The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What Drives the Kremlin's Syria Policy

By Ruslan Pukhov

July 05, 2012

The Syrian crisis has become the latest test of Russia's relations with the West. Moscow's support for the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad and its readiness to aggravate the West in pursuit of that policy has surprised Western politicians and observers, especially in light of the initial "conciliatory" position that Russia took toward foreign intervention in Libya in early 2011.

Western analysts and media have attempted to find rational explanations for Russia's position, suggesting that its main motivation is a desire to preserve its military base in the Syrian port of Tartus and its profitable weapons sales to Damascus. But these factors do not seem to play a leading role.

As the Soviet Union's most loyal ally in the Middle East following Egypt's fall from the Soviet orbit, Syria was probably the largest recipient of Soviet arms among non-Warsaw Pact countries in the mid-1970s. As a result, Syria was able to create a powerful military for that time, equipped almost entirely with modern Soviet weaponry.

As part of an agreement in 2005, Syria placed major orders in 2006 and 2007 with

Rosoboronexport, the state arms exporter, for the purchase of weapons worth about $4.5 billion, and that deal continues to define Moscow's military and technical cooperation with Damascus.

The Tartus port, often described in the media as a "military base," consists of two floating docks with a couple of warehouses and some barracks. Tartus has greater symbolic than practical significance for the Russian Navy. It cannot serve as a base for deploying a major naval operation in the Mediterranean, and Russian ships in the area call on the port more as a show of solidarity with Syria than to replenish supplies. Losing the Tartus port would have no significant negative consequences for the Russian Navy.

Moscow's policy toward Damascus basically amounts to supporting the Assad regime to prevent it from being overthrown by foreign military intervention. This policy is based on a fairly broad consensus among Russia's politicians, analysts and the general public. In this context, President Vladimir Putin plays the familiar role of "protector of Russia's interests" against Western meddling and expansionism.

Of course, Putin is also motivated by a desire to preserve his own hold on power. His authoritarian regime also faces a growing protest movement that receives political endorsement from the West. Putin cannot help but sympathize with Assad as a fellow autocratic ruler who is struggling against "outside interference in his country's internal affairs."

But the most influential factor is the Kremlin's firm belief that Russia cannot afford to "lose Syria." The collapse of Assad's regime would signify the loss of Moscow's last client and ally — and only foothold — in the Middle East. Syria is seen as one of the last symbolic remnants of Moscow's superpower status that was the trademark of the Soviet Union. Western military intervention in Syria would be a worst-case scenario because the Kremlin would be practically powerless to prevent or resist this, except for a veto in the United Nations Security Council.

There is a generally pessimistic perception in Russia of the consequences of the Arab Spring for the Middle East as a whole, and of the possible results of a Syrian revolution in particular. Moscow considers secular authoritarian regimes to be the only realistic alternative to radical Islamic influences in Arab states. After many years of suffering from Islamic-inspired terrorism and extremism in the North Caucasus, Russian public opinion is on the side of Assad. Moscow sees Assad not so much a bad dictator, but as a leader fighting against an uprising of Islamic barbarism.

The active support for the rebels fighting Assad from Saudi Arabia and Qatar only reinforces Russia's deep suspicion of the Islamic character of the Syrian insurgency. Russia has long been concerned about Saudi Arabia's export of radical Wahhabi ideology across the Middle East and beyond, including parts of the North Caucasus.

The final factor is the Kremlin's traditional aversion to unilateral Western interventionism. The latest example of this was the intervention in Libya, which the West justified by broadly interpreting UN Security Council resolutions and even violating those same resolutions by arming Libyan rebels. Russia viewed U.S.-led Western actions in Libya as cynical and deceitful, a typical display of its double standards.

At the same time, the violent conflict in Syria brings to the surface all of the Kremlin's foreign policy fears, complexes and phobias. These factors are more dominant in shaping Moscow's policy toward Syria than the actual events on the ground there. What's more, Putin, who has always tried to exploit such sentiments for his own gain, is now burdened with the Russia's opposition movement, which is pushing him to take an even firmer position on Syria.

That position is not based on a desire for profits from Russian weapons sales, to preserve a presence at the Tartus port or even to gain a bargaining chip with the United States. It is based on the conviction that a revolution in Syria would inflict serious damage on Russia's prestige and national interests, particularly if the Syrian revolution is fueled by Western and Arab governments.

Ruslan Pukhov is director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies and publisher of the journal Moscow Defense Brief.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/07/05/what-drives-the-kremlins-syria-policy-16032-a16032