

A Not So Grand Bargain

Almost everyone but ordinary Syrians wins from the emerging deal on Syrian chemical weapons (CW). The cynical and self-dealing Russians regain diplomatic center stage, and increase their influence in Damascus and beyond. The Obama administration snatches diplomatic success from the jaws of political defeat at the hands of Congress, and the embattled President is saved from launching an attack he clearly has little stomach for. The war weary American people are free to isolate themselves further from an unworthy world that American foreign policy did much to shape. Recession-wracked European consciences (and perhaps a few Canadian as well) are spared the discomfort of once again leaving the heavy lifting to the Americans. The innumerate Prime Minister Cameron can get to work on reasserting the UK's "America's best ally" standing that they ceded to the more decisive French. The Arab League states are saved from reconciling their many hypocrisies and contradictions. The world, especially Syrian neighbours Israel and Turkey, has one fewer state with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to worry about. The United Nations is called on once again to provide the locus of great power negotiation and to help implement any decision on safeguarding and disposing of Syria's chemical weapons.

That is almost all good but it is not the end of the Syrian story. Even if diplomacy works and the chemical weapons are neutralized, the Syrian people still lose. The Faustian bargain emerging is that the blood-dripping Assad gives up his CW, or at least the CW that the weapons inspectors actually eventually find, but keeps his throne. Assad's military machine remains intact, the military balance is not tipped, the civil war grinds on, the bodies pile up and the innocent are denied justice. It is clear from President Obama's address to the nation last night and from the isolationist tenor of the debates in the US and UK and other parliaments that there is no prospect of Western intervention if Assad keeps his end of the CW bargain. If the world returns to its malign neglect of Syria, by this time next year scores of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands more will be killed and maimed, millions more will flee, an entire generation will be crippled psychologically, sectarian divides will deepen, and regional instability will worsen. We will all have to admit that we could see it coming.

Still the CW deal is a surprisingly positive outcome of two years of futile, occasionally haphazard diplomacy. Will it work? Possibly, if the Syrian and/or Russian leaderships are not just playing for time in the hope that the political ground will vanish under President Obama's feet. Obama is certainly correct that the credible threat of military action was necessary to get all concerned this close to agreement. The US Congress will have to cooperate in keeping that threat credible, not a sure thing given the antipathy there to Obama. The Russians, whose own default position in most issues seems to be truculence, will have to deliver the elusive Syrian leadership. As anyone who watched President Assad dissimulate on American TV this week will know, he is not given to straight talk. And, in the Middle East diplomatic bazaar, the too eager are fleeced. Some relatively short, internationally-agreed timetable will be essential.

Important questions remain and the deal will have to be clarified. Syrian regime leaders are reportedly ready to join the convention on the prohibition of chemical weapons, to declare the location of their weapons, to stop production of them and to show the facilities to "representatives of Russia and other UN member states." Which other UN member states? Senator Kerry's initial offer was predicated on the weapons being taken out of Assad's control completely. Would the Syrians be

willing to put the weapons under international custody and see them destroyed? Would the Assad regime forswear transferring such weapons to Hezbollah?

If the deal does come together, it could easily run aground. International efforts to find, inspect, destroy and verify vast CW stores in the middle of a civil war will be fraught with difficulty, especially if the Syrian leadership decides to hide some of the munitions as seems likely. Further, negotiations with both the Assad regime and the rebels will be required for the inspectors to be able to move safely inside Syria and gain access to chemical weapons facilities. Even then, as in Iraq, it could take UN weapons inspectors years to find and destroy the weapons.

Before the Russian initiative, strategic and moral arguments alike were marshaled to make the case for action against Assad. These arguments were reiterated again by President Obama in his address to the nation. Assad's use of CW breached treaties that make America and the world safer. If that goes unpunished, it will encourage other potential perpetrators in Pyongyang and Teheran. America's credibility will be undermined and its capacity to deter bad behaviour in others diminished. US Secretary of State Kerry described Assad's use of CW on civilians as a "moral obscenity" that "should shock the conscience" of the world, a direct allusion to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine which the UN adopted under Canadian leadership in 2005. President Obama said last night "the question now is what the United States of America and the international community [are] prepared to do about it..."

What should Canada do about it? So far Canada has been on the sidelines, cheering the Americans on. We have the diplomatic and military capacity to do more. Canada can help gather the evidence to bring Assad and his fellow criminals to justice. Canada is already contributing significant monies to the UN and others in humanitarian aid to the refugees but less wealthy countries like Turkey are contributing much more than we are. As a G8 country, we can afford to do more. Working through the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Canada can contribute to the international effort to identify and dispose of Syrian CW. We can provide additional money to help finance the inspections. We can make the Canadian Forces expertise derived from anti-chemical warfare training available to the UN and the OPCW. We can draw on civilian expertise in Canadian universities as well. To help the chemical weapons inspection process to succeed, our own special forces can work with others to provide protection for the inspectors in Syria. We can provide logistics support and force multipliers, such as our transport aircraft. And we can stand ready to assist the Americans if worse comes to worst. As observed by President Obama "sometimes resolutions and statements of condemnation are simply not enough".

Our government has dismissed the UN as a talk shop. It is that and much more. We should try to build on the chemical weapons negotiations under UN auspices to encourage the Russians and the Americans to finally get onto the same page and end the Syrian civil war. For the Syrian people, the bargain currently on offer is not so grand.