

Ways Out of Russia's Isolation on Syria

By [Margarete Klein](#)

March 29, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

Russia is a key actor in the Syrian crisis because of its bilateral leverage on Damascus and its veto power in the United Nations Security Council. Despite its rhetorical assertions, Moscow has acted as a protector for President Bashar Assad and counterbalanced all efforts to increase pressure on Damascus in the Security Council. Then, on March 20, Russia backed a UN Security Council statement that calls on Assad to implement envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan and, should Assad refuse, threatens to adopt "further measures."

It appears that Russia's support of this statement stems from its acknowledgment that the current balancing act of its Syria policy is becoming increasingly difficult. Russia is attempting to ensure the survival of its most important political partner in the region without being drawn into the maelstrom of the increasing self-isolation of the Syrian regime and without further damaging its long-term interests in the region.

The destructive impact of this balancing act is threefold. First, by continuing to block any meaningful action by the UN Security Council, Russia is undermining its most important tool of influence in international politics. In effect, this is leading to the search for possible

solutions to be pursued outside of this arena — solutions without Russian veto-power — as is already occurring through the "Friends of Syria," a group comprising dozens of nations that support the Syrian opposition and will hold talks Sunday in Turkey to plan for political change in the country.

Second, Russia is isolating itself regionally. The more that key regional actors — including Turkey, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council — distance themselves from Assad, the more Russia as a perceived protector of Assad risks the foundations of its Middle East policy — building good relations with all local players and establishing a long-term image as "honest broker" in the region.

Finally, as prospects for the survival of Assad's regime diminish, Russia also risks isolation in Syria itself as it is increasingly losing credibility vis-à-vis the Syrian opposition.

The Russian leadership is beginning to realize the damage it is creating for its own long-term interests through its current position on Syria. It has begun to seek stronger coordination with Arab states with some success, as suggested by the five-point plan with Russia and the Arab League for resolving the Syrian crisis on March 10. Furthermore, the Russian Foreign Ministry invited members of the Syrian opposition to Russia in November 2011 and has begun to criticize Assad more openly and firmly in recent weeks. Moscow's support of Annan's mission and the Security Council statement are clearly part of this new realization.

Even if these steps do not signal a fundamental shift in Russia's Syria policy but merely a tactical step in damage limitation, it does pose a window of opportunity for Western and Arab states to engage Russia and find a consorted solution to the Syrian crisis. This is additionally supported by the end of the presidential election campaign in Russia that had been marked by a strong anti-Western and superpower rhetoric and a more balanced view of the Syrian opposition being accepted among Western states (including acknowledgement of human rights abuses and Islamic influences). As a result, we are witnessing a good opportunity to bridge existing perceptions on both sides of the Syrian crisis.

One decisive factor in this will be to what extent Russia feels that its own interests are respected in attempts by Western and Arab states to find a common solution. It is important to keep in mind that President-elect Vladimir Putin's foreign-policy motives are less ideological but rather based on pragmatic and realistic concerns. Syria is one of Russia's most important weapons industry clients, the Russian naval base in Tartus is home to the only remaining naval base from the Soviet era outside post-Soviet territory, and Syria is viewed by Russia as one of the last bastions of anti-American dominance in the region. Credible assurances provided by the Syrian opposition that it will observe existing contracts with Russia — guaranteeing Russian economic and military interests — in the case of regime change in Damascus would be one strong factor in assuring Russia that its interests are being respected, as would an offer by the Gulf monarchies to expand political and economic relations with Russia.

Furthermore, in order to assure Moscow's support, any way to find a solution to the Syrian crisis will need to rest primarily on a purely diplomatic approach.

Military intervention would represent a red line for Russia out of principle — but also due to experiences in the Libyan crisis, where a no-fly zone was transformed into an operation of regime change — and would therefore undermine any chance of stronger Russian support.

Margarete Klein is a senior associate with the Berlin-based German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/03/29/ways-out-of-russias-isolation-on-syria-a13692>