

THE MYTHICAL ALLIANCE: RUSSIA'S SYRIA POLICY

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The Syrian conflict, now almost two years old, has claimed over 60,000 lives, bringing destruction to the country and destabilizing the Middle East. Joint international action is needed, but deadlock at the United Nations Security Council has so far prevented it. U.S. and European hopes that Russia would simply join them in pushing Bashar al-Assad out of power have proven wrong. A new approach is necessary to stop the carnage and create a transitional authority in Damascus that can foster national reconciliation.

Moscow's Calculus

- On Syria, Russia took a clear position early on and has not shied away from very strong disagreement with the United States and Europe.
- Refusing to use its influence to pressure President Assad and urging both sides in the conflict to work toward reconciliation, Russia sees itself as evenhanded.
- Russia's position on Syria is governed by its concept of the world order, which calls for the use of force to be controlled by the Security Council and rejects regime change from abroad.
- Moscow views the Arab Spring as an Islamist revolution likely to be dominated by extremists. It fears the Syrian conflict will become more radicalized and spread further.
- The Kremlin's policies have not worked and are seriously damaging Russia's relations with the West and the Arab world.

Toward Deeper Russian-Western Cooperation

- Russia cannot be ignored, and Western countries cannot deal with Moscow on their own terms.
- The West should embrace cooperation with Russia on the basis of shared interests. In Syria, no matter how strongly Moscow and Washington disagree about Assad's departure from power, neither Americans nor Russians want chaos or the establishment of a radical Sunni Islamist regime.
- Western countries should make use of Russia's unique and pragmatic perspective in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. Moscow's view has sometimes been closer to reality than a succession of Western enthusiasm and despair.
- The United States and Europe should acknowledge that the world order is transforming. Russia is not and will not be part of the West, but it sees itself as a stabilizing force, favoring tradition and procedure over emotion and ideology. Russia is a natural ally of those seeking more predictability in international relations.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Toward a New Approach in Syria

- Russia should drop its notional hands-off attitude toward political developments in Syria. And the United States should focus on a political settlement as its immediate goal instead of an overthrow of the Assad regime.
- The United States and Russia need to work out a practical mechanism for implementing the political transition in Syria.
- Moscow and Washington should identify and incentivize those elements in the warring camps that are most amenable to dialogue and should apply pressure to those unwilling to engage in order to bring them to the negotiating table. They should isolate and sanction those totally opposed to reconciliation.
- Russia and the United States need to work closely with all parties in the region—the Arab states, Turkey, Israel, and Iran—to secure their support for the Syrian peace process. The process should be “owned” by the United Nations to improve its credibility.