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The Skies Above Damascus

By Richard Lourie

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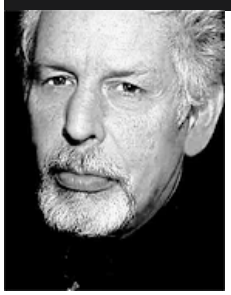
Richard Lourie

When U.S. President Barack Obama dispatched his national security adviser, Tom Donilon, in March 2012 to confer with the newly re-elected President Vladimir Putin, Putin's first question was: "When are you going to start bombing Syria?" That's still very much the question today, but there is also the question of what the Syrian crisis will do to Russia's prestige and power. Moscow could yet prove to be one of the big losers.

By siding with child-gasser, Syrian President Bashar Assad, Russia runs the risk of becoming a moral pariah. That, in turn, will accelerate the brain drain and capital flight. The already

disaffected middle class will become increasingly alienated. Russia's support for Assad is hardly the best advertisement for foreign investors. What's more, Chechen militants who are fighting alongside the Syrian rebels will now have one more reason to disrupt the Winter Olympics in Sochi in early 2014.

U.S.-Russian relations, already quite chilly, could go into a state of deep freeze. Obama's comparison of Putin to a bored schoolboy in the back of the classroom reportedly incensed Putin. And Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin's remark about the U.S. as a "monkey playing with a grenade" referred to the U.S.'s careless adventurism, while it was difficult to not catch the racist undertone. At least Obama's remark was about the content of Putin's character.

But it isn't U.S. carelessness that worries Putin. It's the drive for hegemony.

There is a story about a U.S. general apologizing to a Japanese general for using atomic bombs at the end of World War II. "Don't be silly," answers the Japanese general. "If we had the A-bomb, we would have dropped it on you."

Given his mindset, Putin genuinely believes that the U.S. is seeking to establish hegemony everywhere from Kiev to Cairo. If Russia had ended up the world's one-and-only superpower, that's exactly what he would be doing. Why else have all that power?

Russia's value as an ally to Syria is said to be more political than military. Being able to veto a Security Council resolution, the argument goes, is worth more than missiles and MiG fighter jets. Russia can force the U.S. to act alone but it will not reduce the number of U.S. missiles that will rain down on Syria. The current delays help the Syrians move some troops and equipment to safer places, but you can't hide bridges, television towers, air fields, roads and rail lines.

Russia's political value ends as soon as the raids begin. What then will count is the performance of the Russian weapons that Syria has been buying for many years. Those weapons may include the formidable S-300 anti-missile system, which can track 100 incoming missiles and engage a dozen. Kommersant recently reported that Russia had not yet delivered the four S-300 systems that Syria had contracted for $1 billion because there was no payment. On the other hand, Russia Beyond the Headlines, a newspaper supplement linked to the Kremlin, recently quoted a "Moscow military source" as saying that although Russia had not delivered those systems, "Belarus or China could have done so tacitly in 2010-11."

So there are any number of questions:

Do the Syrians have S-300 anti-missile systems or knockoffs? If so, will they deploy their billion-dollar investment against the U.S.? Will the S-300 systems prove as formidable as their reputation, or will the Russian arms industry be dealt a serious blow?

The answers to all these questions will soon be writ large in the skies above Damascus.

Richard Lourie is the author of "Sakharov: A Biography" and "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin."

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