

Russia's Diplomatic Flourish in the Middle East

By [Dmitry Trenin](#)

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The problem President Vladimir Putin has faced is how to convince the West that Russia means business when it offers a solution to the chemical weapons issue. After all, for well over a decade Russia has been a naysayer and spoiler, either protesting against U.S. military interventions or seeking to obstruct Washington's policies. Why has Russia now stepped forward and offered an alternative solution, tentatively accepted both by Damascus and the Americans?

By reaching out to U.S. President Barack Obama at the Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg, Putin was hardly seeking either to humiliate Obama or to save him. The personal relationship between the two leaders is missing — it is all business. In offering his plan to Obama, Putin had important interests in mind.

The Russian leader's short-term goal was to prevent U.S. military strikes against Damascus. Putin admitted to having been surprised by the vote in the British Parliament ruling out participation in U.S.-led attacks. He must have been no less impressed by Obama's decision

to turn to Congress for approval of military action. Watching the House of Representatives debate, he saw that Obama stood a good chance of getting a "no" from Congress.

By coming up with his initiative, the Russian president was seeking to strengthen the hand of those in the United States who opposed military action in Syria.

Putin also has a long-term goal. It is to turn the tide in U.S. foreign policy by supporting the neo-isolationist trend in American politics against the interventionists, who have prevailed since the mid-1990s.

Putin understood that both goals were ambitious enough to warrant his direct engagement. Rather than leaving the job to Foreign Minister Sergei

Lavrov, Putin assumed personal responsibility for the negotiations leading to the Syrian chemical disarmament plan.

He realized that Russia had to first deliver Syrian President Bashar Assad, and then to make sure that the Syrians stuck to the terms of the deal. He knew he was taking a big risk, but letting things run their course threatened to produce the outcome in Syria that Russia feared: a new lease of life for U.S. interventionism and the triumph of the jihadi groups on the ground.

In making his offer to Damascus, Putin counted on Assad's rationality. For the Syrian president, chemical weapons were the only weapons of mass destruction in his arsenal. They could only function as a credible deterrent against Israel, or the U.S., should those countries consider a ground invasion. Trading the weapons for U.S. nonintervention, implicitly guaranteed by Russia, must have appeared as a good bargain to Assad as he faced the prospect of U.S. airstrikes. By going along with the Putin plan, Assad would be saving his rule in Damascus and quite possibly his own life.

Putin has never considered Assad to be Russia's ally, whatever the Western, Arab and Israeli media write. He knows enough about Middle Eastern politics not to be complacent. A U.S. threat helps keep Assad rational, but it is not enough. Hence, Russia's agreement to the United Nations Security Council resolution on the Syrian chemical disarmament plan that makes reference to Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which allows the international community the use of force. Moscow only wants to make sure that such use is not automatic and that Russia will have a final say in the decision making.

Syria's chemical weapons arsenal needs to be brought under international control before being removed and eliminated. Having already destroyed most of the Soviet Union's chemical weapons, Russia is prepared to engage on the ground in Syria. A decade after withdrawing from United Nations peacekeeping operations in the Balkans, Putin has indicated the possibility of sending Russian troops on a UN mission to the Middle East.

In May, as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Lavrov came up with an agreement in Moscow to work towards political settlement in Syria — Geneva II — Putin thought he had Obama committed to something like "Dayton for two," a more balanced version of the U.S.-led process which ended the Bosnian war in 1995.

The Russians and the United States would both push the Syrian side, kicking and screaming,

toward a ceasefire and a compromise political settlement. The leadership in Washington, however, was still thinking in terms of Moscow helping it ease Assad out of power.

Now, the U.S.-Russian chemical weapons disarmament deal for Syria logically leads to the need to establish local ceasefires and to advance to a political settlement. Crucially, Moscow and Washington are leading the peace process on an equal basis.

For Putin, Syria has always been more than just Syria. He aims at a world order in which the Security Council's five permanent members — not the U.S. alone or with its allies — decide on major international issues pertaining to war and peace. It is a tall order.

Putin knows he may fail, but he evidently believes that the risk is worth taking.

Dmitry Trenin is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. This piece was originally published in "The World Today," the bimonthly magazine of Chatham House.

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