light of the limited flexibility and dynamism that its state structure displays in principle, including in external affairs. While contemporary international realities and developments increasingly require a truly global vision and high degree of dynamism and flexibility from any power claiming major international status and clout, Russia's system exhibits general difficulty handling prompt reactions to any rapid and relatively unexpected change. This does not imply that Russia cannot come up with adequate responses to the most pressing and dynamic international problems and processes. However, when these arise, Russia tends to take a

significant amount of time to digest, adjust, and formulate a response calibrated to the scale and type of foreign policy challenge.

Minimal National Consensus on Foreign Policy Priorities

The second “driver” is related to the genuine foreign policy interests of Russia as a nation, state, and society. Conflicting domestic political agendas may dictate significant nuances in how these interests are understood by different political forces. However, a rather broad national consensus on certain basic tenets for shaping Russia’s relations with the outside world appears to be emerging. These tenets include:

- making the most out of Russia’s growing integration into the world and the global economy for purposes of modernization;
- improving Russia’s overall international image (which, for pragmatic purposes, will create more favorable conditions for investment, business, and development); and
- trying to increase Russia’s influence by building partnerships and alliances (not only in Eurasia, but also in adjacent regions).

This emerging core consensus goes beyond any anti-Western or pro-Western agenda and is hardly disputed by anyone. It is reinforced by the fact that despite the decline in Russia’s international influence over the past two decades, the country retains sufficient professional expertise to formulate a set of foreign policy priorities that are broadly acceptable at the national level.

Role of the Ruling Caste

The third driver comes in the form of what appears to be instinctive foreign policy impulses dictated by a narrow dominant caste in the ruling political elite. Their specific world vision, background, corporate interests (including economic interests), behavioral patterns, administrative practices, political culture, and relatively limited international affairs expertise make their decision-making on foreign policy the most erratic factor of the three.

All three of these “drivers” more or less contribute equally to Russia’s foreign policy. Depending on a given issue or crisis, and in interaction with other factors, these main “drivers” may reinforce or balance each other. Overall, Russia’s reaction to the wave of socio-political change in the Middle East has been no exception: while Russia’s position was slow to evolve, it remained rather cautious and pragmatic until early 2012, when the third “driver” came to play a disproportionately high role in Moscow’s reaction to the Syria crisis.

The Syria Challenge

Beyond these three basic drivers, additional explanations for Russia’s particularly assertive position on Syria have dominated the subject both in and outside Russia. One explanation underlines the bad timing, i.e., a highly volatile period in Russian politics between recent parliamentary and presidential elections. Another

explanation emphasizes the post-Libya intervention context, whereby Russia's Syria policy reaffirmed its growing concerns about the tendency of leading Western states (supported by Gulf states) to extend United Nations Security Council resolutions without limit; the resulting focus on regime change; and the disturbing consequences of Libyan state collapse. A third common explanation centers on Moscow's "major" strategic interests vis-à-vis Syria.

While these factors are not negligible, none of them, separately or in combination, provide an exhaustive explanation for Russian policy. It is amazing to watch Russian hardliners and many Western and Middle Eastern analysts join together to grossly exaggerate Russia's strategic interests in Syria. Existing military, economic, cultural/ educational, and other links notwithstanding, Syria's importance as a purchaser of Russian arms should not be overestimated, especially given the poor paying record of Damascus. The small Russian naval facility at Tartus has more symbolic than real significance. Until very recently, the Assad regime has not bothered to assert itself as Moscow's political ally. Russia's economic interest in Syria other than arms sales – in energy and other sectors – is real, but it is modest compared to economic cooperation with, for instance, neighboring Turkey. Even the impact of the Russian election season, in which the government played on and propagated anti-U.S. sentiment to appear "tough on the West" and discredit domestic opposition, cannot fully explain its unusual attachment to the Syrian government.

Indeed, this attachment belies a more fundamental issue at play – that of a shared regime identification. All contextual specificity notwithstanding, there exists a striking affinity of regime type between Russia and Assad's Syria, closer than that between the Russian government and any other regime outside the CIS. Similarities include the political and economic dominance of a narrow closed caste of a clearly defined type or origin; unaccountable presidential rule; the unparalleled clout of the security sector, especially the special services; and the fiction of belated political reform, exercised only under tremendous pressure and not touching on central elements of the power structure. In both cases, the primacy of regime self-survival dictates a "smart authoritarian" approach under normal conditions, but one that easily slides into "security solutions" and a "siege mentality" when control is at stake. The collapse of the Assad regime would hardly have any direct impact on the domestic position or future of Russia's regime. However, the more fundamental significance of such a collapse would be as a demonstrative failure of an essentially (and strikingly) similar strategy of national modernization centered on "smart authoritarianism" – a scenario that the present Russian leadership is almost instinctively reluctant to accept.

The role of regime identification as a contributing factor in Moscow's painful reaction to developments around Syria stands out even in comparison to its response to the disintegration of other authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes that displayed crucial distinctions from Assad's rule. These distinctions included the strong autonomous role and significant external financing of the armed forces in Mubarak's Egypt and a complex combination of bargaining relationships between the ruling regime and various regions and tribal groups in Qaddafi's Libya. In the case of Syria, the regime affinity factor has been at least as critical for explaining what has "made

the difference” in Russia’s policy vis-à-vis Syria as has been the combination of straight strategic interests and short-term electoral pressures.

In the long-term, it is also more alarming for Russia than the UN Security Council debates on Syria, as such debates did not start and will not end with this crisis. They involve a genuine controversy between human security-centered and sovereignty-centered legal and ethical approaches to international security. The growing importance of the human security agenda notwithstanding, this controversy is constantly reignited by the highly mixed experience and consequences of a number of external military interventions and foreign-driven state-building experiments.

Limited Damage and Damage Limitation

The effects of Russia’s initial one-sided backing of the Syrian government on developments in and around Syria may be a matter for speculation. But the immediate outcomes of that policy for Russia were quite problematic.

First, while this policy provoked an expected outcry in the West, it was also met with an almost universally negative reaction in the Arab political space and even provoked atypical protests at Russian embassies in the Middle East (in Lebanon, Libya, and Sudan). This threatened to turn Russia into a major external “scapegoat” for much of the Arab world – a label that Moscow hardly deserves for many reasons, including its rather limited role and leverage in the region.

Second, Russia’s reputation at the UN also suffered a new kind of damage. Repercussions at the UN Security Council should not be overestimated; the negative response to the Russian and Chinese veto of the Western-backed Arab League peace plan in February was predictable (and not unprecedented). However, broad support for an anti-Assad resolution at the UN General Assembly days later came as a surprise. For a body in which voting patterns better reflect members’ genuine attitudes (as opposed to in the Security Council, where votes are often shaped by strategic calculations), this was a radical departure from the well-recorded tendency of many UN members to support Russia and China on human rights-related resolutions (though it has been paralleled by a comparable decline in support for the United States and EU member-states).¹

In sum, for Russia as both an influential UN power and a relative outsider in the Middle East, the pro-regime reaction to the Syria crisis in early 2012 came at the cost of a major diplomatic and reputational setback – more due to its lack of precedent than its scale. However, this setback should not be overdramatized, as the pendulum of Russian foreign policymaking started to swing back to a relative balance based upon the three main “drivers” discussed above, as soon as the presidential elections were over and as Russia adjusted to both the cold shower of international repercussions and worsening developments on the ground in Syria. Much of Russia’s diplomatic activity on Syria since then has been damage limitation.

¹ As shown by analysis of voting coincidence scores in the UN General Assembly from 1997–98 to 2007–08, members’ support on human rights-related issues increased for Russia and China from 50 to 76 and 74 percent respectively, in contrast to decline in support to the United States (from 77 to 30 percent) and the EU states (from 72 to 48–55 percent). See Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, *A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN*, ECFR Policy Paper, 2008.

This adaptation, however, should not be construed as a major policy revision in favor of “doves” at the expense of “hawks.” Rather, the main nuances among Russian elites’ views on Syria and the Middle East depend primarily on their highly varying level of foreign policy professionalism and expertise on the region. Among the more professional segments more specialized on foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular, the following four basic tenets have been gaining ground:

- a) acknowledgment that events in any given country, with due respect to particular context, are part of the genuine dynamics of (irreversible) sociopolitical change throughout the entire region;
- b) recognition that these changes are driven by factors and forces internal to a certain country and the region at least as much (and probably far more) than by extra-regional influences;
- c) general skepticism about conspiracy theories; and
- d) understanding that there is a need to reach out and engage with all major political forces in the region, including reformist Islamists in and out of government.

Those who at least partly share these views can be found in all segments of the Russian government, political elites, and expert circles. They have a more adequate understanding of Russia’s genuine interests and capacities in the region than the hardliners in and out of government. This does not mean they should be confused with “doves,” however. This more adequate approach is embodied by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and is well-represented in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the professional expert community, especially among lead Middle East experts.

It is this approach that is behind much of Russia’s recent damage limitation moves on Syria. It has especially been in evidence since the adoption by the UN Security Council of the April 2012 six-point ceasefire plan put forward by UN special envoy Kofi Annan (Resolution 2042). This plan, in which Moscow invested considerable diplomatic effort, got support from the Syrian government and envisaged the dispatch of a UN monitoring mission to Syria (Resolution 2043). Even as the limited Annan plan had little chance to be implemented in full (certainly not before it was seriously tested by the outrageous and contentious massacre in Hula at the end of May), Russia has been determined to try to preserve it as a negotiation framework for as long as possible. It is only in the aftermath of the Hula massacre and in the context of Putin’s first trips to Europe in his new/old presidential status that earlier Russian diplomatic voices that tried to distance Moscow from Bashar Assad personally have been reinforced at the top level of the Russian government. As Putin stated at a joint press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on June 1, “we have good multi-year relations with Syria, but we do not support any of the parties.”

In sum, the latest stage in Moscow’s diplomacy on the Syria crisis has been a mix of damage limitation and attempts to instrumentalize Russia’s role as a key mediator, including for foreign policy purposes related more to Russia’s relations with its U.S. and European counterparts than to Syria as such.

Conclusion

Whatever explains Russia's higher-than-usual profile on the Syria crisis, its impact on the dynamics of the crisis itself will remain limited. As long as the Syrian regime will muddle through, it will do so primarily for internal reasons, not because of Russia's support. If and when the regime collapses, it will happen due to a complex combination of weakening institutions, economic collapse, spiraling (counter)insurgent and inter-communal violence, including in extreme forms, and external pressures.

For the time being, "hiding behind" the Annan plan appears to be an optimal alternative not just for Russia, but for other key international players, including the United States. There may be hopes in more than one quarter that during the "window of time" granted by Annan's plan, or any follow-up initiative, the situation in Syria may evolve in more than one way, perhaps leading to some intra-regime reshuffling that could open new possibilities for conflict management. In the meantime, however, the diplomatic/ monitoring framework alone is unlikely to prevent further escalation of violence – as has already been seen – and a deterioration of the humanitarian situation on the ground (with a Lebanon-style full-fledged internal and regional proxy armed conflict as the worst-case scenario).

This would bring the problem back to the UN Security Council and to painful decisions about the course for further action. The United States and their European and Gulf allies will be under ever more urgent pressure to more actively intervene in a highly volatile regional environment and in the most difficult of all "Arab Spring" conflicts. Even in that case, the absolute maximum that Russia would be ready to approve is a full-scale multilateral UN peace mission – and only if the latter is accepted by the Syrian government, whoever the government is by that time. A lack of Russian support for an open-ended Security Council resolution explicitly calling for regime change or external intervention in Syria is unlikely to be reversed – nor will it stop such an intervention.