

As the Syrian government prepares to offer up its chemical weapons for disarmament, **John Chisholm** examines how Russian intervention put paid to Western military threats

FOCUS ON SYRIA: PART 1



PUTTING THE PUTIN

A month is a short time in Syria, but it has not prevented an awful lot happening. It is not very often that the term “diplomatic coup” is used to describe Russian policy, but so far the Kremlin is basking in an atmosphere of international success. Russian policy throughout the Syrian crisis has been solid and consistent: hostility to international intervention. This has placed them firmly in the camp of President Assad who, by controlling the state apparatus of law, order and military capability, has the upper hand over the rebels.

This commitment to Syria does not stem from the apparent will of the Russian people themselves. Unlike, say, Serbia where there was a strong cultural and religious affinity, there are no such connections with

the fractious Arab republic. This is not to say Russian policy is conducted in a public relations vacuum, but it is not one related to support for an ally. Rather, it is a self-referential policy, underpinned by the macho populism exuded by President Putin and the organs of the state and media. Russia must be strong, Russia is strong, so Russia must stand up for its allies overseas and stop being pushed around by the West. This goes along with hostility or suspicion of Western cultural and democratic values, a sense of moral superiority over a perceived culture of decadence, and the feeling that Russia has retreated far enough.

And Russia has retreated far. The expansion of Nato after the end of the Cold war, followed by the expansion of the European Union, has left Russia with



US senators examine pictures of the alleged victims of Assad's chemical weapons

the West effectively on its doorstep. Hot on the heels of collapse from superpower to also-ran, the imminence of Western military, then cultural and economic advances into the original Cold War buffer zone have placed the Kremlin on the back foot in Europe for years. Adventures in Belorussia, Moldova, Trans-Dniester and Ukraine could be seen as an attempt to maintain that cordon sanitaire, with the Kremlin more than prepared to influence these countries to keep them away from the threats posed by the West.

It has hardly been any better elsewhere. Soviet influence in Africa was already in decline before 1991, and the Western interventions in the Middle East have happened with no regard to Russian objections. China has eclipsed Russia as the main threat, and therefore

focus of US policy in the world, and in the Far East Russia eyes Beijing with envy and suspicion over the Chinese infiltration of the Central Asian Republics and ambitions in Siberia. Against this backdrop of retreat, defeat, policy initiatives checked by the US and relative decline in the diplomatic specific gravity of the Kremlin in relation to Beijing, Syria has assumed major importance.

Russia has been against intervention from the start, unless it is to support what it sees as the legitimate government quell a rebellion by Islamic fundamentalists. This intellectual somersault has allowed the Kremlin to continue supporting a country that has been a loyal ally of theirs since the 1960. Whereas other allies in the Middle East have either aligned themselves with the West (Egypt and Jordan), collapsed totally (Afghanistan) or been removed from the chessboard altogether (Saddam Hussein's Iraq) Syria has remained firmly in the Kremlin's corner, and tightly in the grip of the Assad family.

President Hafez Al Assad was trained in the USSR as a pilot, and Syria had maintained strong relations with the Kremlin before he took power. This was continued when he became President in 1971. Both he and his son shared the strong philosophy of Arab nationalism, secular and socialist. This has changed over the past decade as Syria forged a close relationship with Tehran, increasing the influence of Islamic norms and values in Syrian society. Nevertheless, Moscow remains the main supplier of arms to Damascus and its most powerful friend in international diplomacy.

So it is no surprise that Russian policy has been consistent. Any sign of weakness in backing Assad would have undermined Russian influence elsewhere, implying that they would not stand firm with their allies when the going got tough. It would also have led to domestic humiliation; for a President keen on posing topless in an effort to look strong and masculine, chickening out would have been fatal to his reputation.

US policy, on the other hand, has displayed none of the brutal single-mindedness of the Russians. The main problem is that US policy was being retarded by the huge sheet anchor that was the Iraq war. Although in the UK there was a clear feeling that the war had been undertaken based on a false prospectus, the US public was slower to realise this. But Obama's victory over McCain in the 2008 presidential election was due in no small part to the US public feeling that it was time to leave Iraq and that it may have been a mistake to intervene in the first place. With Afghanistan continuing to look unstable, and regime change in Libya and Egypt leading to uncertain outcomes, including more bloodletting, it is hardly surprising that the US public were sceptical of any adventures in the Levant.

But, from the perspective of Foggy Bottom, the removal of Assad would be a great success. It would remove the last credible conventional threat to Israel. Would deny Tehran of its main ally and prevent Iran supplying Hezbollah, making it easier to draw Lebanon

PUTTING THE PUTIN

into the orbit of the West. But Obama was never going to intervene before he won his second term. However attractive the removal of Assad from the scene would be, it would not be worth electoral suicide. So the US contented itself with humanitarian aid, non-lethal support for the rebels and encouraging Saudi Arabia and Turkey to be more forward in their support for rebel groups. The now-famous “red lines” regarding the use of chemical weapons had allegedly been breached by Damascus several times in small ways – ones that Washington was content to ignore. But once one came along that Washington could not ignore, the whole policy blew up in Obama’s face.

Washington started rattling sabres. Initially it seemed that it was all settled – a missile strike from assets offshore by the US supported militarily by the UK and France. This would probably have taken the form of striking command and control centres, weapons stockpiles and static but visible military assets. This may have been enough to tip the balance in favour of the rebel groups; it would certainly have been painful for Assad.

Then it all went wrong. The British broke ranks and Parliament voted down a motion by the British government supporting intervention. With the public wary at best, this was an accurate reflection of public opinion, but a result that infuriated the Foreign Office. That left the US with France as their main ally for the first time since 1777. The US public were proven to be equally sceptical, and the interest in military intervention started to wane.

But the Russians then stepped in with a compromise – one only they could deliver on. Their connection with the Assad regime allowed them to put forward an idea of a UN resolution demanding the destruction in-situ of the Syrian government’s chemical stockpiles. All well and good. A major diplomatic wrangle developed about whether the language should include automatic military sanctions – in effect a military strike – if Damascus did not fulfil its part of the bargain. The US was in favour, Russia against.

It is interesting that here, again, the US backed down. This is as good an indication as any that appetite for military intervention is not strong in the White House, although Obama clearly feels the threat of military action was responsible for bringing about the necessary compromise. So now all that Damascus faces is economic sanctions for not fulfilling its part of the bargain.

But – and here things get very grey indeed – Syria is responsible for compiling the list of stocks it owns. These are the ones the international disarmament team – the OPCW – will destroy. After that, they will leave. Syria may hold back stocks. It has plenty after all, and overseas estimates are just that – estimates. Although the OPCW may inspect sites and interview people, that was hard enough in Iraq. In the chaos of a civil war it may be close to impossible.

There are other issues as well, of which two key ones are devoted to chemical weapons alone. The first is that, if the Syrian government’s evidence is genuine, some rebel groups have access to both chemical



©Getty Images

weapons and delivery systems – in this case mortar rounds – implying that the Syrian military has lost the ability to keep these weapons secure. This would be reason enough, one might have thought, to destroy every last vestige of chemical capability. But will Damascus see things that way?

Out of the same flapping stable door comes the true nightmare for Israel and the West: that chemical weapons, however small in quantity, may have fallen into the hands of Islamic fundamentalist groups fighting Assad. For these people, in their “Alice through the looking glass” world, Assad is being propped up by Washington, Israel, and indeed anyone they do not like. Unable to reconcile their hostility to the United States with the truth of US opposition to him, they have lapsed into a fantasy world in order to deal with this particular example of cognitive dissonance.

So imagine a small vial of Sarin being used on an aircraft, or in a metro carriage or any other confined space. If these groups have now gained access to it, it changes the terms of trade completely. Forget about incompetents with fizzing shoes or exploding anuses – this would be the real deal, with aircraft plummeting from the sky or trains pulling into a station with coaches of dead and dying. A nightmare prospect.

Of course, whatever happens, the civil war continues. Assad has dodged a potentially painful blow thanks in no small part to the Kremlin. But over two million Syrian refugees crowd into camps in Turkey or Jordan or are scattered around the world as displaced citizens. No matter who wins, some of these people will never be able to return home. There is no sign of a resolution. It does not appear the rebels can ever win, but at the same time it is hard to think of a circumstance when they would lose. Syria has the potential to slip into becoming a failed state.

There is now unlikely to be any form of Western intervention. One of Obama’s red lined was crossed, Assad got a fright, the Kremlin scored a victory. For ordinary Syrians this is just theatre.

Staunch support: Russian president Vladimir Putin (right) has stood by the Assad regime in spite of the mounting evidence

John Chisholm is intersec’s International Affairs Correspondent