

US Attack on Syria: Why Russia is on the Right Side

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Moscow's calibrated response to developments in the West Asian country stems from the realisation that it stands to gain from whatever course the U.S. adopts

"In a race across a minefield it is wise to let other runners overtake you," quipped a Russian Middle East expert explaining why Moscow adopted a low-key attitude to the rapidly escalating Syria crisis.

The comment pretty accurately captured Moscow's stand. Russia has vehemently protested U.S. plans to attack Syria, but has also made it clear that it was not going to war with the West over the Middle East country.

Russia of course is no match for the erstwhile Soviet Union. But Moscow has rendered Syria crucial diplomatic and military support since the outbreak of civil strife in the country. It has vetoed all western resolutions in the U.N. Security Council condemning the Syrian government.

Russia, which has been the main source of weapons for Syria since 1973, has stepped up its supplies in the past two years.

"Russia has done all it could to arm Syria," said Ruslan Pukhov, Director of the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) military analysis think tank.

In his interview to the Russian daily *Izvestia* last week, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad confirmed that Russia was honouring "all contracts" it had signed with Syria.

"Russia continues to supply Syria with what it requires to defend itself and its people," the Syrian leader said.

At the same time, the Kremlin's response to U.S. threats to attack Syria has been distinctly measured.

It took President Vladimir Putin 10 days to comment on the U.S. threat to punish Syria for the reported chemical attack near Damascus on August 21. He rubbished U.S. claims that the Syrian government was behind the attack and warned the U.S. not to jump the gun and commit another "mistake" by attacking Syria. But when asked what Russia would do if the U.S. intervened, he just said that this would be "very sad."

Stands to gain

Experts say that Moscow's calibrated reaction largely stems from realisation that U.S. President Barack Obama has got trapped into his own rhetoric about "red lines," and whatever he does now will play into Russia's hands.

"Russia doesn't have to do anything, just sit back and relax, and we'll end up the winning side," said Prof. Georgy Mirsky of the Moscow Institute of World Economy and International Relations.

Moscow stands to gain whatever course Mr. Obama takes, experts said.

"If Obama attacks Syria he will be seen fighting on the side of al-Qaeda, whose militants make up a third of the opposition forces, even according to U.S. military commanders," said analyst Yulia Latynyna.

If the U.S. attack is "limited" and "narrow," as Mr. Obama has declared, it may even strengthen President Assad who will be able to say he has stood up to the world's most powerful nation.

Analysts, however, think the U.S. may well slide down the slippery path of broader intervention in Syria.

"Having started to take part in this campaign, the United States will be unable to get out of it without removing Bashar al-Assad. And considerations of prestige will outweigh all the doubts of those who fear chaos after a change of regime," said Dr. Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy.

At a recent press conference on Syria, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lamented a lack of "strategic thinking" in U.S. foreign policy. In contrast, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated it has strategic vision, with the situation in Iraq, Libya and Syria proving it right.

Mr. Lavrov said Russia had "no plans to go to war" over Syria, but he did not say Russia would not react.

China factor

Russia will continue to block any anti-Syrian moves at the U.N. Security Council, expose the illegal nature of U.S. interference and the foolishness of siding with Islamist radicals in Syria.

Moscow will also cement its ties with Iran and China. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani placed a telephone call to Mr. Putin last week, with the two leaders calling for resolving the Syrian crisis "exclusively through political and diplomatic means." The Russian and Iranian Presidents will have their first face-to-face meeting on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Kyrgyzstan in mid-September.

Also, last week, China's Ambassador to Russia Li Hui called on Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's point man for the Middle East, to discuss "further Russian-Chinese political and diplomatic interaction in connection with a sharp aggravation of the situation around Syria."

Last, but not least, Russia will continue to arm Syria.

“Russia and Iran have far more possibilities to help Assad than the other side can help rebels,” said Prof. Mirsky. “We can ship him as many weapons as he needs, while Iranians can send over its Islamic Revolution Guards in the guise of volunteers. America has no chance of winning this war.”

The one thing Russia will not do is stop the U.S. from running the minefield of being bogged down in Syria.

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