

Position Paper

Geneva 2: Prevent the Collapse of the Syrian State and Adjust Escalation

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U.S. President Barack Obama (left) greeting his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin
[EPA - Archive]

America and Russia mutually agreed to convene the 'Geneva 2' conference because the assessments of both are that a military resolution is not a possibility for the Syrian crisis. Furthermore, the military option is no longer desirable for America. After more than two years of the Syrian revolution, the USA has concluded that the armed opposition is unable, by itself, to overthrow the regime. Additionally, the USA supports one of the weaker military factions. Jabhat al-Nusrah (The Victory Front), which is allied to al-Qa'ida, is the main rebel military force in Syria. However, the USA placed al-Nusrah on its terrorism list in December 2012. Russia, on the other hand, believes that since the outbreak of the revolution the Syrian regime has demonstrated that it does not have adequate resources to control the entire territory of Syria, and that the regime needs a political agreement with the rebels in order to share power in return for the rebels' acceptance of a single authority over the whole country. This would guarantee Russia's maintaining its naval base in Tarots, which is Russia's only access to the Mediterranean Sea.

Apart from their assessment that there is no military solution, the USA and Russia also believe that a political solution would satisfy their mutual interests. An agreement would maintain the state's cohesion, thus preventing Syria's chemical weapons from falling into the hands of militant groups that are hostile to America, Israel, and Russia. It would also prevent the secession sought by the Kurds and feared by Turkey. Additionally, a political

deal would prevent the collapse of the social, economic and security functions of the state, which could lead to the outbreak of a sectarian civil war. This last scenario would create a huge refugee problem that Syria's neighbours cannot afford.

Geneva 2 could also be an appropriate framework for the USA and Russia to prevent the Syrian conflict from escalating the tensions between them. It would allow them to prevent other forces from eventually pressurising them into a costly confrontation that could harm their strategic interests in Syria and the rest of the world. There have been signs of strategic decisions by the two global powers to maintain control over the levels of conflict in Syria. For example, Moscow deliberately did not provide the Syrian regime with the S-300 missiles that it had promised them, as that would have deprived Israel of its control over the Syrian-Lebanese airspace. In return, the USA refrained from providing quality weapons to the opposition, as this too could significantly disturb the balance of military power.

The question that requires answering is whether this mutual agreement between the USA and Russia was dictated by the current balance of power, or a result of their strategic, common, and long-term interests in Syria.

The strategic gap

This question can be answered through an analysis of the effects that the Geneva agreement would have on the interests of the two great powers.

The agreement reached in the first Geneva Conference in June 2012, which will form the basis for the Geneva 2 Conference, includes a provision that all parties in Syria must stop the fighting. However, it allows them to maintain their positions as at the date of the ceasefire in exchange for the formation of a unity government between representatives of the Syrian regime and the opposition.

Geneva 2 is an opportunity for America to achieve a series of objectives, over a period of time, without it having to commit to any military intervention. In the short-term, the USA seeks to:

1. Avoid military intervention. According to a survey conducted by the New York Times and CBS News in April 2013, intervention is a very unpopular option in America because of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which were costly and negatively affected its struggling economy. Intervention in Syria is also contrary to current US strategic priorities, which give priority to containing China in the Pacific.

2. Achieve a gradual political solution that would remove power from Asad. The US focus is on removing Asad's most important and strategic asset: his control of the security services and military forces.
3. Achieve a political solution that will lead to elections under international supervision. The USA is certain that the outcome of the election would be a victory for the opposition, which is supported by the Sunni majority. According to the US plan, the opposition will gain power in the medium term, which will thus eliminate Iran's influence on Syria. It would also deny Hizbullah access to supply routes that it uses to connect to Iran.

In combination, these factors will allow the USA to achieve two of its main long-term objectives in Syria. Firstly, it will eliminate Iranian influence from the Arab region, and, secondly, it will remove Russia from the Mediterranean and contain it within its regional borders. This is consistent with the US elimination strategy that followed the containment strategy it had previously employed after the end of the Cold War.

Russia views Geneva 2 differently. It sees the conference as an opportunity to place the opposition and the western powers on a political path that will create their own internal contradictions and fractures. This will weaken both, and will eventually coerce them to agree to participate in a new Syrian government. Ultimately, this scenario will not affect the regime's structure or policies. According to the Russian assessment:

1. The US acceptance of Geneva 2 will mean that it will accept the postponement of western military intervention, thus bolstering the position of those western powers that are opposed to military intervention against those supporting it, such as France and Britain.
2. Geneva 2 will help cause severe friction within the Syrian National Coalition. The SNC will be compelled to negotiate with the regime, which it has repeatedly vowed to destroy, and which it has refused to recognise.

Russia has achieved its primary objective in Syria, which is to expand its influence beyond its own territory. This complements its success in the Georgia war of 2008.

The USA and Russia thus differ in the way that they view the negotiations around Geneva 2. America thinks that, through Geneva 2, it will be able to change the Syrian regime and its policies. Russia, however, believes that Geneva 2 will cripple western powers and fragment the opposition, thus allowing the Syrian regime to remain relatively unchanged.

Conflicting regional accounts

The expansive strategic difference between the two large powers is fuelled by another gap, that between the regional powers involved in the conflict. Iran bases its influence in

Syria on its alliance with Bashar al-Asad's regime. It will reject any fundamental change in the structure of the regime or its policies, as the regime is part of the Iranian-led 'axis of resistance' against Israel. Hizbullah announced the same position after its open participation in the battle of Qusayr alongside Syrian regular forces. Both believe that the fall of the Syrian regime would significantly decrease their influence.

Regional powers supporting the opposition, however, will not find acceptable a change in the Syrian regime that does not lead to the termination of Syria's alliance with Iran and Hizbullah. They believe that Iran uses its doctrinal position, as it did in Iraq, to threaten the political stability in the Gulf and the Levant. Moreover, they believe that any part of the Asad regime that remains with some power will extend Iran's influence from Iraq to Lebanon. Iran's influence would thus cover the Gulf states from the north, and Turkey from the south.

The two main conflicting forces in Syria – the regime and the opposition – are incapable of resolving the conflict militarily. They are also incapable of reaching a political agreement without external intervention. Their fate is therefore at the mercy of regional and international powers.

Towards military escalation

These trends indicate that, if it were to be held soon, the prospects of success for Geneva 2 will be slim. There are more disagreements between the USA and Russia than points of convergence, and each will seek to strengthen its negotiating position and increase military action. This has been demonstrated recently, as the conflicting parties were preparing to escalate. America decided to locate Patriot missile batteries and F-16 fighter jets in Jordan. It also discussed the legality of military intervention by announcing that the Syrian regime has passed the 'red line' by using chemical weapons, even on a limited scale. It announced its willingness to arm the opposition, without specifying the nature of the weapons it would supply. White House spokespersons explained the USA intended escalating the war if the Syrian regime further violates the rules through the use of chemical weapons, and by using Hizbullah to achieve military gains.

Even though it is not as keen to see the fall of the Syrian regime as it was to see the fall of the Libyan regime, these decisions prove that the United States will not allow the opposition to be defeated. The USA is ready for escalation to ensure equal or greater losses to its adversaries. The collapse of the Syrian regime will therefore result in the end of Russian influence in the Levant, and the beginning of the countdown for the next attack on Hizbullah and Iran.

At the end of May 2013, due to pressure from France and Britain, the European Union decided to lift its arms' embargo on Syria and thus allow its members to arm the Syrian

opposition. This was after Washington abandoned its opposition to the lifting of the sanctions. The embargo had prevented western and some Arab countries from providing weapons to the armed Syrian opposition. It is likely that these countries will begin in supplying arms in line with the US approach.

Hizbullah confirmed that after the battle of Qusayr in the first week of June 2013, it would continue to fight for the Syrian regime until the fall of the 'American takfiri project', in the words of Hizbullah secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, in his address on 'Resistance Wounded Fighter Day' on 14 June 2013. This American project aims, according to Hizbullah, to determine the presence of Syria, and its resistance role. Hizbullah will not be able to engage further in the fighting to prevent the regime from falling, except with Iranian consent and Russian acceptance.

In conclusion, both America and Russia want to maintain the Syrian state structure, but their strategies differ. America does not want the opposition to be defeated, but nor does it want the opposition to win militarily as that would cause the collapse of the state. The USA prefers to maintain the balance of power on the ground in such a manner that neither party wins militarily, and the regime will be compelled to accept a political solution. Russia is not opposed to a negotiated settlement, even if the regime had the capacity to win the conflict militarily. Russia's objective is to have the situation return to the way it was prior to the outbreak of the revolution. It understands however, that a political solution may be the only option if the regime feels that the armed opposition might succeed in toppling it.

The Geneva Conference 2 is premised on the notion of a political solution that is intended to prevent the collapse of the Syrian state. It does not, however, bridge the wide rift between America and Russia. The former wants to banish Iran from the Arab Middle East and encircle Russia from the south, while the latter seeks to use the Iranian-Syrian alliance to break the barrier imposed by the NATO powers under US leadership. Both the USA and Russia are prepared to escalate their military support in order to increase the material and moral costs of the conflict until it becomes so great that the conflicting parties are compelled to accept a political deal. This would not only ensure the survival of the state, but would save the regime's structure and policies, which continues to suffer as the battle continues.