



Russia and Syria - The odd couple

by Florence Gaub and Nicu Popescu

As the world awaits a possible military strike - led by the US - on Syria, the leaders of the G20 are gathering for their annual summit in St Petersburg. This time round, the issue of war is likely to overshadow discussions on the economy, finance and trade, with the meetings and media platforms of the summit being used to exchange arguments over Syria between advocates of military action and the dwindling group of friends of Bashar al-Assad.

Some Western leaders will no doubt try to persuade President Putin to alter his hitherto obstructive stance on Syria. In public, they are likely to make appeals on humanitarian grounds, arguing that the use of chemical weapons against a civilian population cannot go unpunished. In private, they will appeal directly to Russia's rational self-interest and urge Moscow to come down on the right side of history in the eyes of the Arab world. In all likelihood, Russia will respond with lectures on the sanctity of international law, state sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of others. As a result of these two seemingly unbridgeable positions, it may well become another dialogue of the deaf.

The use of chemical weapons in Syria may have emboldened some countries in the West to take a more pro-active stance on Syria, but it does not seem to have had any real impact on the Russian standpoint. Despite frequent claims to the contrary, Russian support for Assad is not primarily motivated by the interests of arms dealers, the desire to hold on to its military base in Tartus or a cynical attempt to

simply antagonise the West. Although driven by all of these concerns to varying degrees, Russian support for Syria is mainly rooted in the historical relationship of the two countries and in respective domestic political developments of the last few decades. Consequently, appeals to either humanitarian sympathies or naked interests are highly unlikely to change the Russian position.

Where it all began

By the current standards of fast-changing international political (re)alignments, the Russia-Syria special relationship is reasonably longstanding. Formally beginning in 1971, following the *coup d'état* of Hafez al-Assad, father of the current Syrian president, the relationship was originally driven by Syria's need for weapons and allies. The bonds between the two nations were then further reinforced when the Soviet Union lost its main Arab ally - Egypt - in 1976. But Syria was never a Soviet proxy: the two states did not see eye to eye on certain policy issues - such as the Palestinian problem or the Iran-Iraq war - and Syria retained its Baathist ideology and non-alignment stance without embracing communism.

Although the end of the Cold War reduced the strategic significance of the Russia-Syria partnership, the relationship was re-launched after both President Putin and President Bashar al-Assad took office in 2000 and, more importantly, when Russia

began to re-assert itself on the global stage towards the middle of the last decade. When Putin closed down Russia's military bases in Vietnam and Cuba at the beginning of his presidency, the puny, four-person-strong Russian military supply base in Tartus, consisting of eleven buildings and two 100m piers, became the only Russian military outpost outside of the post-Soviet space. The base was one of the symbols of continued diplomatic and military ties that, although not central to either country, continued to fuel their low-cost diplomatic partnership - as demonstrated by Syria's support for Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 for example.

However, with the outbreak of civil war in Syria and the perpetration of repeated atrocities by various parties, this almost dormant partnership was quickly pushed into the limelight of global politics.

Elective affinities

Continued Russian support for Assad has its roots in Russia's recent history and politics rather than in burning Middle Eastern realities. Both Russia and Syria are multi-ethnic and multi-religious entities, and both consider themselves to have incurred major territorial losses during their birth as states. Moscow's elite are in agreement that the disintegration of the USSR was a national catastrophe, while Syrian regime supporters generally subscribe to the idea of Syria as an 'amputated' nation, referring to the loss of territories following the aborted attempt to create the Arab Kingdom of Syria in 1920, and the military withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005. Both states therefore mourn the loss of a former central role within larger political constructs. This self-perception is reflected in the difficult relations both states have with their smaller neighbours – be it Ukraine and Georgia, or Jordan and Lebanon – which often feel threatened by expansionist rhetoric emanating from Moscow or Damascus.

Russian and Syrian elites also share the view that the best (if not only) way to manage their multi-ethnic societies is through strong, centralised political regimes. In the minds of the establishment in both countries, street politics or protest movements against the government have no place in the current system, and popular revolutions need to be crushed before they cause the total implosion of the state. They are also firmly of the belief that the revolutions in Ukraine and Egypt, and the overthrow of Qaddafi in Libya only led to a weakening of those respective states. Recent events in Egypt – where many of the anti-Mubarak protesters ended up siding with the generals against the Muslim Brotherhood – also

seemed to confirm what Moscow and Damascus have believed since day one of the uprisings.

By the same logic, both Syria and Russia perceive their statehood to be threatened by Sunni Islamic radicalism. Although neither Assad nor Putin are exactly secularists (Assad relies on his Alawi sect to form the core of his political regime, while Putin relies on the Russian Orthodox Church to shore up his legitimacy), both think of themselves as bulwarks of moderate secularism against Sunni fanaticism. The presence of Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, amongst the rebel groups feeds the notion that the Syrian regime is under assault by radical Islamists rather than a population clamoring for reform. Instances like the kidnapping in Aleppo of two archbishops (belonging to the Syrian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox churches) allegedly by north Caucasian/Chechen jihadists, also add to the feeling that both Russia and Syria are pitted against a common enemy.

In a similar vein, fears of foreign conspiracies also provide a common basis for the worldviews of the two countries, with both Moscow and Damascus of the belief that Western rhetoric on human rights and the responsibility to protect is merely a thinly veiled excuse to meddle in their domestic affairs and weaken their authority.

Lastly, both states adopt similar approaches to dealing with challenges should authoritarian stability not be enough. The brutal crushing of uprisings in Hama in 1982 and in Grozny in the early 2000s with heavy artillery and aerial attacks has cultivated a belief that a military response is an appropriate method of dealing with internal unrest. It is precisely this recent history, however, that makes Russian insistence on abiding by international law when addressing the situation in Syria appear somewhat hollow.

Indeed, a level of affinity does exist between Moscow and Damascus and the two governments do share certain (geo)political instincts. This is, however, hardly tantamount to an alliance. Russia is not a patron of Syria and its support for Assad is mainly confined to low-cost diplomacy, international lobbying and limited supplies of weaponry. It costs Russia little to follow its instincts and beliefs on Syria, and as such its policy is unlikely to change. This only makes it more likely that the rest of the world will simply stop trying and instead begin to define their policy on Syria without Russia in mind.

Florence Gaub and Nicu Popescu are Senior Analysts at the EUISS.

