



The Syrian civil war's global implications

Ted Galen Carpenter - Mideast Flashpoints - 9/10/2012

Syria's civil war has been a humanitarian and political tragedy for that country. Thousands of innocents have perished, Islamic extremist groups have exploited the conflict to establish a presence there, and the country stands on the abyss of fragmentation into ethno-religious cantons. The war also symbolizes a ruthless Sunni-Shiite regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Turkey - in an uneasy alliance - on one side and Iran on the other. All of those aspects have received a fair amount of attention in the West.

What has received less attention, but could ultimately prove to be as least as significant in the longer term, is the Syrian civil war's corrosive effect on the West's relations with both Russia and China. Disagreements about how to deal with the fighting in Syria have led to exceptionally bitter denunciations and recriminations on both sides. That development does not bode well for effective international cooperation on a host of issues in the coming years.

The degree of bitterness, especially on the US side, surprises even veteran observers of international affairs. Following a February 2012 decision by both Moscow and Beijing to veto a UN Security Council resolution condemning the violence in Syria and calling for an immediate end to the bloodshed, US Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice denounced those vetoes and stated that her country was "disgusted." The Chinese and Russian actions, she added, were "shameful" and "unforgivable."

Later that month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used equally inflammatory language. "It is distressing to see two permanent members of the Security Council using their veto while people are being murdered - women, children, brave young men," Clinton raged. The Russian and Chinese actions were "just despicable, and I have to ask whose side are they on? They are clearly not on the side of the Syrian people."

The tone of the discourse has not improved in the intervening months. And even worse, a threatening undercurrent in US policy toward Moscow and Beijing has developed. At an international "Friends of Syria" meeting in July, Clinton expressed frustration that "Russia and China are not paying any price at all - nothing at all - for standing up on behalf of the Assad regime." The only way that

would change, she warned, “is if every nation represented here directly and urgently makes it clear that Russia and China will pay a price.”

Predictably, Chinese and Russian officials have not reacted well to such shrill rhetoric and the underlying threats. Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, expressed outright suspicions about US/NATO motives in the debate leading to the February veto. Although he condemned the bloodshed in Syria, Churkin cited Russian concerns about “regime change” intentions by “influential members of the international community.”

Chinese officials harbor similar suspicions. Wang Keihan, a deputy director at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, said at a news conference in early August that “some Western countries” had hindered and even “sabotaged” the diplomatic process by pushing for regime change in Syria. His comment was clearly directed at Washington and its NATO allies, who have repeatedly demanded that Bashar al Assad step down. The solution to the Syrian crisis must be a political one, Wang argued, with the option of military intervention taken off the table.

Policy regarding the Syrian civil war has exposed and exacerbated fundamental disagreements between the Western powers and both Russia and China about not only Middle East issues, but the role of great power interventions in the international system. The United States has increasingly embraced the “responsibility to protect” doctrine. That doctrine asserts that when a regime brutalizes its population in a systematic way, the “international community” has not only a right but an obligation to intervene and, if necessary depose, that regime. Washington has, albeit with some reluctance and inconsistency, even turned its back on long-standing autocratic clients like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak.

Moscow and Beijing, on the other hand, continue to endorse the traditional system embodied in the Peace of Westphalia, the series of 17th Century treaties that ended the horrific Thirty-Years War in Europe. The core principle of the Westphalian system is a general prohibition against great power interference in the internal affairs of other countries. In the view of Russian and Chinese leaders, the US policy of forcible regime change threatens to end such restraint, thereby creating chaos in the Middle East and other regions and potentially producing military confrontations between major powers.

Russian and Chinese leaders believe, with good reason, that the Assad regime is not the primary target of the United States and its allies. It was Assad’s willingness to be a major (increasingly, the only significant) ally of Iran’s clerical regime that put him in the West’s gunsights. As part of Washington’s strategy to isolate Iran and make it impossible for that country to develop nuclear weapons, the Obama administration decided to back the Saudi-Turkish bid to overthrow Assad’s government.

Moscow and Beijing warn that Washington’s approach is extremely dangerous, since it could intensify the explosive tensions between the leading Sunni powers

(US allies Saudi Arabia and Turkey) and Shiite Iran. Such a confrontation, Russian and Chinese policymakers fear, might set the entire Middle East aflame.

In addition, bringing down Syria (even if it were not clearly a prelude to bringing down Iran) does not serve Russian or Chinese national interests. Moscow has long-standing economic and strategic ties with the Syrian government, not only under Bashar Assad but during earlier decades under his father. The USSR supplied Damascus with economic and military aid throughout the Cold War, and Russia's "naval maintenance facility" is the only military installation that country has today in the Mediterranean region. China was Syria's largest trading partner in 2011, with Syrian exports to that country totaling more than \$2.4 billion. China is also a major participant in Syria's oil industry.

A bigger concern for Russia and China, though, is that US policy regarding Syria is just the latest manifestation of an overall strategy of forcible regime change to advance the interests and policy preferences of the United States and its Western allies. That policy was on display in the Balkans during the 1990s, Iraq during George W. Bush's administration, and more recently in Libya. To officials in Moscow and Beijing, it looks suspiciously like a power play to achieve undisputed US/Western global dominance.

Both sides, but especially the West, need to keep the dispute over Syria policy in perspective. Unfortunately, neither side seems inclined to do that. The Putin government is digging in its heels, continuing to back the tottering Assad regime, and the Chinese government, at least thus far, appears to support that policy. Even worse, Washington has not muted its shrill accusations and threats against Moscow and Beijing for daring to thwart US policy.

The importance of good relations between the West and Russia and China goes far beyond the issue of Syria. It would be a tragedy if policymakers allowed differences regarding Syria policy to disrupt those crucial relations and trigger an East-West cold war. Unfortunately, the danger of such an outcome is no longer far-fetched. The palpable chill in this summer's summit meeting between Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin is a warning of the permanent damage to great power comity that could occur.