

# Russia's Actions in Syria: Underlying Interests and Policy Objectives

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Winston Churchill in 1939: “I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.”

# Russia's vital national interests at stake in Syria

Interest	Impact
1. Prevent, deter and, reduce threats of secession from Russia; insurgency within Russia or in areas, adjacent to Russia; and armed conflicts waged against Russia, its allies or, in vicinity of Russian frontiers;	<p>Threat of “exports’ of insurgency from Syria to Russia:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Long-time between Al-Qaeda and North Caucasian insurgency</li><li>• ISIS has established a ‘vilayat’ in Russia</li><li>• 2,500 nationals of Russia in ISIS alone</li><li>• Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, lists 1,500 Chechen, Uzbek and Tajik fighters and pledged allegiance to al Qaeda's Syria wing Nusra Front in September 2015.</li></ul> <p>Threat of power projection by NATO in the Black Sea, so maintain permanent presence in the Mediterranean to deter.</p>
2. Prevent emergence of hostile individual or collective regional hegemonies or failed states on Russian borders, ensure Russia is surrounded by friendly states among which Russia can play a lead role and cooperation with which it can thrive;	Syria as failed state with Central Asian republics among the potential next targets for an emboldened architects of the “Islamic State”
3. Establish and maintain productive relations, upon which Russian national interests hinge to a significant extent, with core European Union members, the United States and China;	Russia’s military campaign in Syria has been seen an opportunity for Moscow to repair relations with Washington and Brussels, which have been damaged by the Ukraine conflict.

# Russia's vital national interests at stake in Syria

<b>Interest</b>	<b>Impact</b>
4. Ensure the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports;	Plans for Iran-Iraq-Syria and Qatar-Turkey pipelines?
5. Ensure steady development and diversification of the Russian economy and its integration into global markets;	Not too many countries buy Russian machinery and cars, but Syria does.
6. Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and their long-range delivery systems on Russian borders; secure nuclear weapons and materials;	Both ISIS and Al-Qaeda have displayed practical interest in acquiring nuclear weapons.
7. Prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia;	Both ISIS and al-Qaeda have urged their supporters to carry out terrorist attacks against Russia.
8. Ensure Russian allies' survival and their active cooperation with Russia.	Syria is one of the allies Russia has preserved after disintegration of the Soviet Union.

# Russia's ruling elite's very important interest at stake in Syria

<b>Interest</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Prevent forceful regime change in countries friendly to Russia.	Strong

# Russia's minimal objectives in Syria include

- **Prevent Assad's government from losing control over the remaining part of Syria and from being forcefully ousted/eliminated by ISIS, Al-Qaeda, etc.**
- **Bleed Al-Qaeda, ISIS and other non-state actors, which have nationals of post-Soviet republics in their ranks and/or which are a threat to security or Russia and its allies (security of post-Soviet allies in Central Asia are of special concern).**
- **Maintain control of Russia's military facilities in Syria, including naval facility in Tartus.**
- **Prevent Syria from becoming a failed, 'terrorist' state that would be run by likes of ISIS, play host to non-state actors hostile to Russia.**

# Russia's 'medium' objectives in Syria include:

## Short-term:

- Ensure success of Assad's forces' efforts to eliminate most immediate threats to their positions, eliminate pockets/make the 'front' lines more defensible.

## Longer-term:

- Facilitate the following sequence of steps: between Assad and his allies, on one side, and moderates on the other, while excluding those deemed extremist/terrorist, such as AQ and ISIS, all while ensuring Russia's leading role in these steps and honoring of Russia's interests by the interim/new authorities:
  1. Negotiations of a ceasefire.
  2. Beginning of joint action by parties to the ceasefire against ISIS, AQ, etc.
  3. Negotiation of a constitutional reform (but Syria remains secular).
  4. Presidential elections and transition to a new (coalition) government (, which would be secular/moderate.
  5. Completion of ISIS, AQ, etc in Syria, including 'neutralization' of Russian nationals in their ranks and establishment of the control over the entire Syria by the new central government.
- Preserve access of Russian companies to Syria's market to ensure that the country continues to buy Russian-made arms and machinery, ensuring at least some degree of diversification of Russia's economy, largely driven by the oil and gas sectors.
- Ensure that Russia's reputation as a reliable protector of its allies (in the eyes of the latter) is not damaged by a forceful removal of Assad from power.
- Ensure that the example of Syria reaffirms Russia's claim to having a say in outcome of major decisions on the global scene, where Russia plays what its foreign policy doctrine defines as a "balancing role."

# Russia's maximum objective in Syria:

**Return to status-quo ante, which is  
all, but impossible.**

Russia's vital national interests (in order of importance)	U.S. vital national interests	Converge (C) / Diverge (D) / No equivalent (NE)
Prevent, deter and, reduce threats of secession from Russia; insurgency within Russia or in areas, adjacent to Russia; and armed conflicts waged against Russia, its allies or, in vicinity of Russian frontiers;	Not available;	No equivalent;
Prevent emergence of hostile individual or collective regional hegemonies or failed states on Russian borders, ensure Russia is surrounded by friendly states among which Russia can play a lead role and cooperation with which it can thrive;	Maintain a balance of power in Europe and Asia that promotes peace and stability with a continuing U.S. leadership role;	Russian and U.S. interests more diverge than converge;
Establish and maintain productive relations, upon which Russian national interests hinge to a significant extent, with core European Union members, the United States and China;	Establish and maintain productive relations, consistent with American national interests, with nations that could become strategic adversaries, China and Russia;	Converge (partially);

Russia's vital national interests (in order of importance)	U.S. vital national interests	Converge (C) / Diverge (D) / No equivalent (NE)
Ensure the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports;	Ensure the viability and stability of major global systems (trade, financial markets, supplies of energy, and the environment);	Converge;
Ensure steady development and diversification of the Russian economy and its integration into global markets;	Not available;	No equivalent;
Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and their long-range delivery systems on Russian borders; secure nuclear weapons and materials;	Prevent the use and slow the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, secure nuclear weapons and materials, and prevent proliferation of intermediate and long-range delivery systems for nuclear weapons;	Converge, but differ in methods of advancing this interest;
Prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia;	Prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on the American Homeland;	Converge to a significant extent;
Ensure Russian allies' survival and their active cooperation with Russia;	Ensure U.S. allies' survival and their active cooperation with the U.S. in shaping an international system in which U.S. can thrive;	Either no equivalent or divergence, if threat to Baltics viewed as real.
Not available;	Prevent the emergence of hostile major powers or failed states on US borders;	No equivalent.