

Russia Flexing Its Muscles With Syria

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Damascus is the "Stalingrad" of Russian diplomacy. After years of geopolitical withdrawal, Moscow has chosen Syria as a way to revive its image of power in the world. "Not one step back" is the Kremlin's new strategy, as it was for the Red Army along the banks of the Volga river during World War II.

To be more convincing, the Kremlin has simultaneously flexed its muscles by supplying sophisticated weapons to Syria. The undeclared objective is to prevent the West from establishing a no-fly zone or a naval blockade of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, as was done for Moammar Gadhafi's Libya. The presence of Russian ships patrolling waters near the Russian naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus indicates that the Kremlin is serious.

Surely, President Vladimir Putin doesn't want a new Cold War. Russia is not the Soviet Union, but the problem of at least recognizing the former superpower's status of regional power undoubtedly exists.

The Libyan wound is still bleeding. Despite its economic interests in Libya, Moscow was not even invited to take part in the postwar negotiations. The same thing occurred in 1999, when the Kremlin did not oppose the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

The result in both cases was a blow to the Kremlin's prestige at home and abroad. The Russians have understood that when they do not beat the table with their shoe, they are not given adequate attention.

In addition, Putin is particularly concerned about the future in Afghanistan after NATO withdraws its troops in 2014. He has already warned that the situation will worsen and infiltrations of radical extremists to Central Asia might resume like during the Taliban regime in the late 1990s.

Today, Assad plays the same military role as Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov does in Grozny. In Moscow's view, the show of force is the best way to maintain its influence in the Middle East. The second is to be the main actor at a future peace conference, where the Kremlin intends to invite all those countries that have a say on the Syrian issue.

Its hidden goal is to curb Islamic radicalism by drying up its financing through an unexpected global agreement. Now the most urgent things are to stop the bloodshed in Syria as soon as possible and to find a political solution through peace talks.

Until now, the West has failed to provide convincing answers to two fundamental questions: Why do the Syrian Christians remain faithful to Assad, and what will happen in Syria after the end of the regime?

And there is a third question that is no less important: Even if a negotiated peace settlement is initially reached, is Syria doomed to become another Iraq?

Those in the governments of the Commonwealth of Independent States remember the emergency summit held in Almaty in October 1996, a few days after the fall of Kabul into the hands of the Taliban. They also remember the subsequent bloody mini-wars fought to stop the infiltration of Islamic extremists into Central Asia and Russia.

Objectively, Russia is unable to fight Islamic extremism in its backyard on its own. Thus, Moscow and the West need to work closely together to fight this threat in Central Asia, but this is possible only if Russia doesn't allow its inflated pride to get in the way.

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