Europe, Syria, and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Jan 8, 2004

Brief Analysis

Syrian president Bashar al-Asad's January 6 interview with London's Daily Telegraph -- in which he indicated that Syria would not relinquish its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities until Israel did so also -- suggests that Syria is not likely to follow Libya's recent example of foregoing WMD in order to improve relations with the West. Still, Europe's newly aggressive approach to countering proliferation offers an opportunity for greater transatlantic coordination and the potential to reap concrete results.

Europe's Tougher Approach to Proliferation

The Iraq war may have brutally divided Europe, but its aftermath triggered a push for the development of the European Union's (EU's) Security Strategy. This approach recognizes key American concerns regarding threats from terrorism and proliferation, as well as the need to use force as a last resort (albeit only with the approval of the UN Security Council). Moreover, the strategy demonstrates that such problems could be addressed through multilateral diplomacy and policies of conditional engagement.

While Europe still has a long way to go in projecting a common foreign and security policy, last year it made remarkable progress in projecting a cohesive policy against WMD proliferation. In June 2003, the EU adopted a set of Basic Principles for its strategy against the proliferation of WMD, as well as an action plan to implement the principles. The plan emphasized not only the importance of multilateral approaches, but also the complementary relationship between diplomacy and the use of force. The plan also highlighted the need to engage the United States and Russia as partners in the nonproliferation effort, particularly in the Mediterranean region. In a critical break with past practice, the EU agreed to insist that all future EU Trade and Cooperation Agreements (TCA) with third parties will include a nonproliferation clause. Last month, the EU adopted a nonproliferation strategy that reinforced the recently adopted principles and made clear that WMD would now become a fundamental condition in all future EU agreements.

The timing of the new nonproliferation strategy was bad luck for Syria because the strategy emerged just as the European Commission (EC) was engaging Damascus on a TCA -- the rest of which have been concluded with every other Mediterranean country, as part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership begun in Barcelona in 1995. Increasingly, the EU is using such agreements -- and the trade benefits they offer -- as leverage to obtain political concessions in areas such as human rights and, now, proliferation, as happened recently with Iran. Thus, because the EU-Syrian negotiations happened to coincide with the EU's new proliferation policy, Syria has become the first test case of the policy.

Growing European Pressure on Syria

Although the EC completed a draft TCA with Syria in December 2003, the member states have not yet approved the agreement. Some key member states, such as Britain and Germany, have expressed concern that the proliferation clause is watered down, and have instructed the EC -- the body responsible for negotiating European trade agreements -- to re-enter negotiations with the Syrians on this issue. Several member states are concerned that if

the new proliferation policy is not applied in its first case, particularly with a country like Syria, the credibility of the entire initiative is in jeopardy.

Outside the TCA negotiations, Syria also is receiving pressure from some EU member states such as Britain, which is attempting to duplicate the Libyan success, this time with Syria. Efforts are centered on trying to entice the Syrians into joining the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) because, given intelligence suggesting a major stockpiling of such weapons by Damascus, this is the biggest area of concern. Many are predicting a similar trilateral effort among the Big Three (Britain, Germany and France) to negotiate a deal with Damascus like that of the Iranian model. That, however, seems improbable. France is not likely to apply such high-level pressure on Syria. Moreover, unlike the case of Iran, in which the International Atomic Energy Agency reported a clear violation of an international treaty, Syria -- not a signatory of the CWC -- evidently has not broken any treaty commitments.

Implications for Washington

The combination of diplomatic engagement and the threat of force is often necessary to exact change from states of concern. By itself, the demonstration of force in Iraq is not bringing states like Iran and Libya toward better behavior; European diplomacy and enticing carrots are also helping. In this sense, the bad cop/good cop division of labor between the United States and Europe could prove useful in the situation with Syria.

There is no doubt that Asad is not sitting comfortably in Damascus -- and, indeed, is busy shuttling around the region, even to Turkey, to shore up support -- largely because of his new American neighbors in Iraq. But, in order to translate such vulnerability into concrete results in areas of mutual concern to the United States and Europe, diplomatic engagement is crucial. Thus, Washington should welcome European efforts at conditional engagement, using its economic leverage to gain concessions in areas like proliferation, and it should support those member states seeking to maintain tough language in the EU-Syrian TCA negotiations.

That said, even Syrian concessions regarding proliferation in the TCA negotiations are unlikely to push Asad to follow Muammar Qadhafi's lead by giving up all WMD. Syria is much more likely to make concessions on terrorism and Iraq (as Asad's January 6 interview indicates), and perhaps even on the peace process -- a wildcard that would substantially relieve Damascus of pressure from both Washington and Europe -- than on chemical weapons. Still, Syria could be asked to take other nonproliferation steps, such as signing an additional protocol, ratifying the Biological Weapons Convention and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and subscribing to the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation.

Another useful step would be for Syria to agree to join a regional security dialogue in the Middle East that Europe and the United States have been recently interested in reactivating. Syria never participated in the multilateral arms control and regional security (ACRS) process, which began after the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and foundered in the mid-1990s. The growing vulnerability felt by Syria, combined with the recent actions by Iran and Libya, offer a unique opportunity to establish a new regional security forum that would address region-wide security concerns and the underlying sources for regional conflict -- hopefully this time including the three countries that stayed out of ACRS. Interestingly, the Israeli security cabinet held a session on regional arms control last month for the first time since the breakdown of ACRS. A regional security dialogue may help facilitate a regional peace agreement, which is a precondition for Syria or Israel to give up all their WMD capabilities.

Such a regional dialogue would not preclude continued U.S. and European efforts to press countries of concern on a case-by-case basis regarding their WMD capabilities, particularly if shared intelligence suggests an unequivocal and growing threat or violations of international commitments, as was the situation with Iran. But on both tracks -- bilateral and multilateral -- concrete action and a coordinated approach from the United States and Europe are more likely to be effective than continued debates about what the use of force accomplished in Iraq.

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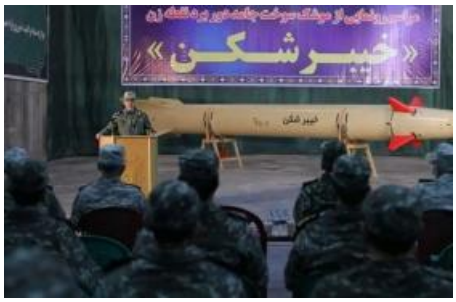

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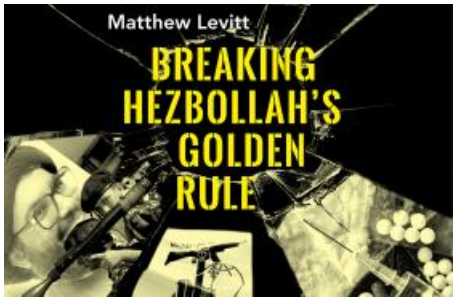

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