Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention

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Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, there have been intermittent hopes that Moscow might play a constructive diplomatic role in resolving it. But the focus on Russia has been deeply misleading. Russia, for reasons that have little to do with Syria itself, was never going to be part of the solution to the crisis – at least on terms that the West and the Syrian opposition could accept. Further, Russia’s centrality to international diplomacy on this issue and its seeming obstinacy expose deep flaws in post-Cold War Western doctrine on international intervention. Russia’s centrality when it comes to Syria is more a function of those flaws than anything else.

As the latest round of failed talks with the Russians – this time between UN/League of Arab States Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in late December 2012 – conclusively demonstrate, Russia will not sign up for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis on Western or Arab terms. Senior Russian officials have made that clear for months, but some in the international community act as though they refuse to believe them.

This disbelief stems from a misunderstanding of the Russian position. The predominant focus has been on the ties that bind Russia to Assad’s Syria, including military, military-industrial and intelligence-sharing. Journalists diligently produce stories on Russian arms sales to Syria and its naval facility at Tartus. A less noted, but more significant factor has been Russian anxieties about the displacement by Sunni Islamist governments of secular

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autocrats in Syria and other Arab countries since the Arab Spring began. Russia’s immediate neighbourhood in the South Caucasus and Central Asia features a number of countries where such a scenario cannot be excluded, and there are over 20 million Russian Muslims, the majority of whom are Sunni and live in the North Caucasus, where Russia has fought two civil wars and continues to battle what is now called the Caucasus Emirate. Decision-makers in Moscow are quick to point out that the emirate and its predecessors were directly supported by entities in some of the Arab countries now leading the call for Assad’s departure.

These factors certainly play some role in Moscow’s approach to Syria. But they do not explain Russian policy on international action on the crisis. Indeed, the Kremlin has issued three UN Security Council vetoes, bent over backwards to water down the Geneva Communiqué calling for a peaceful transition of authority, and fastidiously avoided joining the call for ‘Assad to go’ not because of its interests in Syria, its fear of extremist spillover, or because it ‘backs Assad’. That allegation, frequently levelled in recent months, flies in the face of the persistent Russian signalling that Moscow couldn’t care less about Assad’s fate. As early as summer 2011, then-President Dmitri Medvedev warned that barring immediate reforms, ‘a sad fate awaits him’.

Instead, the tragedy in Syria has brought to the surface a fundamental divergence between Russia’s approach to international intervention and that of much of the rest of the international community, particularly the United States and the EU. Moscow does not believe the Security Council should be in the business of either implicitly or explicitly endorsing the removal of a sitting government.

Many in the Russian foreign-policy establishment believe that the string of US-led interventions that have resulted in regime change since the end of the Cold War – Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya – is a threat to the stability of the international system and potentially to ‘regime stability’ in Russia itself and its autocratic allies in its neighbourhood. Russia did not let the Security Council give its imprimatur to these interventions, and will never do so if it suspects the stated or unstated motive is removal of a sitting government.
The notion that Russia could eventually be the target of such an intervention might seem absurd in Washington, but suspicion, bordering on paranoia, of potential future US intentions runs deep in Moscow. Russia therefore uses what power it has to shape the international system (particularly its permanent seat on the Security Council) to avoid creating a precedent that could eventually be used against it.

In the case of Syria, Moscow cannot be convinced that US motives are purely driven by the humanitarian calamity that Assad has created. Instead, it sees sinister geopolitics: the United States moving to get rid of a government with a foreign policy that had long contradicted US interests, particularly by aligning with Iran. So when President Barack Obama proclaimed on 18 August 2011, that ‘the time has come for President Assad to step aside’, thus making regime change an official US priority, the window for common ground with Russia at the UN closed completely. The fact that the texts of the proposed resolutions did not reflect that priority was irrelevant given what Moscow saw as Washington’s now openly stated ultimate goal.

Since then, many have tried to change Russia’s policy; all have failed. Journalists often inadvertently perpetuate a perceived need to ‘take another go at Moscow’ when every Russian statement is parsed for hidden clues to an imminent policy shift. This was particularly true at the end of 2012 and in January 2013, as Russia’s assessment of the facts on the ground indeed changed; the Russians might be dogmatic, but they’re not blind. But a changed assessment in this case will not lead to a changed policy. The reason is simple: Russia’s stance on international action on the Syria crisis has more to do with anxieties about the implications of US power than it does with Syria itself.

Russia’s buyer’s remorse from its abstention on Security Council Resolution 1973 authorising intervention in Libya underscores the centrality of deeply held principles, not concrete regional interests, in Russian thinking. The certainly widespread view in Moscow is that language in that resolution calling for ‘all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and
civilian populated areas under threat of attack’ cannot possibly be interpreted to cover NATO’s air campaign, which toward the end was directly facilitating the rebels’ efforts at the overthrow of the Gadhafi government. But NATO’s implementation of 1973 did not irk Russian decision-makers so much because of the impact on the ground in Libya. Instead, it convinced them that humanitarian intervention under the banner of the Responsibility to Protect was simply an elaborate cover for regime change.

Without conceding Russia’s argument that NATO overstepped its Security Council mandate in Libya, Western policymakers would do well to reflect on this issue. Responsibility to Protect is a relatively new doctrine (the Security Council accepted it in 2006, and the General Assembly endorsed it in 2009) but the broader concept of humanitarian intervention has been a core foreign-policy preoccupation since the end of the Cold War. The idea that to prevent or stop a humanitarian crisis the implicated government must be toppled, however, is a more recent one. Unfortunately, it has become conventional wisdom in certain Western capitals, without adequate analysis. As political commentator David Rieff writes, ‘Regime change — its moral legitimacy and political practicality — is the ghost at the banquet of humanitarian intervention. Use any euphemism you wish, but in the end these interventions have to be about regime change if they are to have any chance of accomplishing their stated goal.’

Do they? One can make a case that the two no-fly zones in Iraq maintained by the United States, the United Kingdom and (until 1998) France between the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion were a successful preventative humanitarian intervention, one that took place during Saddam Hussein’s rule. While the justification in international law of the zones was questioned by many, including Russia, the hundreds of thousands of sorties flown in that period did prevent further massacres of either the Kurdish or Shi’a populations, and did not entail regime change. Some, presumably including Russia, assumed that Resolution 1973 was intended to create a similar outcome in Libya, with Benghazi saved from Gadhafi’s army but with his writ left more or less intact in other parts of the country. Whether or not such an outcome was possible on the ground will remain unknown. But it seems doubtful that such an outcome could have been sustained
politically in the West, given the media environment in which policymakers now operate. The pressures generated by ubiquitous television coverage (in the Arab world, led by al-Jazeera), the 24-hour news cycle, and social media make imperfect half-measures increasingly politically untenable. In any case, it seems like NATO military planners never even contemplated ceasing operations after Benghazi.

That decision – or rather, that action (no alternatives were considered, after all) – was bound to have implications for the Security Council, and its capacity to provide legitimacy to future interventions. Barring regime change in Russia and China themselves, the Security Council is highly unlikely to pass resolutions that would endorse Western militaries’ intervention unless, as in Mali, the intention is to bolster a sitting government. As with Syria, even the suspicion of ulterior motives is enough to elicit a Russian veto.

But in the case of Syria, Russia didn’t have to dream up an unspoken motive: the United States and leading EU states have been on the record since Obama’s speech and simultaneous European statements that Assad’s departure is a policy objective. Obama’s call came in the context of unrelenting media pressure, and a push by certain European governments. And it was a demand of Syrian opposition groups, which have all along stated that Assad’s departure must be a precondition for a political settlement with his regime. They have ample reason not to want to sit down at the same table with a man they consider primarily responsible for tens of thousands of civilian deaths. But external actors have the responsibility to think more strategically than parties to a horrific conflict. In retrospect Western governments might consider whether their decision to make regime change a goal not only made Security Council action impossible, but also deeply complicated achieving a political settlement in Syria. We will never know if Assad would have been more willing to compromise under other circumstances, but Western powers’ call for him to go seems to have foreclosed that chance.

Today Russia remains central to Syria diplomacy largely because the Obama administration, unlike its predecessor, wants UN legitimisation and backing for its interventions. Ironically, those inside and near the administration who pushed most vociferously for NATO to topple Gadhafi are
also some of the most ardent proponents of international law. The tragic diplomatic gridlock on Syria should be a lesson to them: the United States can either do regime change or work through the Security Council, but it can’t do both.

Even among those who recognise New York to be a dead end, some say that Russia could, if it so chose, pressure Assad into making the concessions necessary for a negotiated settlement. Perhaps Russia had such leverage with Assad 12 or 18 months ago. Even then, Moscow seemed unwilling to deliver tough messages to Damascus, despite Assad’s flagrant violations of the one Syria-related Security Council resolution that did pass, UNSCR 2042, in April 2012. Resolution 2042 not only established the short-lived monitoring mission, but also included the six-point Annan Plan, which, inter alia, called on the Syrian government to ‘immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centres, and begin pullback of military concentrations in and around population centres’.

Since then, over 40,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting, and hundreds of thousands have fled their homes. Assad seems to believe that he is in a fight for his personal survival and there is no good reason to think that he would do anything more than smile and nod at any suggestions from Moscow to compromise. And since the only way to get the opposition to the table would be for the first suggestion to be for Assad to give up his office, Russia is not going to prove helpful outside the Security Council either.

If there is one palpable outcome of all the recent Russia-centric Syrian crisis diplomacy, it has been Moscow’s empowerment. This will likely prove a fleeting empowerment, but in the meantime the international community’s time and energy are better spent on efforts that have the potential to produce a resolution. By blurring the line between humanitarian intervention and forcible regime change, and thus effectively removing the Security Council from the equation, Western governments bear responsibility for finding other means of ending the unfolding tragedy.
Notes
