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Position Paper

Approaching International Agreement on Changing the Syrian Regime

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The internationalisation of the Syrian crisis underwent a transformation after the dual Russian-Chinese veto of the resolution based on the Arab League initiative at the United Nation Security Council. In vetoing the resolution Moscow and Beijing risked confrontation with countries in the Arab world, challenged the will of the western bloc, and did not share a common position with rising countries, such as India and South Africa, which are fellow members of BRICS – both of which voted in favour of the resolution. It is becoming increasingly more apparent that the dominant international position is moving towards divesting al-Assad of his legitimacy and pursuing change in Syria through gradual means.

The Syrian crisis reached this point due to the regime's failure to resolve the crisis internally and the Arab League's failure to resolve it regionally. These initiatives failed due to the stances of the parties involved in the crisis: the regime still sees itself as wielding enough power not to make any concessions with regards to major issues i.e. keeping Assad and his regime in power.

The Regime and its Security Resolution Wager

Initially, al-Assad launched a set of 'dialogue initiatives' that were aborted due to consecutive security operations carried out by the regime, and his position that he had to accede to and maintain control over all possible solutions. His position can be summarised as:

- He has the ability to resolve the crisis with his own logic and in his own time with the parties he elects in advance;
- In dialogue with the opposition, his promises of reform are the limit of the concessions he will make; and
- Demands of the revolutionary movement and a large sector of the opposition that exceed the limit of concessions the regime is willing to consider are driven by the agendas of foreign countries who are using this opportunity to punish Syria for its position on resistance.

The conclusion is that the solution lies in Assad's hands and within the regime. This position has been rejected by the rebels and a wide sector of the opposition on the basis that Assad himself is central to the problem and that the regime's duty is to hand power over to a new authority.

The time came for the implementation of a resolution due to:

- Assad's insistence on a security resolution to the crisis;
- his use of concerns around minority rights and communities as a justification for his campaigns;
- the rebels' insistence on challenging his position as president; and
- the increasing isolation of the regime.

The Syrian regime was, therefore, open to consider, and even accept, certain of the Arab League conditions as a means to gain time and accomplish its demands through an Arab League facilitated negotiation.

On the other hand, from the Syrian opposition's point of view, the Arab League initiative converged with their demands on two levels:

- The League's initiative held the possibility of ensuring a gradual decline of the regime. This would allow for the emergence of a democratic process.
- Alternatively if the regime maintained its evasiveness and position, the Arab League's involvement would give forces of the revolution and popular movement an opportunity to catch their breath. The result would then be a greater isolation of the regime, an undermining of initiatives employed by the regime, and the dismantling of its international alliances.

The Arab League's initiative failed because the Syrian regime refused to link the Arab League's monitoring mission to its previous commitments to the Arab League, including: withdrawing its armed forces from cities, releasing detainees, allowing for protests, and commencing dialogue with the opposition – in particular the most prominent opposition groups.

International Considerations

When the Arab League's initiative floundered, the international community began to re-evaluate its position. The United States and the West, in general, looked to generate an international position on the crisis that would allow for the smooth transition of authority that was clearly designed to divest Assad of his legitimacy and result in a change in the regime's structure - without risking the disintegration or collapse of the state. This was one of the most important lessons the US gained from its occupation of Iraq.

Moreover the international position will be dictated by the political condition of the United States and other Western countries; the United States is not ready to become entangled in another external venture that holds unknown prospects. Additionally the Syrian opposition has made assurances that it is able regulate internal conditions, including the participation of all factions in Syria in the transitional phase. However its position that it is able to achieve collective representation of these factions was not convincing to many of the central international actors.

With the obstruction of the Arab League's solution and Western hesitance, Russia acted to ensure its strategic interests in Syria, on two levels: it looked to ameliorate the situation for the Syrian regime that has been compounded by external isolation. To do this it looked to attribute responsibility for the crisis, and violence, to the opposition as well as the regime, and to ensure that the Syrian regime is involved in all discussions. Iran has supported Moscow's commitment to the Syrian regime, and its armed forces.

Similarly, the Arab League moved to develop a diplomatic initiative that would pave the way for a secure transition of authority, and would accomplish the aspirations of the opposition. Therefore, there was supposed to be an intersection between the role of the Arab League and the Russian role at a certain point that could then be taken forward through the United Nations. However, Assad's inflexibility and rejection of the Arab League's initiative (on which the UNSC resolution was based), and Russia looking to protect its interests, that have thus far been guaranteed by Assad, led Moscow to veto the UNSC resolution.

The battle between the West and Russia on Syria has become an open battle as reflected in statements by western and Russian diplomats. The United States stressed that Russia should no longer play a role in the crisis, while Russia (in a means to protect its interests in the region) is capitalising on its position as one of the few international players that is able to effectively interact with the Syrian government. This was illustrated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to Damascus shortly after the UNSC vote. That said, Russia's support of Assad has undermined its credibility as a mediator amongst the revolutionary movement and Syrian opposition forces.

Yet Russia continues to espouse a solution, which it believes is the formation of a transitional government and accomplishing some reforms within the regime. However, its ability to implement this solution is questionable especially as it is unable to obtain

any substantive concessions from the Syrian regime; this renders it directly responsible for the killing done by the regime, causing Syrian rebels to accuse it of 'killing our children'. This is due to the regime continuing with its military operations in Homs and other areas - even while Lavrov was in Damascus.

Beijing, on the other hand, carelessly follows Russia and does not appear to be ready to play a direct role - in the Middle East or in Syria. It is not very influential and does not have clear prospects for its policies. Rather, in this way it chose to express its objection to the US' challenge to its presence in Asia and Africa (Libya and Sudan) while allowing the Russians to pay the price for its position. While the Russians try, in different ways, to accuse Turkey of being responsible for violence towards the regime, Ankara is working to form an international alliance that would provide a moral, political, and diplomatic proposal that would bypass the diplomatic impasse emerging from failure at the UNSC. This would include forces that had initially clashed and disagreed, like Turkey and France.

The Failure of the Security Resolution

Developments around the current situation may play out according to the following scenarios:

1. International political support for the rebels to counter Russian support for the regime:

Assuming the continuation of the Russian position and the insistence of the regime on resolving the crisis through a military solution in conjunction with the political and relief support from the West, Turkey and the Arab community and Turkey, the Syrian crisis will head towards complete confrontation. This will see the eruption of a civil war as well as the collapse of the structures of the army and state, rendering Syria an open field for international conflict. This would deny Russia the ability to contribute to the formation of a final solution. This position will not only contribute to the deterioration of Russia's place in the Arab world and the Middle East, but it will also harm its moral credibility and ability to form an international bloc as an alternative to western dominance over the region and its peoples.

2. Development of the first scenario through an intervention that looks to protect civilians:

The regime's violence and brutality in suppressing protests may greatly increase international pressure to prevent the deterioration of conditions that could result in a civil war that would threaten to divide Syria. Accordingly, the international community will have to surpass the United Nations - and Russian obstruction - causing regional and international forces opposing the Syrian regime to agree on a position that would expand their options. In addition to political and relief support from the West, Turkey and Arab communities, this scenario includes the intervention of an international alliance for the protection of civilians by imposing a no-fly zone and safe havens. This would include attacks on the Syrian air force, armored vehicles, and artillery that storm cities and towns.

3. Western and Arab political and financial support with the transformation of the Russian position:

If al-Assad's regime loses control of the situation, this will see the Russians rush to negotiate a change in the regime in order to protect some of their interests. This would potentially see them not use their veto as an effective tactic during the change of the Syrian regime. This transformation will divest the regime of one of the most important reasons for its internal gamble; forces benefiting from it will feel that it is becoming too weak over time and that it is best to distance themselves from it, in preparation for its change or overthrow. This will lead to an

increased division of state bodies and an economic decline that will cause the regime to lose support from the social group that benefits from its economic policies.

In weighing up the different scenarios, it becomes apparent that no internal, Arab, nor UN solution is likely to be reached in the near future, and that the regime will continue with its armed offensive with the support of the Russians that believe that it is still able to stay in power - and that are not likely to receive rewarding compensation in crucial files such as missile defense. On the other hand, a large sector of regional and international forces agree on supporting the internal opposition to weaken and prevent Assad from quashing the revolution. This would see him gradually losing power. His ability to hold the country together will then decrease and Russia and China will be forced to alter their positions to mitigate their losses.

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