

A Diplomatic Surge for Syria?

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If nothing else, last weekend's double veto should have put a nail in the coffin of the idea that Russian opposition to UN Security Council action in Syria was about post-Libya fallout and the "Responsibility to Protect." The veto was about arms, allies and power. Nothing more, nothing less.

As tempting as it might be to now burn down what remains of the rickety diplomatic bridge between Russia and the rest of the UN Security Council on the issue of Syria, the more vexing question is what next? Both policymakers and the commentariat seem to be divided. Some, including US Secretary of State Clinton, are hinting at increased arms transfers to the "Free Syrian Army," which is attempting to defend people from Assad's troops. Others argue for direct intervention, outside the constraints of the UN Charter, to protect civilians in Homs and elsewhere.

It is therefore worth pointing out that the first course of action would be as dubious as it is dangerous. No one wants a full-scale civil war in Syria with potentially catastrophic dimensions. Damascus could easily become the region's Sarajevo -- a sectarian spark that could ignite a regional war between Iran, Israel, Lebanon and Turkey (to name only those most heavily invested in Syria's future). And the second course of action is illegal under international law. Morally justifiable, but illegal.

So what is to be done? Between the first double veto on 4 October last year and the second veto last weekend, the death toll in Syria doubled to more than 5400. As Syria edges closer to all-out civil war, four months from now the death toll could easily be double that number again. Ten thousand dead would be a diabolical dividend for the failure of the UN Security Council to act upon its responsibilities.

Which is why, despite the opprobrium being poured upon Russia at the moment, we need to return to basics. Crimes against humanity are occurring in Syria. These are exactly the sorts of crimes that the largest meeting ever held of heads of state and government at the 2005 UN World Summit decided to halt once and for all under the aegis of a global "Responsibility to Protect" (or R2P).

Since Libya, Russia and China seem to believe that less R2P at the Security Council will equal less intervention. Notwithstanding the fact that Russia's arming and abetting a bloody crackdown in Syria is also a form of foreign intervention, the reverse is true. Less R2P will mean that in the absence of an engaged Security Council, regional powers with "a dog in the fight," or acting upon enlightened self interest, will simply take matters into their own hands. Interventions will increase. It's just that they will be more overtly partisan and politically divisive.

Kosovo in 1999 is an example of what happens when a noble desire to help those facing death is suffocated by Security Council inertia. NATO acted anyway -- controversially and outside international law.

R2P is essentially a preventive doctrine. It was designed to support states in their efforts to protect populations from mass atrocities. Only when all else fails and circumstances demand an international response is R2P intended, as Ramesh Thakur put it, as an alternative to both unilateral interference and institutionalized indifference.

What we need now is a diplomatic surge, with Russian engagement, to overwhelm those elements in the Syrian regime who think that they can simply shoot their way out of the current crisis. Russia and the United States both need to be a central part of this surge. As does UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon -- the only major international player not tarnished by overt sympathy for either the regime or its opponents.

R2P should be the constructive context to frame this heightened diplomatic effort and as distasteful as it might seem, this should involve direct talks with Assad himself. The Arab League plan still offers the best way out of the bloody mess that Syria has become. But agreeing upon the bare minimal requirements for negotiations about Syria's future should be the focus of diplomacy.

The Syrian government must immediately return all troops to barracks and release detainees. The opposition should call a moratorium on protests and halt attacks by the Free Syrian Army. Assad's government needs to accept a mutually agreed timetable for talks about a genuine power-sharing government as a prelude to real and substantial reform. And the United States, Russia and others must, with the United Nations and Arab League, be the guarantors of any agreement.

Viewed from the perspective of the Security Council chamber last weekend, or worse yet, from the battered suburbs of Homs, things appear hopeless at the moment. But a diplomatic surge is no less difficult and unrealistic than the starting point for the extraordinary peace agreements that were eventually reached in South Africa and elsewhere. The chances of success for such a diplomatic initiative diminish by the day. But the alternative is too heinous to contemplate.

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