

# Why Bashar Assad Is Staying

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As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry meet in Paris in an attempt to hammer out peace terms for the Syrian conflict, one could be forgiven for wondering if Russia would ever allow Syrian President Bashar Assad to be removed from power after his alleged use of chemical weapons on his own citizens. To answer this question, one must look to history. In fact, it is fascinating that the West could even believe it possible that Russia would allow regime change in Damascus. All one has to do is study the Russian Empire's past to realize Moscow would never allow Assad to be overthrown.

Russia has coveted access to the Mediterranean Sea for centuries, since Ivan the Terrible's reign. It was said that the third Holy Roman Empire based in Moscow was destined to conquer the Ottoman Muslim capital and restore Christian rule to the ancient city. Successive tsars openly desired the militarily strategic Bosphorus, or Turkish Straits, from Peter the Great to Tsar Nicholas in World War I. In fact, secret Russian historical documents have recently been released that suggest the desire to conquer Constantinople was the real cause for the start of WWI. Russian control would allow the Russian navy freedom from the landlocked Black Sea and the access to the Mediterranean beyond. Today, the Islamic state of Turkey

controls the straits of the Bosphorus and unfortunately for Russia, is also a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; hence Russian support of the current Assad regime in Syria.

The Syrian port of Tartus has been used by Russian forces since the Soviet Union gained access to the facility in 1971. The deep-water port can handle Russian nuclear submarines and is extremely important to the Kremlin militarily and commercially. Access to Tartus allows Russia to resupply its vessels in the Mediterranean and prevents them from having to return to Black Sea facilities. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia forgave most of Syria's debt, built up from weapons purchases over several decades, in order to maintain access to Tartus for the Russian navy. Currently Russia is expanding the facility for larger ships and other operational capabilities.

Although Russian manufacturing is slowly returning, Russia still mainly produces very reliable and capable weapon systems. Syria is a major client and an important source of revenue for Russian arms manufacturers. Although the area is changing as the U.S. abandons long-term allies in the region, Syria still remains the sole vehicle for Russian influence in the Mediterranean.

President Vladimir Putin and his administration understand how to practice realpolitik and work the international chessboard in Russia's favor. All you have to do is look to Putin's deft handling of the Syrian chemical weapons issue to see evidence of this fact. While U.S. President Barack Obama was wringing his hands regarding military force in Syria due to the chemical weapons issue, Kerry casually mentioned that force would not be used if Syria destroyed its weapons of mass destruction. Putin seized on this opportunity to forever prevent the use of American military power against Russia's protectorate. It was a fine example of geopolitical savvy. Russia continues to protect Assad ahead of the peace talks scheduled in Geneva and has even suggested bringing Syria's other benefactor, Iran, into the negotiations. The U.S. has been outmaneuvered.

Russia also has a historical problem of Islamic terrorism from its early days of fighting the Ottoman Empire, which carries through to its present Chechen problem and beyond. The recent bombings in Volgograd prior to the Sochi Winter Olympics are evidence of this festering problem. The rise of Sunni extremist forces in Iraq and throughout the Middle East keeps the Kremlin up at night. Islamic terrorist attacks upend the Kremlin's carefully-crafted image of a stable Russia. Moscow desperately does not want to see the forces of al-Qaida take over in Syria, cutting off their access to a warm water port and possibly threatening other Russian interests in the region.

The bottom line is that historical ambitions, commercial interests and security concerns will prevent Russia from ever allowing the Assad regime to be removed from power. In fact, expect Russia to use the current conflict and negotiations for peace to cement Russian goals in the region and to further the influence of Putin's resurgent Russian Empire. While the West stumbles from a lack of leadership, Russia will take advantage and Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future.

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

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