



When Domestic Factors Prevail Upon Foreign Ambitions: Russia's Strategic Game in Syria

Camilla Committeri

Abstract

The Syrian crisis is dividing the international community like no other Arab uprising has done so far. While the United States and the European Union stand squarely against the Syrian regime, Russia remains a staunch defender of state sovereignty and the Al-Assad regime. There are three main factors that explain this position: Moscow's historical relations with Damascus; Russia's traditional opposition to US presence in the Middle East; and the surge in domestic opposition in Russia itself. This last factor, and the recent evolution of Russian domestic politics, is crucial to grasp Moscow's foreign policy towards Syria and the Middle East, as well as towards the United States and Europe.

Keywords: *Russia / Foreign policy / Bilateral relations / Syria / Syrian internal conflict*

When Domestic Factors Prevail Upon Foreign Ambitions: Russia's Strategic Game in Syria

by Camilla Committeri*

Introduction

The reasons behind Russia's support for the Al-Assad regime are the object of ample speculation in academic and policy circles today. Some argue that Russia's stance is a residue of Cold War strategic thinking, while others focus on the specific relationship between the two regimes. However, an analysis of the economic and political nature of the decades-long Russian-Syrian partnership reveals that economic interests do not play a major role. Over the past twenty years, Russia has not always staunchly defended its traditional allies in the region, allying with the United States, for example, when it has deemed appropriate, as when it condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Hence, while economic and foreign policy dynamics are undeniably important, they do not represent the main explanatory factors of Russian behaviour towards Syria today. What appears to play a far more decisive role is the domestic domain, and in particular the national promotion of a strong Russia, the role of Islam in Russian politics, and the recent opposition to Putin's re-election. Hence, this paper argues that to grasp Moscow's foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Syria, and more broadly the Middle East, it is crucial to understand the evolution of Russia's domestic politics.

1. The Syrian crisis and Russia: the evolution of an upheaval

While the Arab Spring reached a relatively immediate and successful culmination in Tunisia and Egypt, the protests organized in Syria in the wake of Egypt's revolution have been unsuccessful so far in bringing down the Al-Assad regime. Sparked in March 2011 by the incarceration of children in the small border town of Dera'a, accused of writing anti-government slogans on public walls, the uprisings reached the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo several months later. It was not until July-August 2011 that the different opposition movements inside and outside the country organized themselves politically through the Syrian National Council, based in Istanbul, and militarily through the Free Syrian Army. Though the establishment of these more or less organized groups laid the foundation for transition, divergences among the various political currents slowed it down. It took even longer for the international community to take a stand, as the Arab League and the United Nations hesitated in their official statements, resolutions and sanctions. In fact, the resolution plans proposed by the two organizations (the Arab League Plan of January 2012 and the UN Annan Plan of March of the same year), were welcomed with scepticism by both the Syrian regime and the

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opposition. While the United States, the Arab League, Turkey and the European Union implemented sanctions against the Al-Assad family and members of the regime's inner circle,¹ the United Nations Security Council has yet to take a decisive stand regarding the Syrian conflict. In truth, it is widely acknowledged that the UN Security Council's inaction, even in light of the escalating violence on both sides transforming the conflict into full-fledged civil war, is due to Russian and Chinese opposition.²

2. Moscow's partnership with Damascus: an alliance dating back to the Cold War

Syria is Russia's only remaining partner in the Middle East, thanks to the particular relationship developed during the Cold War between the Ba'ath Party in Damascus and the Socialist ruling elite in Moscow.

The climax in Russian-Syrian military relations came with the 1971 construction of the Russian naval base in Tartus, just north of Syria's border with Lebanon. Today, reports on the effective capacity of Russia's only naval port outside the former Soviet space differ drastically. According to the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST): "Tartus is not a real naval base, just a point on the map to replenish food and water and carry out some occasional repairs".³ Another analysis by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty claims instead that "Russia's greatest strategic and geopolitical interest in Syria is the use of [this] deep-water port".⁴ Hence, the extent to which the Tartus port determines Moscow's support for the Syrian regime remains unclear, though one aspect seems self-evident: for Moscow, Tartus represents the only naval base with direct access to the Mediterranean Sea, and thus its strategic importance goes beyond the mere capability of the port itself.

Beyond the naval base, military ties feature a significant arms trade. Exchanges in this field flourished even before the Syrian uprising: the Russian-imported arsenal in Syria includes the latest MiG-29SMT fighter, as well as over 30 Pantsir S1E air-defence systems.⁵ Some claim that the "current contracts for sales of arms and military equipment from Russia to Syria are worth at least €2.5 billion."⁶ This trade is of

¹ The nature of these sanctions consists mainly of asset freezes for targeted Syrian individuals and companies, as well as an oil import ban (EU sanction), restrictions on the energy sector (US 2011 sanction), and a halt to all investments in Syria (Arab League sanction, which is harder to implement due to Syria's porous borders).

² "Guide: Syria Crisis", *BBC News*, 9 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13855203>.

³ Frank Gardner, "How vital is Syria's Tartus port to Russia?", *BBC News*, 27 June 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-18616191>. See also Mikhail Barabanov, "Russian Interests in Syria: Myths and Reality", in *Moscow Defense Brief*, No. 4/2012, <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/4-2012>.

⁴ Ron Synovitz, "Explainer: Why Is Access To Syria's Port At Tartus So Important To Moscow?", in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 19 June 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/content/explainer-why-is-access-/24619441.html>.

⁵ "Russia defends arm sale to Syria", *UPI*, 29 September 2008, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/09/29/Russia_defends_arms_sales_to_Syria/UPI-28611222726785.

⁶ "Q&A: Syria Sanctions", *BBC News*, 23 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15753975>.

particular value for Russia as arms exports became the main source of employment in the Russian military-industrial sector after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁷

Broader economic relations between the two countries are instead fairly limited, as Russia is not amongst Syria's major trading partners. Indeed, in 2010, Russian exports were estimated at approximately €840 million, and imports at not more than €30 million. Overall, this trade flow accounts for a mere 3 percent of Syria's global trade. Syria's principal trading partners are the European Union, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and China.⁸ Conversely, Syria accounts for less than 0.2 percent of total Russian trade.⁹

Economic relations between Russia and the Middle East are generally rather imbalanced, with only two Middle Eastern countries exporting to Russia (Egypt and Iran, accounting respectively for €203.9 million and €203.8 million, in 2010 - a mere 0.1 percent of total Russian imports). Russian exports to the region amounted to 3.2 percent of total its exports in 2010 with Iran in the lead (€2,531.3 million), followed by Egypt and Israel (respectively, €1,335.1 and €1,2729 million), Algeria (€961.9 million), Syria (€843.9 million), the UAE (€666.2 million), Morocco (€423.3 million), Tunisia (€329.7 million), Saudi Arabia (€226.4 million) and Lebanon (€174 million).¹⁰ These volumes do not include energy trade, but mainly comprise manufactured and industrial products.¹¹

From the above, we can infer that Russia's staunch support for the Al-Assad regime is unlikely to be due simply to economic factors, although the arms trade does play an important role. Other explanations can be found in the former Soviet and now Russian foreign policy in the Middle East and the on-going struggle against the United States for influence in this area.

3. The Soviet Union's/Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East

Russia's historic ties with the Middle East - including Qaddafi's Libya, post-independence Algeria, the Ba'ath regimes in the Levant and the theocratic regime in Tehran - go much deeper than economic relations. To understand how these partnerships developed, and thus understand which elements of Russia's foreign policy play an important role in supporting the Al-Assad regime, we must look back at American-Soviet relations during the Cold War. The ideological competition between the US and the USSR influenced the evolution of Arab regimes, since North African and Middle Eastern (MENA) countries were clearly allied with one superpower or the other. This so-called Arab Cold War was characterized by two distinct stages, the first, ideologically pitting Egypt against Saudi Arabia (backed by the USSR and the United States, respectively) and, the second, religiously contrasting Saudi Arabia and Iran

⁷ James O'Toole, "Billions at stake as Russia backs Syria", *CNN*, 10 February 2012, http://money.cnn.com/2012/02/09/news/international/russia_syria.

⁸ European Commission, *Syria: Trade Statistics*, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113451.htm>.

⁹ European Commission, *Russia: Trade Statistics*, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113440.htm>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Arms trade is not included in these figures.

(with the former still supported by the United States and the latter distancing itself from both the United States and the Soviet Union).¹² It thus seems that the Soviet Union chose its allies in these divides by default, including Syria after the rise to power of the Ba'ath party, trading with them to the best of its abilities.

The fall of the Berlin Wall left loose ends in three key countries in the Middle East: Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. At the same time, Russia's domestic and foreign policy were undergoing a transition in the 1990s, during which a series of events, including the Chechen Wars and the 1998 financial crisis paved the way for Putin's rise to power. Russian politicians spent the first half of the decade retreating from the international scene to nurse their country back to health. The early days of the Russian Federation's foreign policy were characterized by a long-sought *rapprochement* with Europe. When it became clear that the West would not adopt such a conciliatory position with the Russian Federation, and consequently began negotiations to integrate the Eastern European countries into NATO and the European Union, Russia's hopes for reconciliation on its terms were dashed. At this point, President Yeltsin's pro-Western approach, perceived as a sign of weakness *vis-à-vis* foreign powers, was discarded and Yevgeny Primakov was named Foreign Minister in 1996. In fact, Primakov promoted a double strategy of pragmatism and multipolarity, which has shaped Russia's foreign policy ever since.¹³ The principal aims of this strategy were rather similar to those advanced during the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union; in particular: "to maintain the unity and integrity of the Russian Federation; to enhance Moscow's influence in the bordering states of the former Soviet Republics; and to establish strategic alliances with states or in regions that bordered or were geographically close to the former Soviet Union so as to block possible US entry into those regions."¹⁴

Russia's comeback on the international scene was in line with this approach. In the Middle East, the Federation reclaimed its traditional allies and those countries defined as "rogue states" and shunned by the United States, in particular, Iran, Iraq and Libya.¹⁵ Hence, the Middle East and especially the Levant, perceived to lie on the margins of Russia's 'near abroad', could either pose greater threats to the porous borders of the Federation or be a fertile terrain for its foreign missions. Here, pragmatism meant that no action would be taken to oppose the United States directly. Indeed, with the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia recovered its relations with Israel after 40 years of impasse.¹⁶ Similarly, Russia's multipolarity policy resulted in stronger relations with Iran.¹⁷ In Syria, Russia maintained traditional trade and political relations, with both countries supporting the Western anti-Iraq alliance of 1990.¹⁸

¹² Indeed, Iran had the potential to become a new key partner of the USSR, had it not been for the violent and long war against Iraq, a historic Soviet ally.

¹³ Traditionally, the Soviet Union's foreign policy has been identified as a "zero-sum game", in which what is beneficial for the West, must be disadvantageous for the USSR.

¹⁴ Talal Nizameddin, "Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon: Russia and the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah Nexus", in *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (July 2008), p. 478.

¹⁵ Alain Gresh, "Russia's Return to the Middle East", in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 28, No 1 (Autumn 1998), p. 69.

¹⁶ Relations between the two countries quickly deteriorated after the 1956 Suez Crisis, which pitted Egypt against Israel, France and Britain over the nationalization of the Suez Canal.

¹⁷ Alain Gresh, "Russia's Return to the Middle East", cit., p. 72. Russian-Iranian trade relations in the 1990s focused mainly on the construction of the highly controversial Bushehr nuclear power plant, where

Thus, Russia's multipolar-pragmatist foreign policy approach meant support for its traditional ally. By the same token, supporting the Al-Assad regime today appears to be a pragmatic choice because, although it is isolating Russia on the international political scene, it is strengthening the state's role at the national level. Likewise, Russia's UN Security Council vetoes may be perceived as part of a multipolar policy, aimed at establishing that the West does not set the world's priorities and principles by itself.¹⁹

A similar behaviour on Russia's part may be observed in the Security Council in April 2003, when Russia stated that a war in Iraq would be illegitimate without United Nations approval. Multiple reasons lay behind this decision, the most important of which was Russia's mistrust of international intervention in breach of state sovereignty. In this case, Putin adopted a pragmatic attitude, waiting for European countries to pronounce themselves, and then joining France in its veto in the Security Council, thus shielding Russia from the possible repercussions of direct opposition to the United States.²⁰ In the case of Iraq, Russia's behaviour on the international scene was perceived as a sign of strength both domestically and in those European countries that opposed the war, and some believe that this initially motivated Russia's support for the Syrian regime - especially since it came right after its abstention in the Security Council vote that led to the much contested military intervention in Qaddafi's Libya.

With hindsight, Russia's standoff against the other permanent Security Council members on the Syrian crisis of 2011-2012 can largely be seen as related to Resolution 1973 (2011), which approved the No-Fly Zone in Libya during the struggle between the rebels and the Qaddafi regime. At that time, the Federation deemed that the international community had overstepped the UN's mandate by aiding the rebel forces in toppling Qaddafi. As a result, Russia is particularly prudent today in its concessions to the other P-4. As noted above, Russia has two main aims when using its veto power in the Security Council: 1) to promote an international environment to the Federation's liking,²¹ consequently, when a resolution threatens this environment, Russia blocks it; and 2) to reinforce its international status, deemed necessary to maintain legitimacy among the population. The lesson drawn from Russia's abstention, along with that of China, on the vote against Qaddafi's regime, was that "once a Security Council resolution authorising the use of force has been passed, Moscow cannot do much to control or affect the actions of the U.S. and its allies when they take the lead in implementing such a resolution."²² In light of this, it appears that Russia cannot be persuaded to legitimize, through the UN, even mere economic sanctions against the Al-Assad regime. Yet, while the 2003 UN blockade on the war in Iraq resulted in general praise, Russia's support for the Al-Assad regime in the Security

Iran is accused of enriching uranium at non-IAEA approved levels. Yet, most important was the nature of their political alliance on the international scene.

¹⁸ Marie Mendras, "L'impuissance russe devant la chute des dictatures", in *L'ENA hors les murs*, No. 414 (septembre 2011), p. 25-26.

¹⁹ Ellen Barry, "For Putin, Principle vs. Practicality on Syria", in *The New York Times*, 5 July 2012, p. A7, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/05/world/europe/putin-tested-on-principles-and-practicality-in-syria.html>.

²⁰ Marie Mendras, "Les ambiguïtés de la Russie", in *Esprit*, No. 294 (mai 2003), p. 33-39.

²¹ Mark N. Katz, "Russia's Security Council Diplomacy and the Middle East", in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 114 (4 June 2012), p. 5-7, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-114-5-7.pdf>.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Council has been regarded as the main reason for weak international engagement in this crisis, thus making the United Nations responsible for the “blood of [...] young children” slain in Syria.²³

The above paragraphs help understand the perceived international context in which Russia's foreign policy unfolds: an international system allegedly dominated by pragmatism and multipolarity, with Russia playing an important role in it. Yet, a series of questions concerning the Federation's support for the Al-Assad regime remain. Above all, it is unclear whether Moscow is willing to sacrifice much of its international credibility to oppose Western policies in the MENA region. To grasp this reality, a look must be taken at the domestic factors motivating this choice.

4. Russia's domestic drivers underpinning support for the Al-Assad regime

All countries keep a close eye on national politics when operating in the international arena. Russia is no exception. Russian foreign policy in the hands of President Putin is a tool for legitimizing domestic action and acquiring prestige.²⁴ By promoting the image of a strong Russia abroad, Putin aims to maintain power over the population at home. In fact, opinion polls conducted in Russia during the Security Council vote on Libya showed that, with respect to foreign policy, the population tends to agree with the government: over 60% of the respondents believed that the establishment of the No-Fly Zone was wrong because aerial attacks constituted an “interference in Libya's internal affairs and an aggression against a sovereign nation.”²⁵ Furthermore, when asked if they favoured Putin's condemnation of the resolution, or Medvedev's support for it, over 50% replied that they preferred Putin's position. Finally, when asked what spurred the events of the Arab Spring, 27% of the respondents replied that it consisted of “popular revolutions against corrupt despotic regimes.”²⁶

When, on 4 February 2012, Russia vetoed yet another resolution against the Al-Assad regime, it arguably did so in response to the thousands of people who had rallied in Moscow to protest against the irregularities of the presidential elections.²⁷ The veto was a message from the élite to the demonstrators that no legitimacy would be granted to a people opposing their government, in Syria or elsewhere. Indeed, the nature of the Russian protests is an important piece of the puzzle in understanding the Federation's foreign policy in Syria. The elites are aware that the demonstrators' claims in Russia do

²³ Statement by UK Prime Minister David Cameron to the 67th Session of the UN General Assembly, 26 September 2012, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=PressS&id=816006082>.

²⁴ Since Putin's rise to power in 2000, domestic policies and reforms have become more centralized, and it is fair to assume that the President maintained strict control of national politics and policy-making. The four-year period of Medvedev presidential mandate is perceived by many academics as an interval in which Putin set policies as Prime Minister and supervised his dauphin's work.

²⁵ See the opinion poll conducted by the Levada Center: “Russian Public Opinion on the War in Libya”, in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 98 (6 July 2011), p. 6-8, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-98.pdf>.

²⁶ “Russian Public Opinion on Unrest in the Arab World”, in *Russian Analytical Digest*, cit., p. 9.

²⁷ Inna Lazareva, *Bear Trap: Russia's self-defeating Middle East policy*, London, Henry Jackson Society Russia Studies Center, 25 July 2012, p. 15, <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/HJS-Bear-Trap5.pdf>.

not differ from those of the Syrian population: democracy, free and fair elections, transparency and accountability. The related issue of freedom of speech resulted in similar episodes in the two countries. Indeed, both the imprisonment of children in Dera'a and the Pussy Riots trial in Russia are manifestations of the regimes' intolerance towards any form of political opposition.

Behind the Russian and Syrian protests lie some similarities in the two countries' economic structures: the expansion of crony capitalist networks, through which the presidents exploit close relationships with business oligarchies, and distribute wealth to specific sectors of society, purposely excluding others. For example, in Russia, with the 2010 inauguration of the Northern Caucasus Federal District, then President Medvedev nominated as Presidential Envoy the businessman Alexander Khloponin, former governor of a Siberian district, who had close ties with both Medvedev and Putin.²⁸ In Syria, the Assad regime has remained in power for almost 50 years thanks to political and economic benefits granted to the Alawi and other religious minorities. These similarities in economic structures are largely due to the fact that natural resources constitute the main source of wealth in both countries. Indeed, in Syria oil accounts for 64% of all exports, while in Russia gas accounts for exactly the same percentage of exports.²⁹

Another parallel between the two regimes is their rather negative approach towards political Islam. Russia has tried to redefine its relationship with Islam after the fall of the Soviet Union. In post-Soviet Russia, the authorities made it a priority to establish control over Islam, by demanding that Muslims remain loyal to the State, by subordinating the Muslim leadership to the State, and by overseeing political-religious organisations.³⁰ Moscow has adopted a dual policy towards Islam: it has collaborated with religious elements in the country on a series of social issues, such as drugs and HIV prevention, while monitoring and identifying those sectors deemed Islamist, and thus dangerous. Hence, the wars in Chechnya in the 1990s became Russia's version of the "war on terror", before this concept was coined by the United States after the attacks of 9/11. The Federation's repeated crackdowns in Chechnya, officially carried out to subjugate Islamist terrorists to the state, but in reality intended to suppress any form of political opposition or separatist movement, are similar in nature to the 1982 Hama Massacre and the current struggle in Syria. In both cases, the Russian and Syrian regimes supported one another.³¹

²⁸ "Background People: Khloponin, Alexander Gennadyevich", in *Russia Profile*, 30 September 2010, http://russiaprofile.org/bg_people/resources_whoiswho_alphabet_K_khloponin.html.

²⁹ International Trade Centre, *Trade Competitiveness Map: Trade performance HS* (Russian Federation & Syrian Arab Republic), http://legacy.intracen.org/appli1/TradeCom/TP_TP_CI.aspx.

³⁰ Aleksei Malashenko, "Islam and the State in Russia", in *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 44 (2 July 2008), p. 2, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/publications/pdfs/RAD-44.pdf>.

³¹ When Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, Bashar Al-Assad supported Moscow by claiming that Russia was acting as a "guarantor of peace" in the Caucasus. Sergey Markedonov, "Russia in the Islamic World", in *The National Interest*, 27 June 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/russia-the-islamic-world-7126>.

Conclusion

There are three recurring leitmotifs in Russia's foreign policy towards Syria. First, Russia's relations with the Syrian Arab Republic, dating back to the Cold War, represent an important basis for developing strategic ambitions in the Levant and the broader Middle Eastern region. Second, Moscow's unrelenting stance in the UN Security Council is a means of opposing the United States and its use of force in violation of state sovereignty, as was the case in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. Finally, this keen interest in state sovereignty reflects the Federation's current domestic situation, with the government challenged by rallies in opposition to Putin's re-election and the controversial Pussy Riot case.

These elements are all-important in determining Russia's stance towards the Syrian opposition movement. However, while the first two elements can be considered as facilitating conditions, being linked to the international economic and political framework in which the Syrian conflict evolves, it is the drivers related to the Russian domestic situation that represent the single most important explanation of Moscow's stance towards Syria. Indeed, the similarities between the initial stages of the Syrian uprising and the March protests in Moscow, combined with the similar economic structures of the two countries, constitute a source of concern for the Russian political elite, who fears an international intervention into their own domestic affairs.

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