

Beware of Russia Baiting and Switching on Syria

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It should be more than clear by now to anyone who believed that achieving Western consensus over Syria depends on securing assistance from Russia that Moscow is interested in anything but helping. Agreeing on a deal with the Kremlin over putting Syria's chemical weapons under international control was never a good idea.

Despite criticism heaped on U.S. President Barack Obama from all sides, however, the decision may reflect a more nuanced Russia strategy than the White House gets credit for. It could still pay off in some way.

For that to happen, however, it will be crucial to remember that navigating the Russian baiting and switching over Syria that has put Washington in its current position requires that there be no further illusions about the Kremlin's motivations. That is particularly important to keep in mind as Western powers push for a tough new United Nations Security Council resolution in the coming days and weeks.

It is also rarely easy. Moscow's sometimes contradictory actions often mystify observers because they tend to see Russia as a place whose leaders make decisions largely in the country's interests, not solely their own. In fact, the most important function of Russian institutions and rhetoric is often to obfuscate decision-making by the country's real bosses in the Kremlin. That's a central aspect of President Vladimir Putin's rule, although the precedents go far back in Russian history.

The ability to bluff is a remarkably successful trait of traditional Russian political culture. From the laws of Catherine the Great, which omitted many elements of the Enlightenment that she claimed they reflected, to Soviet communism, whose tone and practice would surely have dumfounded Karl Marx, Russian rulers have regularly appeared to be far more westernized than they were.

In other words, it is no accident that Putin is hard to read.

Nevertheless, it's no secret by now that Moscow's overriding goal in Syria isn't to find a political solution as much as to increase its own influence by obstructing international consensus. Russia has torpedoed three UN resolutions on Syria over the past two years. The Kremlin's veto power, a Cold War relic, may be its most important lever in international affairs. That is why Moscow regularly warns of Armageddon if Western countries circumvent the UN, even while the Kremlin does everything possible to undermine agreement there.

According to Putin's Soviet-era foreign policy manual, which apparently equates being feared with being respected, appearing to stand up to the West keeps Putin in the headlines and increases his popularity back home, especially when he is waging an ongoing battle to distract Russians from the corruption that sustains his rule.

If there were ever any questions about the purpose of Russia's chemical weapons plan, which experts convincingly argue would be virtually impossible to carry out in the conditions of Syria's civil war, they should be dispelled by Moscow's resistance to a UN resolution that would enforce the scheme with the threat of military action.

The Kremlin's tactics include lambasting the West while pouring cold water over a report by UN inspectors that indirectly points the finger at Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime for the use of chemical weapons last month. Moscow calls the attack a "provocation" staged by Syrian rebels.

No matter that the "proof" Russian officials cite appears to be based on dubious sources at best. Brazenness is important to Moscow's throwing its weight around. The Kremlin knows it doesn't have to prove anything to sow doubt.

Never mind that helping escalate instability in the Middle East as a means of retaining importance in the world contradicts any reasonable logic about what would really best serve Russia's long-term interests as a supposedly responsible member of the international community.

Moscow has other motives, to be sure. The Kremlin is interested in propping up Assad as its last remaining Middle East ally, picturing itself as playing a part in the wider divide between Shiites and Sunnis, backing Syria's ally Iran and serving as a balance force against U.S. Persian

Gulf allies. But its main aim, far from any genuine concern about international law or even the Syrian regime, is to increase its own leverage over both sides.

Luckily, Obama's "reset" policy has put the U.S. in a strong position to act. By seeking cooperation with Moscow until now, Washington would be more than justified in moving ahead without its consent. That was always one of the policy's strengths.

But hope for significant dividends from the reset will have been in vain if difficult decisions are not taken now.

Despite the general view that Russia is winning the diplomatic battle over Syria, there's a good chance for the U.S., France and Britain to turn the tables by holding Moscow to its word that Syria must now be held accountable for failing to comply with the deal. To do so, they must pursue a strong Security Council resolution backed by the threat of force under the UN Charter's Chapter 7. Failing that, they must act alone.

As the Obama administration navigates its perilous path forward, its actions will have consequences that will reverberate far beyond the Syrian civil war, the chemical weapons disarmament plan and even dealing with Iran.

Among the broader ramifications for the U.S. as it seeks to emerge from the shadow of the Iraq war are its relations with other rivals. They are closely watching how the White House deals with Russia as thousands of Syrians die each week and the conflict's threat to long-term regional stability steadily grows.

The White House may have agreed on Moscow's Syria proposal as a way to avoid a vote in the U.S. Congress over a military strike that it would have likely lost anyway. But if U.S. lawmakers do vote on a U.S. strike initiative, they should remember that tougher choices will have to be made in the future regardless of the issue of chemical weapons. The Syria conflict will only worsen.

If Moscow continues to see itself as "winning" by further stalling international action over Syria, that would not only further betray Syria's innocent civilians. It would also make it more difficult in the future to advance U.S. interests and values on Syria and other issues.

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