

Russia Warns West on Syria After Obama Threats

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Lavrov greeting China's top diplomat, Dai Bingguo, at a meeting Tuesday. **Maxim Shemetov**

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned the West on Tuesday against any unilateral action on Syria after U.S. President Barack Obama said U.S. forces could act if the Syrian leader deployed chemical weapons against rebels trying to topple him.

Russia and China have opposed military intervention in Syria throughout 17 months of bloodshed and have vetoed three UN Security Council resolutions backed by Western and Arab states that would have raised pressure on Damascus to end violence.

Lavrov spoke at a meeting with China's top diplomat one day after Obama, in some of his strongest language yet, said U.S. forces could move against Syrian President Bashar Assad if he resorted to chemical weapons against insurgents.

Russia and China base their diplomatic cooperation on "the need to strictly adhere to the norms of international law and the principles contained in the UN Charter, and not to allow their violation," Lavrov said at a meeting with Chinese State Councilor Dai Bingguo.

“I think this is the only correct path in today’s conditions,” Lavrov told Dai, who also met with President Vladimir Putin and his top security adviser, Nikolai Patrushev, on Monday for consultations that went unannounced by the Kremlin.

Lavrov’s remarks underscored Moscow’s wish to keep international efforts to end Syria’s crisis within the United Nations, where Russia and China wield clout as two of the five permanent Security Council members with veto power.

Frustrated by the vetoes and by the refusal of Russia and China to join calls for Assad to leave power, the United States and other Western and Arab countries are seeking other ways to exert influence on the situation in Syria.

Obama said Monday that he had refrained “at this point” from ordering military engagement in Syria. But when asked whether he might deploy forces, for example to secure Syrian chemical and biological weapons, he said his view could change.

Russia has also expressed concern about Syrian chemical weapons, saying it had told Damascus that even the threat to use them was unacceptable.

But Lavrov said Monday that the Security Council alone could authorize the use of external force against Syria, warning against imposing “democracy by bombs.”

Russian leaders have said they are determined to avoid a repeat of what occurred in 2011 in Libya, when Moscow let NATO military operations go ahead by abstaining from the UN Security Council resolution that authorized air operations.

Russian officials then accused the United States and its allies of overstepping their mandate and using it to help rebels overthrow longtime leader Moammar Gadhafi. Putin, at that time prime minister, likened the UN resolution to “medieval calls for crusades.”

Putin, who has faced frequent U.S. and European criticism over his treatment of dissent, has made opposition to foreign intervention in sovereign states on human rights grounds a central plank of his foreign policy in his new presidency.

China has issued similar warnings to the West.

In remarks at the start of his otherwise private meeting with Dai and other officials, Lavrov said the opportunity to discuss coordination on global affairs was “very, very timely.”

Dai, speaking through an interpreter, said he was in Russia for “consultations on strategic security” and had had a “very good, friendly and important meeting” with Putin.

A Syrian delegation led by Qadri Jamil, deputy prime minister for economic affairs, was also in Moscow on Tuesday and was expected to meet Foreign Ministry officials. It was Jamil’s second visit this month.

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