

## *Syria Deal: As Good As It Gets?*

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On paper, the Russian proposal to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons looks like the optimal outcome, a result of American coercive diplomacy at its best. A military attack to punish Syria for its use of chemical weapons was never the objective, but a means to an end, which was to firmly establish the principle that the use of chemical weapons will not be tolerated in the modern world. If—and this is a very big if—even part of the Syrian chemical arsenal is actually placed under international supervision and ultimately dismantled, the United States will have achieved far more than it set out to do, and the Obama administration will be able to claim a major foreign-policy success. It is, however, far too early to predict success, indeed, the prospects are limited.

As with any good package deal, all sides gain from the Russian proposal and no one loses more than they can tolerate.

The United States and its Western allies achieve their objectives without recourse to force, Obama is spared an embarrassing defeat in Congress and if the deal is actually implemented most observers will not remember his irresolution and repeated zigzags. Britain and France, ineffectual relics of past powers—though France did show some spine in this round—are spared the embarrassment of their own impotence. Russia, which almost desperately wants to prevent a further display of America's singular might and role in the world, gained a rare and striking diplomatic success, thwarted unilateral American action, protected its Syrian ally from attack and proved (mostly to itself) that it remains an important world power.

The heinous Syrian regime proved its willingness to stand-up to the United States in the face of a threat of military attack, strengthened its image of strength and resolve despite the ongoing civil war, and avoided an attack whose ultimate consequences are unclear

and which might have been more than it could bear. In the meantime, it can continue slaughtering its citizens with wild abandon, as international pusillanimity has now made it clear that no one truly cares about the killing of over 110,000 people by “conventional” means, and that even the use of chemical weapons does not elicit an appropriate international response.

Iran, which showed a surprising appreciation of the consequences of Syria’s use of chemical weapons, turned on its ally, demanded that Damascus accept the Russian proposal and came off looking like a responsible player. By helping to prevent an American attack against Syria, Iran also helped avoid the establishment of a precedent whereby the United States and international community actually act militarily to deal with a WMD threat, Tehran’s ultimate fear.

Syria’s neighbors, including Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, are spared the possible destabilizing effects of an American attack, including even greater refugee outflows from Syria, and heightened domestic tensions.

For Israel, the stakes are particularly high. Not only is Syria’s chemical arsenal designed principally for use against it, but Israel views Obama’s handling of the Syrian situation as an indication of his future behavior regarding Iran’s far more dangerous nuclear program. In the short term, Israelis will breathe more easily. Despite repeated reassurances by the government and a virtual consensus among Israeli commentators that the likelihood of a Syrian chemical attack on Israel, in response to an American strike, was very low, Israelis besieged national gas-mask distribution centers in droves. They will be less sanguine about the long-term.

Amidst all of the uncertainty surrounding the details of the Russian proposal and the chances of it actually being implemented, there are, however, two near-certainties. Syria will do everything possible to delay, prevent, circumvent and minimize the actual transfer of its chemical arsenal to international control, let alone dismantlement, and will enjoy significant Russian and Iranian backing in these efforts. The Russians, for their part,

rejected Western demands that the UN resolution embodying the proposal include a threat of the use of force, should Syria fail to fulfill its commitments.

To an extent we are back to square one. The Syrians will be sure to raise objections regarding such issues as the nationality of the international inspectors, the inspections mandate, including sites inspectors are allowed to enter, the timing of inspections and much more. With Russian backing, they will seek to play for time, undermine any possibility that the United States might actually attack at a later stage, preserve as much of their chemical capability as possible and ultimately, grudgingly, accede only to the most minimal steps they can get away with. Given the magnitude of the Syrian chemical arsenal, sometimes called the largest in the world, its dismantlement might take years in optimal conditions and in Syria, both intentional obstructionism and the additional constraints posed by the ongoing civil war, will make it that much harder. Few nations will be willing to contribute personnel. Indeed, from a purely logistical point of view it is unclear how the monitoring and dismantlement processes can be conducted in such conditions.

If even part of the Syrian arsenal is ultimately placed under international monitoring, let alone dismantled, this will constitute a major U.S. achievement, especially in the prevailing circumstances.

Nevertheless, the way President Obama has handled the issue should be a source of considerable concern, first of all for Americans, but for the countries in the region as well.

The president first announced that use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime would be a red line just over a year ago, in a statement which took his closest advisers by surprise and engendered considerable discomfort over the unplanned commitment to action it entailed. The president, however, then went to great lengths to ignore the virtually irrefutable intelligence presented to him regarding numerous prior uses of chemical weapons. When he very belatedly did decide to act, he further undermined American credibility by making a last-minute decision to turn to Congress, once again stunning his advisers whom, with one exception, were not in the loop and created an

image of fundamental irresolution and a desire to avoid military actions at nearly all costs. To make matters worse, it rapidly transpired that the president would have a very tough time obtaining Congressional approval and might end up with a fiasco similar to [the recent vote in the British Parliament](#). If in Libya Obama was said to have led from behind, his decision to turn to Congress looks, at least to regional actors, like a dismal failure of resolve, a president succumbing to public opinion, rather than exercising leadership and building support. Finally, the president's last-minute decision to adopt the Russian proposal, on the very day that he was to present the case for military action in a national address, was the ultimate proof that military action, even just coercive diplomacy, is simply not part of this president's psychological makeup and strategic outlook.

The fundamental logic behind the idea—presenting Syria with an ultimatum, dismantle the chemical arsenal or face military action—is unassailable, indeed, should probably have been the American position from the beginning. Moreover, it turns out that the idea had already been [raised](#) a week earlier during the G-20 summit in Russia, and it remains unclear what failing of the administration's decision-making process allowed it to be sidelined, at a time when the president was ostensibly committed to military action.

Competitors like Russia and China and adversaries such as Syria and Iran, will certainly derive one important conclusion from this course of events, regardless of the outcome—the American people and President Obama personally are deeply wary of any further foreign entanglements and extraordinarily reluctant to use force, even when the president has declared a clear red line.

For those concerned primarily with the growing Iranian nuclear threat, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia, the president's handling of the issue is a source of deep concern which will greatly strengthen the feeling that they are on their own and may increase the prospects of unilateral action. On a more general level, a world in which the United States appears irresolute is a world which is far less secure.

What is needed now, in order to turn what is a good idea on paper into a good one in reality, is for America and its allies to understand that they must truly play a game of

coercive diplomacy, and play it with a determination to win. To this end, the United States, Britain and France must stand firm in the Security Council and insist that the resolution adopting the Russian proposal includes a threat of force and other concrete sanctions, should Syria fail to live up to its commitments, along with a clear timetable and explicit benchmarks for Syrian compliance. Otherwise Damascus will bury the proposal in detail, obfuscation and obstructionism, with Russian complicity. Paradoxically the only way to ensure that a diplomatic resolution is achieved and that the Syrian chemical arsenal is actually placed under international control and dismantled, even partially, is to maintain a realistic threat of an American attack.

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