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## The west is playing in to Moscow's hands on Syria

By Georgy Mirsky

Even if the Assad regime crumbles, Russia will not deem Putin a loser, writes Georgy Mirsky



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Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks at the St Petersburg Economic Forum on Friday

Every now and then one of my English-speaking colleagues asks me what Russia will do if the western powers make good on their threats and strike at Syria. My answer is:

nothing. Russia does not have to do anything, it can just sit quiet. The situation is advantageous to Moscow. Our leaders will be only too happy to see the US start a new war it cannot win.

Consider the options. A land invasion is out of the question. Sustained air bombardment risks the loss of pilots, and would therefore be unacceptable for the public in the west. The likeliest avenue is missile strikes; President Bashar al-Assad's regime will undoubtedly suffer – but Russia and Iran will be able to make up for any losses. The allies will give Mr Assad a bloody nose and that is it. Punitive strikes cannot bring about a turning point in the hostilities. Any substantial change in the correlation of forces on the ground is not feasible.

So, morally and psychologically, the Assad regime will score points, at least in the eyes of the developing world – and certainly in those of Russia. Propaganda is certain to draw parallels with the intervention in Iraq 10 years ago. It is, of course, very easy to picture the US as a global bully ever bent on inventing pretexts for aggression. Iran will be jubilant. Many people in Syria will be inclined to resist a new imperialist crusade.

Upping the ante is advantageous for Moscow. The more the western powers are involved in the conflict, the more deeply they are immersed, the more opportunities emerge for Russia to back the Assad regime as a “legitimate authority under attack”. Since a land operation can be ruled out, it may appear in the end that not only has Mr Assad survived but also that Moscow and Tehran have won in the global confrontation with the coalition of the west, Turkey and the Arab League.

Western officials imply that a punitive strike is not intended to engineer regime change, nor is it meant to give the opposition an opportunity to deal Mr Assad a decisive blow. “We just want to punish the dictator and send him a message: do not even think of

using the chemical weapons again or else ...” Well, suppose he never uses these weapons again. Does this mean that he is bound to lose the war? Not by a long shot.

Some observers seem to believe that Mr Assad, sensing mortal danger to his regime as a result of the strikes that may signal the start of a full-scale western invasion, will be more amenable to make concessions. According to this view, he would agree to a peace conference and delegate some of his powers to a person acceptable to the opposition. In this case, however, there can be no doubt that the rebels, particularly those affiliated with al-Qaeda, would never comply with this arrangement. “Assad in Damascus? Never.”

Other analysts have been insisting for months that the only solution is to press Vladimir Putin to convince Mr Assad to take a softer line, maybe even to relinquish powers. It must take an extremely naive person, however, to believe that the Russian president would ever be ready to do any such thing – or, even if he were to, that Mr Assad would obediently step down and leave Syria.

At this moment – when the wheel of fortune seems to have turned in Mr Assad’s favour, thanks to assistance from Iran and Hizbollah – the Syrian leader is more likely than ever to believe that it pays to tough it out. Indeed, he is vigorously asserting himself and now looks more confident than ever.

As regards what some critics call Mr Putin’s incomprehensible intransigence, the bottom line is this: even if the Assad regime ultimately crumbles, the Russian president will not be regarded – at least not by domestic public opinion, which is vital for him – as a loser. The official line from the Kremlin will be: “We did our best to help the Syrian people in their struggle against those determined to impose their will and topple a government they disliked. We acted true to our principles but what can you do against the combined forces of the west, Turkey and Saudi Arabia? America has shown its true ugly face once more.”

On the contrary, if Mr Putin comes on board now and goes in for some concessions, he looks like a loser since it can be interpreted as backing down under American pressure. And that really would be absolutely unacceptable to the Russian people.

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