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Beyond Chemical Weapons Control: Securing a Ceasefire and Broadening the Diplomatic Agenda on Syria

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ROBERT MASON, SEP 20 2013

There is no question that there is a moral imperative to put Syria's chemical weapons beyond use by any party, ideally through the imposition of UN control measures, the terms of which are being concluded by the US and Russia at the time of writing. A limited military strike is really the worst option since it would involve direct strikes against up to 50 chemical weapons related sites which only the Russians have good intelligence on.[1] In this case, it is highly unlikely that the Russians would be in a position to share such intelligence since only the diplomatic track is in their interests. Unfortunately, neither measure will resolve the conflict, one in which more than 100,000 people have died from the use of conventional weapons, and immediately transition Syria into a more peaceful and stable era. The next step is therefore to negotiate a cease-fire which would give the US and Russia the necessary breathing space to build confidence and end the conflict through a new UN Security Council Resolution.

Of course a solution could have been found during the last two years. The US has allowed the negotiating environment to be complicated by various irritants,[2] but in particular the Snowden affair which culminated in President Obama cancelling a high level meeting with President Putin in August 2013.[3] Ironic then, that a former Mi6 Deputy Chief does not perceive the Snowden affair to have undermined US national security to the extent the US has claimed.[4] There is an argument here that not holding the meeting, in which the topic of Syria is more than likely to have topped the agenda, is a fault of omission on President Obama's part.

US - Russia relations have continued to be frosty for the last couple of years due to lack of progress on Syria in the UN Security Council. Tensions have grown as differences between the US and Russia have become more apparent and irreconcilable, between humanitarian intervention supported by the US Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power [5] on the one hand, and respect for the rule of international law (based on the inalienable rights of sovereign states enshrined in the UN charter) supported by Russia on the other. Russia is anxious that the notion of humanitarian intervention not be leveraged into NATO expansionism, a US democratisation agenda and/or regime change, apparent from recent NATO interventions in Kosovo and Libya, and the evolving US and allied rationale to invade Iraq. President Putin has pushed the merits of diplomacy and political settlement in 2013 on the anniversary of 9/11, a reference to US military adventurism and the false choice of "you're either with us or against us" trumpeted by the Bush administration.[6]

Will this be a successful plea? The fact that the US is already taking the Russia proposal of decommissioning Syria's chemical weapons seriously boosts Russian standing on the international stage. The rest depends on whether the US recognises that Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has more power in its veto to tilt the balance of the Syrian conflict into a peace process compared to the various means that Saudi Arabia, the UAE or Qatar have at their disposal, such as arms transfers, *wasta* (financial support) and offers of counterterrorism cooperation.[7] Now that the negotiating environment has improved through the chemical weapons agreement and a good working relationship has been established between foreign ministers Kerry and Lavrov, it is time to consider other measures to achieve a UN Security Council Resolution that establishes a durable Syrian peace process.

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Specifically, this could be achieved through:

1. Continuing with a muscular diplomatic approach led by the State Department that convinces a range of strategic partners (inside and outside the UN Security Council) that it is in their interests to develop a comprehensive and united position on Syria
2. Developing a supplementary US – Russian agreement designed to strengthen and clarify existing principles of international law on humanitarian intervention, such as UN Chapter VII, to enhance Russian support for a new UN Security Council Resolution
3. Providing guarantees or a new comprehensive compact on violent Islamism that addresses Russia's core concerns about Assad's removal from power, which factions continue to be supported in Syria by the US and its allies, and the potential spread of jihadism in the Caucasus and Southern Russia, again with a view of gaining Russian support for a new UN mandate

By making diplomacy on Syria work, the US and Russia could avoid military action and the fall out of wider regional instability while at the same time sending a clear signal to the international community that: a) the UN Security Council is still relevant; b) the Cold War is an outdated concept and bilateral diplomacy between the US and Russia can still work to achieve international peace and security; c) the US, Russia and other members of the UN Security Council are committed to strengthening WMD/unconventional arms reductions (commitments from the US and Russia to bring forward the destruction of their own arsenals would be welcome in this regard, as would a swift conclusion to P5+1 negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme); d) there is a precedent for the resolution of complex WMD and humanitarian crises, enabling other crises to be fast-tracked along similar lines; and e) the US is serious about containing the threat from violent Islamists in Syria and other states where their presence is destabilising states and complicating transitions.

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[1] Adam Entous et al, 'Elite Syrian Units Scatter Chemical Arms Stockpile', *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 September 2013, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324755104579071330713553794.html>

[2] Including missile defence, gay rights, the Magnitsky case and human rights. Russia Today, 'Russia Attacks US Attempts to Broaden Magnitsky Case', 31 July 2013, available at <http://rt.com/politics/russia-magnitsky-reply-list-842/>

[3] BBC News, 'Obama Cancels Putin Meeting Over Snowden Asylum', 7 August 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/23605507>

[4] Recent comments by a former M-16 deputy chief suggest the Snowden affair is not as damaging to US or UK interests as some say. Richard Norton-Taylor and Dominic Rushe, *The Guardian*, 12 September 2013, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/12/mi6-plays-down-damage-edward-snowden-leaks>

[5] Samantha Power generally advocates "boots on the ground" in *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, (New York: Basic Books, 2002)

[6] Vladimir V. Putin, 'A Plea for Caution from Russia', *The New York Times*, 11 September 2013, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[7] Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, 'Saudis Offer Russia Secret Oil Deal if it Drops Syria', *The Telegraph*, 27 August 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/oilandgas/10266957/Saudis-offer-Russia-secret-oil-deal-if-it-drops-Syria.html>

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