The other day I heard Sergei Lavrov explain Moscow’s backing for Bashar al-Assad’s murderous repression in Syria. Russia’s foreign minister, I admit, did not express it quite like that. A former career diplomat, Mr Lavrov is a clever man. He deployed all manner of casuistry to explain that, contrary to vicious western propaganda, Russia was acting in an entirely even-handed way. This was a journey back to the cold war.

The Russian veto at the UN Security Council – matched by China – has had the predictable and predicted effect. Mr Assad has redoubled the military assault on opponents of his regime, ignoring any distinction between civilians and armed rebels. The death toll is rising sharply. The Arab League’s effort to secure a negotiated transfer of power has receded further as Syria tips towards full-scale civil war.

There are many explanations for the veto. The Assad dynasty has been a strategic ally since Soviet times. Moscow (and Beijing) think they were tricked into accepting the UN vote that led to the removal of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. The Syrian port of Tartus is a vital Russian naval base. There are big arms contracts at stake. All these can be added to Moscow’s familiar doctrine of non-interference.

Mr Lavrov’s appearance at the Munich Security Conference, however, also conveyed something else. Russia is on the defensive. Next month’s presidential election was supposed to mark the opening of another 12-year chapter for Vladimir Putin. Now Mr Putin faces catcalls from once-friendly crowds and big protests on the streets of Moscow.
The default response is to blame the enemy without. Everything from disaffection at home to the uprisings in the Arab world is seen through the lens of a western-inspired plot. Russia, the argument runs, must be accorded the respect it commanded during the cold war. In truth, Mr Putin resembles a latter-day Leonid Brezhnev. Bombast abroad does not conceal the hollowing out at home.

To listen to Mr Lavrov was to suppose that the Tunisian vegetable-seller whose self-immolation sparked the Arab uprisings had been a CIA agent; that Islamists in Benghazi and the young men and women in Tahrir Square had likewise been in the pay of the west. The rebellion against Mr Assad is just the latest instalment in a Washington-inspired plot.

The more prosaic reality is that everyone has been taken unawares by the sudden political awakening in the Arab world. It should be said that the west has not always looked comfortable in the wake of this shock. France’s first instinct was to support Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s Tunisian regime. The US lost a vital Arab ally with the fall of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak. Barack Obama’s administration still does not quite know whether to treat newly elected Islamists as friend or foe.

Double standards are not the sole preserve of Russia. Outspoken as it has lately become in the cause of Arab freedom, the west still fears democratic contagion to the oil-rich autocrats in the Gulf.

The inescapable truth, though, is that the geopolitical landscape of the region has been transformed. The US and Russia could once draw neat lines to mark out their respective spheres of influence. Now Arabs claim the Middle East as their own.

Russia has chosen to put itself on the wrong side of this epochal change. Its backing for Mr Assad promises to upturn regional perceptions of the two big powers. US support for Israel and for western-leaning autocrats for decades made it the target of the Arab street. Now, albeit after a stumbling start, Washington has aligned itself with reformists. Russia has contrived to cast itself as the defender of the authoritarian status quo.

This week Arabs watched Mr Lavrov being garlanded by Mr Assad’s supporters in Damascus. When they tune in to images of the bloody siege of Homs they are reminded that Moscow thwarted the Arab League’s efforts to halt the conflict. The Turkish government has been far from alone in charging that the veto handed Mr Assad a licence to kill his own people.

Perhaps Moscow still hopes the Syrian leader can deploy sufficient terror to hold on to power. Mr Putin all but acknowledged this week that he feared the symbolism of the fall of another Arab tyrant. But Russia’s logic here has become hopelessly mangled. How can Moscow imagine that its support for Mr Assad’s reign of violence will assuage the anger of middle-class Russians at Kremlin corruption and vote-rigging?

China has kept a lower profile, pointing to its traditional opposition to intervention in the sovereign affairs of other states. Yet Beijing betrays the same misreading of Arab and international opinion. The doctrine of non-interference could once be held up as a necessary protection against the depredations of western imperialists. Now it has begun to look more like an excuse to support oppression.

As for the west, for all Mr Lavrov’s nightmares there is precious little enthusiasm for direct intervention. Libya was a small war. There is nothing easy about setting up no-fly zones or safe havens. In the case of Syria they would require the destruction of Mr Assad’s air force. The Pentagon long ago lost the appetite for wars in the Middle East.

The west will impose sanctions and will face pressure to ship arms to the rebels. But its inclination is to let the Arab League and Turkey take the lead. The longer the violence lasts the greater the risks of sectarian civil war – and of a wider Sunni-Shia confrontation in the region. No, Mr Lavrov, this is not a western design. What’s happened is that things have changed: in Syria, in the Middle East and, yes, in Russia as well. No one is interested now in the language of the cold war.