

How Syria Pits Russia Against United States

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The latest United Nations resolution sponsored by Western powers that was designed to increase the pressure on Syrian President Bashar Assad and force him to step down was once again rejected by Russia and China, making it abundantly clear that all diplomatic efforts have come to a dead end. If Russia, the main supporter of the Assad regime, still believes that Assad can survive and will support him to the bitter end, Moscow is making a colossal mistake.

Conversely, if the United States continues to issue one toothless condemnation after another and seeks cover under hollow political plans to oust Assad, it will end up in no better position than Russia. The truth is that neither Russia nor the United States believes that the Assad regime can survive. Thus, they must now agree on a way to find a solution that rests on coercive diplomacy acceptable to both while preserving their interests.

There are many irrefutable facts that strongly suggest that Assad is doomed. The ongoing

violence is escalating and gradually tipping the scales in favor of the rebels. The remarkable rebel success in killing four top officials in charge of executing Assad's brutal crackdown has increased the uncertainty and demoralized many of Assad's top commanders. The defection of top officials, including the prime minister and three other high-level defections that Syrian rebels announced on Monday, has made it increasingly difficult for Assad to find individuals he can trust from his shrinking pool of loyalists. Emboldened by their successes in attacking Assad's power base, the rebels have made great strides in their ability to organize and plan ways of inflicting ever greater casualties on his better-trained and better-equipped regular army and militia forces.

President Vladimir Putin is not so naive to think that the Syrian upheaval is an aberration. He understands that it is a continuation of the Arab Spring uprisings. Like Libyans, Egyptians, Yemenis and Tunisians, Syrians are no longer willing to live in subjugation, humiliation and hopelessness.

Concerned over his deteriorating domestic position, Putin, who is now seen as being complicit in Syria's humanitarian tragedy, will seek to contain the damage sooner rather than later, as the Kremlin is certainly guided by its broader interests in the region. U.S. President Barack Obama also understands that the United States will lose much of its remaining credibility and influence if it continues to take cover under abortive diplomatic efforts and engage in empty rhetoric hopelessly aimed at ending the conflict.

Russia knows that without collaborating with the United States on the future of Syria, Moscow will have little say in shaping or influencing the new political order that will emerge after the Assad regime falls. Therefore, the time has come for the two powers, in partnership with the Syrian National Council, the Arab League and Turkey, to fully collaborate in the search for an outcome that will preserve much of their respective interests while simultaneously preventing the crisis from spinning out of control. Indeed, neither Russia nor the United States can allow the crisis to destroy the country through tens of thousands of casualties without severely undercutting their immediate and long-term interests.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said several times that Russia is not wedded to Assad and would not object to a solution to end the crisis under unspecified circumstances. The prospect, if not the certainty, of a full-fledged civil war may now have created the circumstances for Moscow and Washington to work together on forcing Assad out. If Putin can strike a deal with the United States and the Syrian National Council that preserves Russia's interests in Syria, Putin may be willing to sacrifice Assad. Once Assad is told that he is about to lose Moscow's support, he may opt for safe passage to another country and avoid Moammar Gadhafi's fate.

It is imperative that the Syrian National Council be prepared to take over the government apparatus when Assad leaves by establishing a shadow government made up of leaders who have recently escaped from Syria. Once the council presents a united front, the support it receives from the West, and presumably Russia, should be contingent on a longer transitional period of three to five years before elections take place. In this manner, new secular political parties will have a much better chance to organize and prepare comprehensive political platforms, and the country will substantially reduce the Islamists' chances of capturing power, which neither Russia, the United States nor the Syrian National Council wants.

In addition, the United States and Russia should be prepared to sponsor a second UN resolution authorizing the establishment of a peacekeeping force that ideally would consist of a minimum of 10,000 soldiers from Arab states. Preferably, this force would fall under the joint command of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, with external advisers from the West and Russia to provide logistical and technical support. Such a force must have a mandate to act to maintain peace if necessary so it can operate effectively within Syria.

Considering the multiple conflicting issues between all the players whose interests will be affected by the outcome of the crisis in Syria, this approach may well be seen as far-fetched. But by leaving the crisis to take its own course, everyone will wind up on the losing end if the Middle East gets bogged down in a sectarian military conflict that could affect multiple countries and last a decade or longer.

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