

# Russian president in talks with Berlin and Paris on Syria

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In an official trip to Europe last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and newly elected French President François Hollande. Putin then went on to visit Central Asia and China.

At the heart of Putin's talks with Merkel were the Syrian conflict and the development of economic relations between the two countries. Putin's six hours of conversation with Merkel were much shorter than on the occasion of his previous visits to Berlin.

For months, Russia, together with China, has opposed a NATO-led military intervention against Syria and has blocked two UN resolutions. Both Moscow and Beijing regard a possible war against Syria as an attack on their own interests in the region and fear a broader international war. Both countries also oppose a military attack by the United States and Israel against Iran, which an offensive against Syria could provoke.

Discussions of military intervention in Syria have intensified significantly in recent days and weeks. Last Tuesday, Hollande spoke out openly for the first time in favor of such a military intervention.

Prior to the talks in Germany, political sources in Berlin indicated that Merkel would attempt to change Putin's mind on the issue of Syria. Shortly before Putin's visit, German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle emphasized that "Russia and its stance on the Assad regime [would] play a key role." He called on the "international community" to "stand together [to end] the violence in Syria." At the same time, Westerwelle warned against a hasty military intervention and called for a continuation of the peace

plan proposed by Kofi Annan.

After it refused to support the UN resolution on Libya alongside Russia and China a year ago, Germany came under heavy criticism from its traditional Western allies. Now it is backing the United States in its aggressive stance against Syria and supports the pro-Western rebels. At the same time, Berlin is keen to win Russian support or at least toleration for military intervention, as it still fears a wider escalation of conflict.

This was reflected in the criticisms by officials in Berlin of Hollande's statements in favor of intervention in Syria.

Germany is Russia's second-largest trading partner (after China), receiving around 40 percent of its gas imports from the Russian gas monopoly, Gazprom. Berlin is caught in the dilemma of balancing between its increasing economic orientation towards Russia and China while at the same time maintaining its traditional political ties with the United States, amid escalating conflict between the two camps.

Germany, for example, supports the NATO missile system, which Russia perceives as a direct threat. Following Putin's refusal to attend the recent G8 and NATO summits in the US due to foreign policy differences, German foreign policy specialist Wolfgang Ischinger warned against a one-sided orientation against Russia. Security in Europe can only be ensured in cooperation with Moscow, he stressed.

Following their meeting last Friday, both Merkel and Putin stressed that they favored a "political solution" in Syria. Putin pointed out that the Kremlin opposes military intervention but did not defend the Assad regime.

Russia distanced itself some time ago from the Assad regime—traditionally its main ally in the Arab world. While it has accepted the likelihood of a regime change, it is nevertheless intent on preventing a military intervention in the country. The Kremlin also fears its growing political isolation in Europe.

The political differences over Libya, Syria and Iran are increasingly driving Russia into an alignment on China, although Russia remains highly dependent on its gas and oil exports to the EU, its biggest customer. The Kremlin has invested tens of billions in pipeline projects, North Stream and South Stream, to deliver Russian gas directly to western Europe bypassing Ukraine and Belarus. In its political conflicts with the United States and NATO, the Kremlin has relied heavily for some time on Berlin, together with Italy and to a lesser extent France.

Russia's relations with Italy, which were especially close during the Berlusconi era, have cooled considerably, however, since the assumption of power by Mario Monti, who has tilted Rome's foreign policy back towards the US. Russian relations with France, which played the leading role in the imperialist war against Libya and is now pushing for military intervention in Syria, are also very tense.

Whereas the former president, Nicolas Sarkozy, sought to establish closer economic relations with Russia, this is less of a priority for Hollande. In his meeting with Putin on Friday, the new French president reiterated his stance on Syria and called for further sanctions, which Putin rejects. Observers wrote of an icy atmosphere between the two heads of state.

During their meeting in Berlin, Putin and Merkel discussed the North and South Stream projects and the development of bilateral economic relations. German-Russian trade peaked at a record high last year. The North Stream pipeline, which will transport gas directly from Siberia to Germany, plays an especially important role in the development of relations.

The first section of the pipeline went into operation in autumn of last year, and the construction of the second

section is nearing completion. On Friday, Merkel endorsed for the first time the expansion of North Stream by a third and fourth section of pipeline. The project is assuming increasing importance, threatening to end the EU's competing Nabucco pipeline project, which aimed to transport gas from Central Asia to Europe, bypassing Russia.

Despite the sensitivity of its relations with Russia and fears of an uncontrollable conflagration in the region, ruling circles in Germany are discussing possibilities of German intervention in a war against Syria.

In the *Institute for Science and Politics*, Markus Kaim argued in early May that Berlin could not avoid military participation without seriously jeopardizing relations with its NATO allies. This assessment was then repeated in a separate article by Thomas Speckmann in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last Friday.

Having spoken out against the NATO war in Libya, along with China and Russia, Germany wants to ensure that in the event of war against Syria, it is involved and can participate in the subsequent reallocation of energy resources in the Middle East. Germany is already playing a leading role in the current preparations for war against Iran, actively supporting the upgrade of the Israeli armed forces.

A lead article in the latest edition of *Der Spiegel* reveals that Germany had supplied Israel with submarines that Israel subsequently equipped with nuclear warheads. As the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* noted, the submarines are tailor made "for use in the Persian Gulf."



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