



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 17, 2013

U.S. and Russia in Showdown Over Syria?

The civil war in Syria is a growing source of tension between the United States and Russia, a subject President Obama is expected to [broach](#) with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, during this week's Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland. As the United States prepares to send arms and ammunition to the rebel forces, Russia has disputed the claims of Western nations that the Syrian government has used chemical weapons, and Moscow appears unlikely to yield to U.S. urging that it cease its support of the Assad regime in Damascus.



"It's in Russia's interest to join us in applying pressure on Bashar al-Assad to come to the table in a way that relinquishes his power and his standing in Syria, because we don't see any scenario where he restores his legitimacy to lead the country," Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes told reporters at the White House.

The insistence that the Syrian president abdicate his office does not leave Assad much room for negotiation, however, and he is not likely to surrender at the conference table what he has not lost on the battlefield. The Russians clearly do not see it as in their interest to abandon a strategic ally in the Middle East. And while Moscow has not gone as far as the Syrian foreign ministry has in accusing Washington of issuing "a statement full of lies regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria," Putin's foreign policy advisor, Yuri Ushakov, was quite blunt in calling the evidence unconvincing.

"I will say frankly that what was presented to us by the Americans does not look convincing," Ushakov [said](#). "It would be hard even to call them facts."

The Obama administration announced last Thursday that evidence, including victims' symptoms and intelligence reports, has confirmed the use of the poison gas sarin by the Syrian government. That crossing of the "red line" that Obama said last August would bring "enormous consequences" to the Assad regime is what triggered the decision to send arms to the rebels, according to the statement issued by Rhodes. It did not say what kind of weapons would be sent, but a number of reports, quoting anonymous White House and Defense Department sources, have said it would be small arms and ammunition. Military officials say no consideration is being given to sending U.S. [ground forces](#) into Syria, though some American troops are now in Jordan for a multinational military exercise in Jordan, and are likely to remain there to provide Syrian rebel units with combat training. That's not enough, said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who has long advocated the creation and enforcement of a "no-fly" zone against the Syrian air force and a "safe zone" for the rebels.

"I know that we have the military capability to impose a 'no-fly' zone, to crater their runways and their fixed installations where fuel and parts are, and establish a 'no-fly' zone with Patriot missiles," McCain said. "And if we can't do that, then the question ought to be asked to the American taxpayer — to the Pentagon, 'What in the world are we wasting tens of billions of dollars for defense for if we can't even take care of this situation?'" South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham joined his Arizona colleague in



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the call for a “no-fly” zone.

“The goal is to end the war. And the only way this war is going to end quickly and on our terms is to neutralize the air assets that Assad enjoys,” Graham [said](#) on the Senate floor last week. “There are four air bases he uses. We can stop the planes from flying. We can shoot planes down without having one boot on the ground.”

That would be more difficult than it might seem. According to Joseph Holliday, a fellow at the Institute for the Study of War, Syria has “[one of the densest air defense systems in the world](#),” including 200 combat-capable aircraft and 650 surface-to-air missiles. At the end of May, Assad announced the arrival of [S-300 anti-aircraft rockets](#) from Russia, each with a range of 125 miles and the ability to track and target multiple objects simultaneously. Putin recently endorsed a Russian navy plan to maintain a fleet of 16 ships in the Mediterranean that will visit ports in Syria. The fleet will be the first permanent Russian military presence in the Mediterranean since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Bloomberg [reported](#), and it will be modeled after the Soviet fleet stationed in the region during the Cold War, according to the Russian defense ministry. Syria is also host to the only Russian military base outside the old Soviet Union.

McCain, Graham, and [other critics](#) of Obama’s decision to arm the Syrian rebels say it’s a case of doing too little, too late, though they have failed to explain how intervening in Syria’s civil war at all enhances or protects the national security interests of the United States. Given the affiliation of many of the rebel units with al-Qaeda and other militant, anti-Western organizations, it seems possible, even likely, that the Obama administration will be supplying weapons used in future attacks on American people and institutions. It is also unclear how the United States, and possibly its NATO allies, would maintain a “safe zone” for rebels without the use of troops to defend it.

McCain and Graham apparently expect the Russians to sit passively on the sidelines while we bomb air fields, “crater their runways” and shoot down the planes of their ally in a country with whom we are not at war, absent a declaration of the same from Congress as the Constitution requires. A shooting war with Russia in the Mediterranean is a risk they seem willing to take. But even if their bold actions were to succeed, what would be the “up” side of replacing Assad’s dictatorship with one run by the kind of militant extremists who attacked the U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi last September 11 or the twin towers and the Pentagon in 2001?



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