

SYRIA'S FATE IN THE BALANCE

Jayantha Dhanapala exposes some of the myths surrounding a crisis-ridden Syria

The United Nations rose to one of its finest moments when the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2118

(2013) on 27 September, addressing the outrageous use of chemical weapons in Syria while setting guidelines for a political solution to the civil war in the country. Great powers can sometimes agree to use diplomacy to save the world from conflict.

However, the assumption that the Syrian crisis has been solved through a US-Russian agreement on Syria's chemical weapons hides the ugly reality of a continuing civil war, with daily death tolls adding to a cumulative count of about 100,000, a suffering populace and an exodus of refugees now numbering 1.9 million, apart from the displaced.

Certainly, the world was saved from another display of arrogant adventurism by self-appointed global policemen without the legality of a UN Security Council resolution, converting yet another Arab country into the same sectarian disunity that engulfs Iraq and Libya after regime change was achieved.

LESSONS LEARNT President Barack Obama failed to persuade his own Congress and a war-weary public that the Assad regime was guilty of using chemical weapons – on 21 August, in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta – and had to be punished with air strikes without waiting for the UN inspectors' report.



CONFLICT'S TOLL Residents of Syria's eastern town of Deir ez-Zor walk past the debris of a building reportedly hit by a missile on 26 September.

There are a number of lessons to be drawn from this, while reaffirming the need for a political solution to the Syrian conflict, beginning with a Geneva II conference. Having rashly proclaimed the red line of chemical weapon use as a

trigger for US military action, Obama tolerated several earlier incidents until 21 August. Interestingly, this horrifying incident took place after UN inspectors were permitted entry into Syria with the consent of the Assad regime.

Obama promptly concluded that chemical weapons had been used by the Syrian regime, and not the rebels. Subsequent revelations hint that the US intelligence that he relied on was doctored. The US President, who ironically had

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was thrown a political lifeline by an ingenious Russian diplomatic move which could prove to be the game changer. At the same time, leaked CIA files proved the US knowingly helped Saddam Hussein use chemical weapons against Iran in 1988, with intelligence on Iranian troop formations, location and movements.

In a climactic week, what appeared to be an inevitable attack on Syria by some Western powers, turned into a constructive diplomatic negotiation to seek peaceful solutions.

Russia's brilliant Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (who began his career in Colombo, where he studied Sinhala) proposed international custody of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal.

The Syrian President Bashar al-Assad went even further, offering to surrender all his weapons and join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). Syria has avoided such a move because of Israel's nuclear weapons.

Events proceeded with speed, with Russian President Vladimir Putin rubbing in Obama's humiliation with an op-ed in the New York Times, addressing the people of the US over the heads of its leaders.

He warned: "A strike would increase violence and unleash a new wave of terrorism. It could undermine multilateral efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and further destabilise the Middle East and North Africa. It could throw the entire system of international law and order out of balance."

Despite Russia's support for Syria and its supply of arms to the Assad regime, this warning resonated around the world.

CURRENT AFFAIRS



been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize soon after his first election, called for military strikes without putting US boots on the ground.

British Prime Minister David Cameron fell into line, rather like the way Tony Blair supported George W. Bush over Iraq. The important difference was that with strong

public opinion polls in both countries opposing military action, Obama and Cameron cautiously decided to consult their legislatures. The House of Commons voted 285-272 against any intervention, and with many of his backbenchers and Liberal-Democrat partners also joining in the opposition, Cameron backed down.

Not so Obama, who pressed on. He was no doubt influenced by the pro-Israeli lobby led by the powerful American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), addressing the nation and proposing a resolution in Congress despite voices against it.

RUSSIAN LIFELINE Faced with imminent defeat, Obama

THE SYRIAN CRISIS

The Lavrov-Kerry meeting in Geneva worked hard to come out with a balanced agreement which was greeted with relief by all, except of course Israel and France. The latter, under its Socialist President François Hollande – in marked contrast to the more conservative ex-president Jacques Chirac, who strongly opposed Bush over Iraq in 2003 – announced his support for Obama and the Syrian rebels.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, while condemning the use of chemical weapons, was consistent in urging member states to wait for the report of his experts. He warned against action outside the UN Charter. The UN's mandate was to find out whether chemical weapons had been used, rather than who used them.

INCLUSIVE TALKS There is an amazing chutzpah on the part of the US, France and Israel, as possessor states of the most destructive weapons of mass destruction (the nuclear weapon) in their reaction to chemical weapons.

A statement issued by the Nobel Peace Prize recipient, the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, stated inter alia: "Rather than a limited military intervention with unclear goals, a cessation of all war-related actions should be promoted by engaging in an all-inclusive dialogue including the Government of Syria,

representatives of opposition and neighbouring countries (Iran and Saudi Arabia included), as well as NATO countries and Russia."

It continued: "The universalisation of the CWC and the dismantlement of CW (Chemical Weapons) stockpiles is a goal that needs to be prioritised, and plans should be discussed for how to achieve a Syria free of CW following the cessation of the current conflict. Events in Syria reinforce the urgent need for a Middle East WMD Free Zone."

The conference called for by the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Review Conference in 2010 for 2012 should be held with utmost urgency, it added: "Those countries who believe the use of military force is a viable option following an alleged attack, but who block efforts to convene meetings that could lead to the eradication of these weapons from regional arsenals, bear some responsibility for the deepening quagmire in the Middle East."

Hans Blix headed the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (a. k. a. UNMOVIC), the UN body vested with the verification and destruction of Iraq's WMDs. He wisely observed that "political dynamics are running ahead of due process."

Another expert, Prof. Ramesh Thakur wrote: "The one significant development since

2003 is the unanimous adoption of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) norm in 2005. As one of the main authors of the original R2P report in 2001, let me say two things. First, the use of chemical weapons does constitute a war crime and a crime against humanity, thereby triggering R2P which covers four atrocity crimes in all (the others being genocide and ethnic cleansing). The UN Secretary-General's special advisers were right to call attention to this. If use is proven and guilt established, the UN as the custodian of our collective conscience must take appropriately tough action and hold the perpetrators criminally accountable."

"But (second), they failed to speak truth to power by not emphasising – at a time when the FUKUS (France, the UK and the US) leaders were uttering public threats of military strikes unilaterally, if necessary – that R2P action must be UN-authorized in conformity with the UN Charter, and for civilian protection, not punishment. If NATO were to launch military strikes on Syria by misusing R2P language, they will kill R2P," he added.

As a concept in international relations, R2P has already lost credibility in the UN, since the West transformed it into a tool of their own policies for selective regime change. A resolution in the Security

Council seeking military action in Syria is certain to be vetoed by both Russia and China. Any NATO action thereafter would spark global outrage and tragic consequences for the Middle East with spiralling terrorism, sectarian violence and no prospect of regional peace for the immediate future.

POLITICAL SOLUTION The only country this will satisfy would be Israel. It is feeding the neo-conservative lobby in the US against Assad and the Iranian regime, which after the election of Hassan Rouhani has demonstrated a willingness to talk to Obama to resolve the issue of its nuclear programme through diplomacy.

Indeed, the process of chemical weapons inspection and destruction will take time. Syria has furnished records of its chemical weapons arsenal, which must of course be verified. That opportunity could be used to accelerate the search for a political solution and the convening of Geneva II under the wise guidance of veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi.

If meanwhile, evidence is produced by an impartial and credible source that the now proven use of chemical weapons was by the Assad regime, then a process approved by the Security Council must be launched to prosecute him and his associates in the International Criminal Court.



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