

Russia Shouldn't Shield Syria's Chemical Weapons

By [Alexander Golts](#)

July 30, 2012



At some point, President Vladimir Putin concluded that supporting the dictatorial regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad would be advantageous for Russia's foreign policy. What's more, it would require little or no investment on the Kremlin's part. All that was required was to veto United Nations Security Council resolutions put forward by Western states and make meaningless statements about how the warring sides in the Syrian conflict must be brought to the negotiating table to work out a peaceful solution to the de facto civil war.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin continued to deliver weapons to Assad, claiming that these were old contracts that Moscow was obliged to fulfill. These orders including attack helicopters that would not be used against civilians or the rebels, we were told.

Russian leaders also warned that the West was itching to bomb Syria under a similar pretext that it used to intervene in Libya. But Moscow is determined to not let this happen. According to the Kremlin's thinking, supporting Assad and opposing the United States on Syria will increase Russia's authority and return the country to the role of a major global player.

The problem with this approach is that Moscow is attempting to defend a brutal, dictatorial regime that acts impulsively and unpredictably. Two weeks ago, a senior Syrian Foreign Ministry official tried to refute the notion that Assad was prepared to use chemical weapons against his opponents. Instead, the official clarified that chemical weapons would be used only against "foreign aggressors."

In a rush to clarify its position, Syria's Foreign Ministry had overlooked the fact that the country had never admitted to having chemical weapons in the first place. In addition, Damascus had refused to sign the international convention that prohibits the development and use of chemical weapons and requires the destruction of current stockpiles. Syria argued that its refusal was simply a rhetorical response to Israel's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968. Now, the Assad regime has inadvertently admitted that it does, in fact, own chemical weapons.

Based on intelligence reports, foreign military experts are convinced that Syria has huge stockpiles of chemical weapons. At a minimum, there are four chemical weapons factories in As-Safir, Homs, Hama and Latakia that together are capable of producing hundreds of tons of sarin and even binary chemical agents every year. Enormous stockpiles of chemical weapons are located in Khan Abu Shamat, near Damascus and Homs. Hundreds of bombs and artillery shells are already loaded with chemical weapons and stationed at dozens of military bases.

What's more, Western intelligence agencies claim that Syria has tactical missiles loaded with deadly chemical agents that can reach targets as far as 500 kilometers away. Western governments are worried that terrorists might obtain even a tiny fraction of Syria's stockpiles of chemical agents and their delivery systems. In addition, the most intense fighting between government troops and opposition forces is taking place near Syria's chemical weapons plants and storage facilities.

By announcing the existence of chemical weapons and the willingness to use them against "foreign aggressors," Damascus has provoked the West and given it a *casus belli*, whether it intended to do so or not.

Most interesting has been Russia's reaction to this provocation. Shocked into silence for two days after Syria's official position on chemical weapons became known to the world, the Foreign Ministry issued another meaningless statement: "The Russian side believes that the Syrian authorities will continue to strictly adhere to their international obligations."

In other words, Moscow is pretending that Syria never admitted to anything. Not to be outdone, the General Staff issued a statement from an unidentified source assuring journalists that Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons are not really as large as Western countries have claimed.

If the source at the General Staff was suggesting that Syria's chemical weapons are unlikely to cause serious harm to U.S. and NATO troops, he was actually correct. The world's leading powers abandoned the production of chemical warfare agents not so much because of their deadly nature but because they are ineffective. Even when a chemical weapon hits its target, the area it affects is relatively small.

In contrast, modern conventional weapons are generally much more powerful and destructive. Chemical weapons have become a sort of "poor man's nuclear bomb," a deterrent of last resort in the confrontation with the West. But Western militaries possess the equipment and uniforms to protect against the effects of chemical weapons. In addition, Western forces can in most cases destroy enemy aircraft, artillery batteries and rocket launchers carrying chemical weapons before they can launch a strike. Although chemical weapons are not a real threat to Western forces, they could kill thousands of civilians.

If Damascus does use chemical weapons against its own people, what will happen to the reputation of Russia, a longtime and loyal ally of Assad? Most likely, Russia would become a global outcast, fully joining the ranks of North Korea, Iran and Belarus. At that point, Putin would have a difficult time blaming the ostracism on the U.S. State Department.

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