

From the Syria Veto to the Egypt NGO Crisis: A Weekend of Setbacks to U.S. Policy

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Brief Analysis

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Washington suffered two setbacks in the Middle East this weekend: the Russian/Chinese veto of a U.S.-backed UN Security Council resolution on Syria, and news that the Egyptian judiciary has indicted nineteen Americans in a wide-ranging investigation of U.S.-supported pro-democracy organizations. Although each of these issues arises out of country-specific circumstances and stands on its own as a major challenge to U.S. interests, there is a link between the two -- namely, the Obama administration's message to the relevant antagonists that the cost for "bad behavior" will be low.

A Double Victory for Russia and China

In the Syrian case, the effort to secure unanimous approval for a Security Council resolution backing the Arab League peace plan was, from the beginning, hobbled by the Libya precedent. In Moscow and Beijing's view, the resolution authorizing action to prevent humanitarian disaster in Libya morphed into a license to arm the rebels and overthrow the Qadhafi regime. Indeed, the Syria resolution was even bolder in its commitment to "leadership change," if not "regime change," in that it called for Bashar al-Assad to resign.

But if there is one thing that the Russians and Chinese detest more than third-party calls for "leadership change," it is the prospect of military intervention to implement it. That is why it was a mistake to remove the threat of intervention from the Syrian equation. Statements by U.S. officials forswearing even the idea of intervention -- which, remarkably, have defined U.S. policy even since the veto (see Secretary of State Clinton's post-veto comment that "military intervention has been absolutely ruled out, and we have made that clear from the very beginning") --

may have had the intent of making the Syria resolution more palatable to Russia and China, but in practice, they merely made the cost of vetoing the resolution more acceptable to those two naysayers.

The result was, in fact, a double victory for Moscow and Beijing -- not only did they succeed in blocking a resolution not to their liking, they also procured from Washington a commitment not to intervene militarily, which is what they allegedly feared most. There were at least two alternatives that would have served U.S. interests better: the administration could have issued a clear statement of intent to pursue the interventionist path if the Security Council resolution was vetoed; or, if a Russian/Chinese veto seemed likely no matter what, the administration could have called for a vote on the stronger text, before it was watered down to attract the naysayers, and thereby give it the measure of legitimacy that a 13-2 vote provides. Of course, the second option would never have worked if the administration was only bluffing; the intervention option would only have stood a chance if Washington was truly willing to go that route without China and Russia. While that has not been in the cards so far, Assad's relentless pummeling of civilians could drive up the death count so high that even those reluctant to act may be compelled to intervene, a possibility that U.S. statements should not have foreclosed.

The Fog of U.S.-Egypt Priorities

Similarly, Egypt's use of a judicial hammer against U.S.-backed pro-democracy NGOs may also reflect Cairo's (mis)reading of messages from Washington. While it has been no secret that elements of the Egyptian regime (both before and since the revolution) have been incensed at what they perceive to be U.S. meddling in Egypt's internal affairs via the operations of these NGOs, a tacit bargain has permitted them to stay in business for years, without formal registration. One of the great ironies of the current crisis is that a revolution whose most democratic and liberal proponents benefitted from the training provided by U.S. NGOs has now turned on those very institutions.

The reason is simple -- Egypt's current rulers are evidently convinced that Washington needs them even more now than we needed Hosni Mubarak over the past thirty years. After all, so this logic goes, the United States may have been willing to partner with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in engineering Mubarak's departure, but with the rise of Islamist parties and the evisceration of the liberal alternative, there is no one left to partner with in a post-SCAF Egypt.

For the SCAF, which bears responsibility for the actions of Egypt's current transitional civilian government, evidence of this thesis came in the form of Washington's relatively mild public comments after the initial raids on the NGOs in December. Urgent private phone calls to SCAF leaders notwithstanding, the administration's public stance was, as one senior official told a Cairo newspaper, to ensure that the NGO issue "did not distract us from the overall importance of the bilateral relationship between Egypt and the United States." Even if "regional stability" -- a codeword for maintaining the frigid peace with Israel -- is the U.S. priority in Egypt, the administration should have sent a clear message, in public, that failure to resolve the NGO crisis quickly and amicably could trigger a serious breach in U.S.-Egypt relations. Without such clarity, the SCAF quite logically interpreted this to mean that it would be subordinated to larger strategic concerns. The result is that, like Russia and China, the SCAF concluded that it would pay no significant price for its objectionable behavior.

Lessons from These Episodes

In both circumstances, U.S. policy had a certain logic -- entice Moscow and Beijing, do not inflame an already unstable situation in Egypt -- but in both cases, the reluctance to draw stark alternatives for the key actors only invited bad behavior to become worse. Repairing these situations will require the administration to consider strong U.S. responses: active measures to protect the Syrian people (including defensible humanitarian protection zones along Syria's borders and logistical and material support for the paramilitary units operating against the regime) and

suspension of discussions about future U.S. military assistance to Cairo pending the resolution of judicial proceedings against American aid workers.

Along the way, the fundamental lesson from these two episodes should also be applied to the greatest and most confounding challenge Washington faces in the region -- how to compel Iran to change course in its drive toward a nuclear weapon. The right approach is a formula that includes ever-tightening U.S. and international sanctions, a willingness to accept a diplomatic climb-down should the Iranians chose that path, visible military preparations that give substance to the "all options on the table" mantra, and close coordination with Israel and other like-minded states on the content and timing of potential preventive action. However, high-profile statements about U.S. vulnerabilities in the Gulf and Afghanistan -- as President Obama made in the course of his pre-Super Bowl interview last night -- cut into the effectiveness of that approach. In dealing with Iran, as in dealing with Russia, China, and the SCAF, staying on message is essential.

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