

Framework Agreement on Syria: The Least-Bad Result

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Brief Analysis

The Obama administration should take steps to ameliorate the negative effects of the chemical disarmament agreement, restore Washington's credibility, and preserve its ability to use force if necessary.

The good news about [the new U.S.-Russian framework agreement on Syria](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm) (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm>) is that it could remove the Assad regime's chemical weapons (CW) stocks, eliminating a major tool against the insurgents. This result would have been unimaginable if Washington had not threatened military action. The bad news begins with the major obstacles the agreement places in the path of any credible U.S. threat of unilateral force, among other troublesome issues. Given President Obama's position that military force -- even a justified, low-risk operation -- requires support from a recalcitrant Congress, the agreement might be the "least bad" outcome. But Washington now faces the urgent task of minimizing the damage to its Syria policy and broader regional strategy.

USE OF FORCE OFF THE TABLE?

The terms that Secretary of State John Kerry worked out with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov may hinder unilateral military action if Bashar al-Assad violates the agreement or uses CW again. The fourth paragraph of [the document](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm) (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/09/214247.htm>) states that in the event of such violation or use, the two sides commit to take the issue to the UN Security Council, which "should" issue a Chapter VII resolution (i.e. authorizing the use of force). But any such resolution would require the acquiescence of Russia, which still disputes that the Assad regime was responsible for the August 21 CW attack. What guarantee does Washington have that Moscow would not take the same "fly in the face of the facts" stance on a Chapter VII resolution?

Secretary Kerry stated repeatedly over the weekend that the use of force, including unilaterally by the United States, is still in play. But taking such action without a Security Council deliberation would violate at least the spirit of the agreement. As Lavrov said on Saturday, "there is nothing said about the use of force" in the document.

AGREEMENT TILTED TOWARD ASSAD

Despite the prospect of potentially eliminating Syria's CW, the framework agreement could wind up helping Assad and hurting the opposition. Even its most helpful provision -- checking the regime's ability to use CW, whose tactical utility in clearing urban areas was shown on August 21 -- comes with problematic limitations. For example, assuming Assad complies, he would still be able to implicitly threaten the use of CW until mid-2014, the agreement's proposed deadline for destroying the weapons. Such threats could limit the opposition's tactical options.

The rebels stand to lose even more in the political realm. Assad has gone from an almost-friendless pariah to a partner of the United States and Russia in resolving a problem created by his criminal behavior, only months after his government was condemned by over 100 states in the UN General Assembly. Furthermore, as the focus turns to carrying out the agreement, his ability to blackmail the international community will soar. In particular, the need for his cooperation and control over CW sites and routes thereto in the face of rebel resistance may well tilt international sympathy toward him, probably including endorsement of a "temporary" ceasefire.

But ceasefires are almost impossible in insurgent conflicts. There are no fixed lines, and governments tend to assert their sovereign right to maintain their monopoly of force. In Syria, the regime would no doubt view attacks on rebels outside areas under their control as legitimate, particularly if "justified" for the sake of implementing the CW agreement. Under such circumstances, the insurgency would eventually shift from a legitimate uprising supported by most of the international community to an obstacle impeding the agreement.

REGIONAL BALANCE TILTED TOWARD RUSSIA?

Russia has been playing a smart Syria game with limited cards, using its arms deliveries, UN vetoes, and naval maneuvers to safeguard its interests, support its ally Assad, and stymie the United States. Moreover, by making Putin its partner, Washington has formally elevated him to the U.S. level despite Russia's lack of regional hard power and its backing of a murderous regime. One proof of this elevation is Putin's September 11 *New York Times* op-ed, which was filled with outrageous assertions on America's role in the world and the insurgents' responsibility for the August 21 attack. The lack of foreign outcry against his rant has been telling.

REVERSING THE SHIFT

To counter the CW agreement's downsides, the most important step is to portray it as a "least bad" move with potential positive aspects, rather than a historical success analogous to the Cuban Missile Crisis resolution. The deal does nothing to solve the larger Syrian crisis and will likely encourage Assad to fight on without compromise. But the United States can help change perceptions that it is "chained" by accelerating its efforts to arm the rebels, coordinating better with nonextremist factions, and developing a common approach with regional governments.

Washington should also make clear that it will strike if Assad violates the agreement or uses CW again. For now, the administration can be vague about whether such a strike would come after obtaining a UN Chapter VII resolution, after failing to reach one, or immediately and without UN recourse. To this end, the United States should keep sufficient forces in the Mediterranean to carry out the threat if necessary.

Beyond the agreement, the past two weeks have raised questions about America's willingness to use military force, whether in Syria, Iran, or elsewhere. The president himself will have to take steps to restore U.S. credibility by recognizing that this is now a serious international problem, to which his language and decisions have contributed. One helpful move would be to eschew the "I am ending American wars" theme. For Americans, "wars" have become conflated with any use of force, however limited or necessary. The administration could also bolster its standing by ensuring that U.S. military trainers remain in Afghanistan and stating that this outcome is important to the president.

On the Iranian nuclear issue, the president will have to deal with the dilemmas arising from both the Syrian CW developments and the use of "redlines" in general. His September 15 comments on Iran were a welcome step, but he should still spell out his views on military force and what he will do if Iran crosses his redline, using themes from his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize speech. Although avoiding specificity on redlines is usually a good idea, being more specific could heighten U.S. credibility under the current circumstances.

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