

Russia's chief concern in Syria is to deny victory to the west

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Moscow will not give up Damascus, as Russia's foreign minister signalled yesterday – despite rebels' latest success in targeting the heart of the Assad regime. At stake here, beyond Syria, is the restoration of Russian power in relation to the west.

Russia's relations with Syria date back to the emigration to Turkey and Syria of Circassian minorities in the 19th century and this link still influences Russia's perception of the Syrian crisis. The fear is that chaos in Syria, if followed by an Islamist victory, might radicalise the Russian Caucasus. Moreover, Syria has traditionally been a counterweight to Turkey, especially when Turkish-Syrian relations were troubled. If the Damascus regime fell, Moscow's southern flank would be weakened. Indeed, the regime's fall would cut Russia out of the Middle East, where it has met with one setback after another over the past 50 years.

Of course, the counter-argument is that the more Moscow supports Damascus, the more it jeopardises its position in Syria. But Russia does not think in these terms. It does not seek to adapt to a changing world but to return to the old world by preserving what is left of it. Russia is fighting national decline not with renewal or development but with systematic political obstruction.

Russia's decline in the Middle East began in 1971, when Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt, expelled Soviet military advisers. The Russians were unable to make up for this defeat in the region because Iraq was too unpredictable and Iran too uncontrollable. Syria has the advantage of being highly predictable and perfectly controllable. It is predictable because Syrians have always known just how far to push against the west or Israel – their realism evident in Damascus's silence after Israel destroyed a

nuclear reactor Syria was building with the help of North Korea. It is also controllable because the country has very few allies besides Russia and Iran. The regime has no cards to play and, despite an apparent opening to the west in recent years, is unreformed.

Moscow sees Syria as the perfect friend. Relations might sometimes be strained by the big military debt Damascus has incurred with Moscow. Yet the stability of Syrian policy is appealing to the Russians because it closely resembles theirs. Both countries defend their interests by compromising as little as possible with the west, short of resorting to force. Both maintain authoritarian and nationalist regimes for which doing business with the west need not imply adopting its model of democracy and human rights. There have been close contacts between the Russian and Syrian elites since the mid-1950s, especially between their armies and intelligence communities.

This stable relationship has also been strengthened by the hereditary nature of the Russian and Syrian regimes. Children of the countries' respective nomenclatures often succeed their parents in key intelligence positions. There are also personal links: some 30,000 Russian citizens live in Syria. Russian arms sales and access to naval facilities are not the foundation but the extension of this relationship.

Yet there is another factor driving Russian conduct: Moscow's desire to prevent any western gains from the Syrian crisis. The regime's unpopularity is secondary in Russia's assessment of a situation: above all, it does not want to see the Syrian crisis unfold like the Libyan one. In Moscow's eyes, the west used UN Resolution 1973 on Libya to get rid of an unpopular regime, and its success was unwelcome. Russians consider help to people struggling against oppressive leaders as a façade to hide ulterior political or commercial motives. What matters to them is that the international system should rest on the sovereignty of states. As Russia declines and falls behind the west and China, its leaders are increasingly tempted to base their political identity on their opposition to the west. In these circumstances, unrest in Syria – even if it ends in civil war and the departure of Bashar al-Assad – is preferable to an orderly political transition that would end the regime.

Russia's priority is not so much to support the Syrian regime. It is to make the price of regime change prohibitive enough for the west to forgo any thoughts of sponsoring it – in Syria, or in Russia.

The writer is a professor at Sciences Po. His book 'Limited Achievements: Obama's Foreign Policy' is published next month