

Putin and Obama Take Responsibility in Syria

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U.S. President Barack Obama and President Vladimir Putin now share a unique political challenge: they both own Syria.

Each leader for his own reasons was desperate to avoid U.S. air strikes.

For Putin, U.S. unilateral action, bypassing the United Nations Security Council, would have pierced the illusion of Russia's international empowerment under his rule. Standing helplessly by while the U.S. was attacking Moscow's chief Middle Eastern client would have exposed Putin as internationally impotent.

Putin's authority in Russia rests in large measure on his image as a strong world player whose position cannot be ignored. A U.S. strike would have underscored Moscow's irrelevance, a debilitating domestic weakness for Putin. He would have had to pledge massive Russian military aid to Damascus to check the U.S.'s intervention, risking a direct U.S.-Russia

standoff.

Obama faced a decision of ordering strikes without Congressional authorization and without UN backing.

Now, these partners in face-saving have an investment in making the deal work, despite its apparent pitfalls. The nightmare scenario would be to have the whole thing unravel.

Moscow will push Syrian President Bashar Assad to destroy his chemical weapons, eliminating the pretext for a U.S. intervention. Moscow has signaled publicly that it might abandon its support for Assad were he to cheat. The new Security Council resolution did not include an automatic recourse to Chapter 7 enforcement measures in case of Syria's noncompliance, but it mentioned that action could be taken under a future resolution. Obama keeps the use of force on the table.

The chemical weapons deal facilitates a political settlement in Syria. Its implementation requires a halt in hostilities. Moscow needs to ease Assad from power while maintaining Russia's influence with remnants of his regime. It is the reason why Moscow denies Assad's responsibility for the weapons' use. Assad's "voluntary" decision not to seek re-election after his presidential term expires in 2014 may advance the transition.

Obama is right to say it is a fantasy that Syria can somehow return to a pre-war status quo. It may already be impossible to keep the country together. Sunnis will never accept Alawite-Shiite minority rule, nor does Assad's government seem interested in governing areas beyond the Damascus-Latakia corridor. Bosnia-style cantonization with an international police force might be considered.

To succeed in Syria, U.S.-Russia cooperation is essential. The "reset" may have stumbled on a new agenda.

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