

# The rise of Russia in the international system

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Vladimir Putin, ex-KGB agent, is a man with close ties to the oil giant Gazprom, whose power is based in the Russian security apparatus and strengthened by his governments.

The civil war in Syria and the consequent threat of the superpower attacking that part of the territory still controlled by the alliance supporting Assad's government has given the Kremlin a unique opportunity. At the start of the so-called Arab Spring and the escalation in conflicts within countries governed by autocratic despots and regimes, Russia kept its distance from the region, leaving the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia under the "control" of the United States and its sole staunch ally, Israel.

Vladimir Putin's government's problems were concentrated in the Caucasus region, specifically the so-called Chechen ethnic groups, hegemonized by Al Qaeda-linked fundamentalism. The threat against the regime in Syria and the composition of its Alawite government led by the Assad clan, with leading members of the Ba'ath Party (a secular politico-military faction), supported by about 35% of the minority groups in the country, placed the old Tsarist Empire at a crossroads. Either it would have to throw itself into the conflict, serving as a shield against the virtually unilateral actions of the USA, or it would have to focus entirely on resuming its hegemony in Eastern Europe, advancing its area of influence over central Europe and projecting Gazprom through the Nord Stream pipeline into the Baltic Sea.

If Putin's cabinet were to abandon its last ally in the Middle East to its own devices, that would mean losing its last naval base in the Mediterranean (in the Aegean Sea, to be precise), located in the port of Tartus, the second-biggest in Syria. When part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet of the US Navy positioned itself to bomb Bashir al-Assad's facilities by launching Tomahawk missiles, the Russian warships sailed out to them, by way of deterrent.

Besides the naval manoeuvre, Russia has threatened not to recognize Assads responsibility as author of a war crime in his use of gas against the population of the suburbs of Damascus. By raising suspicions about Saudi Arabia (as financier of the chemical weapon), it threatened to destroy the Saud dynasty, US allies and partners of the Bush family. In parallel, it went ahead with its diplomatic action, seeking a multilateral solution through the strengthening of the UN Security Council, where it has the power of veto.

The Russian advance comes at the same time as hesitation from the White House, which lacks congressional support for the attack and does not have the support of public opinion. The two military allies of the United States in Europe/NATO — France and Britain — reviewed their po-

sition to the extent that parliaments and the expressed will of the voters said they were against any possible bombing action against Syria.

The checkmate against the USA came shortly after the meeting of the G-20 in St. Petersburg, in early September 2013. When the Syrian regime accepted the Russian solution, delivering its chemical arsenal into UN hands for safeguarding, Russia moved up in the International System, as the only country in the world with the real conditions to become a superpower.

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