

How to Get Russia on Board in Syria? Hint: Think of the Sea

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



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The Russian refusal thus far to support international action against al-Assad is based solely on Russia's fear of losing access to the port of Tartus.

Russian foot-dragging is now a key barrier between the Syrian demonstrators and their prospective liberation from Bashar al-Assad's rule. Even the timid Arab League has called for al-Assad to leave, and Syria's powerful neighbor, Turkey, has declared that it's ready for internationally sanctioned action. The question is, can a UN Security Council resolution, including Russia's vote, be secured, paving the way for an end to al-Assad's rule?

Moscow has so far refused to support international action against al-Assad, frustrating other major powers' desire for a UN-supported call for his regime to end. Moscow's obstructionism is not so much because it likes the al-Assad regime, which it has supported since the 1970s. Rather, Russia fears that by losing influence over Damascus, it will also lose its only Mediterranean maritime base, located in the Syrian coastal town of Tartus. For Moscow, this would usher in a catastrophic lockout of the Mediterranean and the "warm" seas.

If each nation had its own all-consuming phobia, Russia's would be "no access to the warm seas." Ever since Catherine the Great made Russia a major power controlling much of the northern Eurasian landmass, Moscow has had a cardinal foreign policy rule: "Never get frozen in the north, lest you lose your great power status."

Thus, even after it became the world's largest land-based empire in the eighteenth century, Moscow has had an Achilles heel: its only waterways were the frozen seas (the Arctic, the Baltic, and the northern Pacific) that surrounded it with ice much of the year. To tackle this problem, Catherine fought the Ottomans and won precious access to the Black Sea, capturing the Ottoman-Tatar Azak fortress (now called Azov) in the Crimea in 1774. This Tatar foothold eventually opened the adjacent Mediterranean Sea, a warm, year-round-navigable sea, to the Russian navy; Russian greatness followed. Hence, the leitmotiv of Catherine's foreign policy, and that of all Russian leaders since, including Vladimir Putin: Always, always, have a foot in the Mediterranean.

This is where Putin's support to al-Assad comes in. The Russian base in Tartus, which al-Assad's father leased to

Moscow in the 1970s, represents a long line of Russian naval stations in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Tartus is the last Russian warm-water base.

So, "lose Tartus and lose access to the warm waters" is how Moscow views the end of al-Assad's rule. Having said farewell to all its Mediterranean client states and bases in the past decades -- from Egypt, which evicted Russia in the 1970s, to Serbia, which became a landlocked state following the dissolution of the last Yugoslavia in 2003 -- Moscow cannot afford to lose Tartus, the last link between Russian foreign policy today and Catherine the Great's grand strategy.

This is why Russia really values Tartus, an otherwise sleepy and charming Mediterranean port, which I visited in 2006. Just recently, Moscow was reportedly investing heavily in modernizing this base, signaling its intention to stay in Tartus for decades to come.

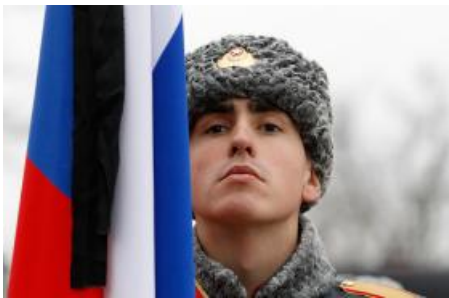
The question now is how to allay Russia's warm-water anxiety. The ideal solution would be to offer Russia a maritime base somewhere else on the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, no state seems eager to accept this proposal, not even the last Russia-friendly nation in the Mediterranean, the Greek Cypriots. Though there are two sovereign British bases on Cyprus, the people there know that they would be opening up a can of worms with Turkey if they were to offer Russia a military foothold on the island.

Thus, the only alternative to Tartus is Tartus. The Syrian opposition needs Russia to get rid of al-Assad. Hence, the opposition needs to reassure the Russians that once al-Assad falls, Moscow will continue to enjoy access to the Tartus base -- and there are some signs this could be already happening. Russia will get on board in Syria if assured that it can continue to sail in warm waters.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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