

# How to Make the Best Out of Russia's Flawed Plan for Syria

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**President Obama should use Moscow's gambit as an opportunity to turn international and domestic momentum back in his favor on Syria, even while recognizing it for the cynical feint that it assuredly is.**

**T**hat Russia has intervened at the last moment in an effort to halt a U.S. military operation in the Middle East should come as little surprise. Moscow engaged in similar last-ditch efforts prior to the first and second Gulf wars, likely in pursuit of twin objectives: preserving an ally, and thus Russian influence, in the region; and derailing the use of force by the United States and thus defending the principle of noninterference, which Moscow rigorously applies to other powers but disregards in its own conduct, especially in its own neighborhood.

While Russia's motivations today may be the same as those in these previous cases, however, the situation facing President Barack Obama is quite different from those facing his predecessors. With a U.S. military operation lacking much international support and Obama's request for authorization facing an embarrassing defeat in the House of Representatives and perhaps the Senate, the Russian initiative may be viewed as a veritable godsend by the White House. Obama will claim Moscow's offer is the result not only of tough diplomacy toward Russia, having canceled a planned summit with President Vladimir Putin just last week, but also of "credible military threats" toward Syria.

In reality, however, the credibility of American military threats was fading fast as congressional defeat loomed for Obama's request for authorization to strike Syria. What the Russian gambit truly provides the White House, therefore, is an opportunity to gain some room for maneuver and to attempt to shift the momentum on Syria back in its favor. Turning Moscow's offer to the U.S. advantage, however, will take realism and diplomatic savvy.

On its face, the Russian proposal is wildly impractical. Even if Bashar al-Assad's regime cooperated with chemical weapons (CW) inspectors, locating and gaining access to Syria's CW amid a civil war, in which control of territory is contested by a variety of armed groups and Damascus's authority is limited, would be near impossible, and destroying those CW would take a long time. But Assad's track record suggests that he will not cooperate. He has blocked the efforts of U.N. weapons inspectors to date and has also failed to provide the International Atomic Energy

Agency access to suspected Syrian nuclear weapons sites. Just like Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, Assad could be expected to make every effort to preserve his CW capabilities and evade inspectors.

More fundamentally, Syria's conflict is not about chemical weapons, their use, or their disposal. Obama chose to identify CW use as a red line for U.S. intervention and has perplexingly made the elimination of Assad's CW capabilities a goal that is apparently independent from broader U.S. goals in Syria, such as the "political solution" that the administration frequently asserts is necessary.

But Assad's CW use is just one way in which the Syrian conflict has spun out of control and threatened U.S. national security interests. The conflict has yielded a shocking toll of fatalities and refugees, has threatened to destabilize Syria's neighbors, has amplified the terrorist threat in the region, and has placed an enormous economic and security strain on countries like Jordan and Turkey. It has also exacerbated tensions between regional powers and strains between the United States and its regional allies.

Even if the Russian plan succeeded beyond all expectations in eliminating Syria's CW stockpiles, in its current (admittedly inchoate) form it holds little prospect for addressing the broader strategic and humanitarian threats posed by the Syrian conflict. Indeed, the fact that it has drawn quick support from Assad's key allies -- Russia and Iran -- suggests that it is judged by them as a means to rescue Assad rather than hold him accountable.

Despite these flaws, the Obama administration can attempt to turn the Russian proposal to its advantage. The American response should not focus on Moscow's position, but the interest in avoiding U.S. military intervention implicit in that position. To that end, the United States should insist that the elimination of CW not take place amid the conflict, but be part and parcel of a satisfactory resolution of that conflict. Such a resolution must include accountability for President Assad and key members of his inner circle for the use of CW and their brutalization of Syria's civilian population. It is of little purpose, after all, to deter or punish CW use if by implication we excuse the slaughter of tens of thousands of Syrian civilians. It must also include an international mechanism to protect those civilians going forward.

Meanwhile, Obama should ask Congress to authorize him to use military force if this diplomacy fails to produce a satisfactory result, while not overly restricting that authorization in a way that puts the president in a weak position vis-a-vis Moscow and Damascus. This would not only put some real credibility behind U.S. military threats, but it would offer an approach more likely to attract support. The Obama administration's previous proposal was so narrowly focused in an effort to gain domestic and allied support that, ironically, it was also easy to reject, being connected not to vital strategic interests but rather to abstract "international norms" that the international community was nevertheless unready to enforce.

The Russian proposal may indeed be a product of an off-the-cuff remark by Secretary of State John Kerry, just as Obama's original "red line" proclamation may not have been preplanned or well thought through. It is also a disappointment to the Syrian opposition and some U.S. allies in the region, who hoped a U.S. strike would turn the tide against Assad.

But the reality was that prospects for such a strike were diminishing, and U.S. policy on Syria was careering toward a nadir. Obama should thus seek to use Moscow's gambit as an opportunity to turn the international and domestic momentum back in his favor on Syria, even while recognizing it for the cynical feint that it assuredly is. Doing so will require diplomatic forethought and skill that the administration has not so far demonstrated and must now produce.

*Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute.* ❖

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