

The Syria Deal: What Happened and Why We Should Support It.

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A good deal is one which will stick. A good deal thus reflects everyone's self interest. The US/Russia/Syria deal for Syria to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention and hand over its chemical weapons with Russian help is a result of each state's best bets about what would happen with or without airstrikes and with or without the deal. In this case, it is win-win-win deal, and it deserves support.

Let us first examine Russian and Syrian calculations. US threats to strike are highly credible, while our promises that it would be limited are less credible. For precedents on US air strikes alone, one can look to the US-led NATO strikes during the Kosovo War in 1999. These were supposed to short, but they lasted two and half months. Desert Fox was a short air campaign against Iraq in 1998, which was kept short at four days, but which was followed by forcible regime change in the Iraq war of 2003. Other precedents were Libya and Afghanistan, two other regime changes caused or aided by US force in the region.

We in the US saw President Obama likely hamstrung by the almost certain failure of an authorization to use force in Congress. But it is hard for dictators to understand the constitutional and other cacophony of our democracy. They do not believe that Obama's powers may be limited, and many in the region believe that the US is influential in most events in the Middle East.

So why did Russia and Syria do what they did?

From Russia's point of view, it would likely love for the US to strike, stir up the pot and get embroiled in war once again. Perhaps it could somehow help Hezbollah or Syria cause more terror, sink a US ship, or down a plane or two. But for the US to get embroiled, the strikes likely need to be big and get bigger. As they do not trust our assurances about limited strikes, and must suspect we want to topple the Assad regime, they must bet that if there are strikes they will be large and that they may in turn change the balance of power in the civil war against Assad. As the size of the strikes gets larger, the more the Assad regime is endangered. The value of Russia's ties with Assad outweigh the value of US embroilment because of what Russia gains in its naval base, trade, and regional influence. Thus, the balance of risks and benefits favors preventing the strikes and helping to keep Assad in power.

Assad probably made the same calculation, as his life is on the line. Hence the Russian proposal and Syria's quick acceptance.

For the US, this deal is also of great benefit despite risks, and despite Russian gains. Prior to the deal, it was clear that Obama's strategy chip had gone missing with regard to Syria. He faced a debacle if Congress did not approve a resolution. His hopes of getting UN backing were nil. On both accounts, Obama blew this into a crisis before marshaling friends and evidence, or waiting for the UN inspectors. Obama's claim to be supporting laws and norms ring hollow if he can not garner support. Norms exist when states and people agree. They are weak or non-existent if there is no agreement and if they do not motivate action. With the deal, the US avoids a political, moral, and legal debacle.

If the US strikes Syria, the US will face myriad disasters. Assad is as bloody minded as Saddam Hussein, so at a minimum any strikes will be accompanied by photos of many civilian dead - whether the US killed them or not. Despite overwhelming conventional superiority, strikes may lead to Hezbollah rocketing of Israel, or terror attacks on US forces and interests? While supporting Assad is regrettable, even worse would be a strike that helped al Qaeda in the civil war. As bitter enemies of the US are the most powerful opponents of Assad, anything that hurts Assad helps them. A bitter truth that Obama avoided in his speech.

Thus, the deal is mutually beneficial for the US and Russia. There will be much hand wringing about verification, and trusting the Russians. But the balance of risks and benefits favors the deal. If the goal is reducing the chemical weapons stocks, this deal is probably going to lock down and take out more stocks more verifiably than a strike. Both are imperfect, but the deal is far preferable to a strike. Even if Syria keeps some chemical weapons, to use them would embarrass the Russians. The US can claim that our threats got Syria to sign off on the deal, even if that is not necessarily true. The Russians will get credit for helping avoid the war and this will help them marginally in their long term goal of advancing influence in the Middle East. A small price to pay compared to the benefits gained and costs avoided, costs which would have done more to harm our credibility and interests than this Russian gain.

Finally, perhaps the biggest stakes in all this are our attempts to coerce and cajole Iran not to obtain nuclear weapons. Our credibility was and is on the line there, and we always insist we want a peaceful solution and that all options are on the table. As the odds of a strike seemed to diminish by the hour prior to the deal, the worst case for the US would have been no strike and no deal.

The deal should be implemented. However roughly that is accomplished, it beats the alternatives.