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Is Russia losing — or playing the long game?

As allies falter, Moscow avoids war but still quietly secures influence across the Global South

When crises erupted — from Syria to Venezuela to Iran — questions quickly arose about how these countries' partners, particularly Russia, would respond. Moscow has long maintained strategic relationships with all three of them. But does a strategic partnership necessarily imply military intervention in the face of internal or external threats?

Much of the commentary has answered this question in the affirmative, portraying Russia as an unreliable patron — either unwilling or unable to defend its partners, and in some cases even as a geopolitical loser. The fall of long-standing allies such as Bashar al-Assad in Syria or Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, alongside mounting US pressure on Cuba and US-Israeli attacks against Iran, have repeatedly reinforced this perception. The prevailing conclusion along this path is that Russia does not stand by its friends and loses prestige across the Global South, from Latin America to Africa.

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But this reading is analytically reductive. It conflates the absence of military intervention with strategic failure and mistakes restraint for weakness. A closer examination suggests a more deliberate pattern: Russia pursues a *hybrid approach* that combines demonstration of political support with long-term positioning. Rather than binding itself to costly and potentially open-ended military commitments, Moscow seeks to preserve footholds and remain relevant, even when allied governments weaken or collapse. In an increasingly fluid geopolitical landscape, this approach allows Russia to absorb, at least partly, setbacks while repositioning itself across the Global South.

This approach aligns with Russia's broader strategic reorientation: The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept and its implementation since then explicitly emphasizes deeper engagement with Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the wider Global South as part of an emerging multipolar order.

Maintaining presence

Syria is often cited as the clearest test of Russia's reliability. Russia's 2015 intervention was decisive in defending the Assad regime. Yet Moscow never formalised a binding mutual-defence commitment that would obligate it to fight on Damascus's behalf. Instead, it focused on securing the strategic assets: the naval facility at Tartus, Russia's only permanent Mediterranean foothold, and the Khmeimim air base, the hub of its regional air operations. In 2017, Moscow formalised a 49-year, automatically renewable agreement, granting it access to Tartus, alongside extensive legal privileges and expansion rights.

At the same time, Russia maintained diplomatic channels with a wide range of actors, including Syrian opposition, Iran, Türkiye, Israel, and the United States. This allowed it to position itself not merely as Syria's patron, but as a relevant player in the broader regional balance of power.

The role as a power broker appears to have helped secure Russia's continued presence even after Assad's fall in December 2024. It was able to rapidly pivot, engage the new Syrian leadership and preserve its military presence by negotiating continued access to its bases. Notably, Syria's new authorities appear to view Russia as a partner worth retaining. The result so far: Moscow's core objective — maintaining a Mediterranean foothold — remains intact under very different political conditions. The Syrian case underscores a broader point: Russia's primary objective was not the indefinite preservation of a particular leadership, but the institutionalisation of its own presence and geopolitical access. This challenges the widespread assumption that Moscow's strategy is centred on regime survival rather than long-term positioning.

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A similar pattern can be observed in Venezuela, though under different constraints. Unlike in Syria, Russia lacks the infrastructure for meaningful power projection in the Western Hemisphere: no permanent bases, no standing naval presence, no logistical capacity to sustain confrontation with the United States in its near abroad. Under such conditions, escalation

would have been strategically untenable. Russia's military support to Venezuela reflected these limits. Arms transfers, including air defence systems such as the Pantsir-S1, have been largely symbolic in relation to US capabilities. Consequently, Moscow's restraint has been widely interpreted as weakness and declining influence, with analyses pointing to potential financial losses.

Still, it should not be overlooked how Moscow adapted to shifting political realities rather than contesting them head-on. So far it has maintained a measured but continuous diplomatic and economic presence, even under adverse conditions. Following his recent visit to Caracas, the Special Representative of the Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Shchetinin stated: 'The meetings held here, and above all the meeting with Venezuelan Foreign Minister Iván Gil Pinto, indicate that our Venezuelan colleagues are committed to continuing cooperation with Russia.'

In general, Russia's involvement in Venezuela has been less about immediate economic benefits than sustaining a geopolitical foothold in the Western Hemisphere, where oil operates as a tool of influence and alignment. While that foothold has become more constrained, it has not disappeared.

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Recent developments have created new opportunities for Moscow. Intensified US pressure and the oil blockade on Cuba have produced acute energy shortages on the island and worsening humanitarian situation. Russia's willingness and ability to provide at least a short-term relief as oil supplier allows it to position itself as both a material partner and a symbolic counterweight to US policy.

This generates a broader political effect. Moscow can frame US actions as sovereignty-eroding, reinforcing a narrative of Western overreach that resonates across parts of the Global South. At a time when Russia faces reputational challenges, such moves offer opportunities for partial image rehabilitation, particularly among states sensitive to external pressure and intervention.

Sometraditionally Western-aligned states are beginning to recalibrate. Madagascar, long situated within France's sphere of influence, has shown

signs of gradual foreign policy diversification. President Mikail Randrianirina visited Moscow in February and signalled willingness to expand diplomatic and economic engagement with Russia. The emergence of the organisation 'Friends of Russia' in Madagascar, advocating closer ties with Moscow and the BRICS countries, further illustrates this shift.

Another's loss can be someone else's gain

Iran presents a more complex case. At first glance, US–Israeli strikes appeared to underscore Russia's diminishing influence. Yet as the conflict has evolved, that assessment looks less straightforward. Unlike in Venezuela, Moscow has adopted a more visibly supportive posture — politically, diplomatically, and through intelligence cooperation. Reports suggest that Russia has provided Iran with satellite imagery, drone technology, and operational data, potentially enhancing Tehran's military capabilities.

However, Moscow has avoided crossing the threshold into direct military alignment. Despite a deepening strategic partnership that was formalised in 2025, Russian officials have explicitly framed the conflict as 'not our war,' signalling a deliberate effort to limit exposure and retain strategic autonomy. This dual-track approach reflects a cautious and interest-driven strategy rather than ideological alignment or unconditional support.

Geo-economics considerations are central to this posture. Instability in the Gulf and particularly around the Strait of Hormuz has strained global energy markets, with knock-on effects for fuel, food prices, and fertilizer supply chains. Such disruptions generate benefits for the energy exporter Russia, but they also impose clear limits. A prolonged severe disruption such as an extended closure of Hormuz would risk broader systemic fallout, including global recession, supply chain breakdowns, and acute food insecurity in vulnerable regions. Under such conditions, the costs of escalation would outweigh any short-term advantages.

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structural shift.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's and China's role in brokering a temporary ceasefire between the United States and Iran points to a broader structural shift: the growing capacity of non-Western actors to shape conflict management. Rather than replacing Western influence outright, such mediation efforts diversify the mechanisms of conflict management. For Russia, this shift is advantageous. It reinforces a more diffuse, multipolar environment in which diplomatic authority is less centralised and shifts towards Eurasian actors, thereby potentially expanding the space for Russian influence.

Across the cases examined, a consistent pattern emerges: while Russia treats strategic partnerships as long-term relationships, it does not translate them into binding security commitments unless these are explicitly formalized, as in the case of North Korea. Moscow's objective is less the preservation of specific governments than the maintenance of access and influence across shifting political contexts. Interpreting such restraint as decline risks overlooking the more gradual ways in which Russia sustains and, in some cases, expands its influence.

Yet managing multiple volatile relationships from Syria to Iran to Venezuela requires constant recalibration, and each theatre presents distinct escalation dynamics. The accumulation of such risks increases the likelihood that miscalculation in one arena could undermine Russia's broader positioning.

The challenge for Moscow is threefold: to maintain ties with strategic partners such as Iran while avoiding direct confrontation with the United States, and at the same time preserve credibility in the Global South so that its reliability as a security provider won't be questioned. Whether this approach is sustainable remains uncertain. But in a context of loosening alliances and deepening multipolarity, it may prove more resilient than it initially appears.



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