

Russia and China veto UN resolution on Syria

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In a move that is certain to further heat up international relations, Russia and China used their veto power in the UN Security Council on Tuesday to block a European-sponsored resolution condemning the Syrian regime for its repression of opposition protests and opening the door for international sanctions.

The US, France and Britain responded with rancorous denunciations, particularly of Russia, accusing it of seeking to defend its interests in Syria at the expense of the Syrian people. The most brazen attack came from American ambassador Susan Rice who declared that the US was “outraged” at the UN’s failure “to address an urgent moral challenge and a growing threat to regional peace and security.”

Without naming Russia and China, Rice dismissed any parallels with NATO’s now blatant neo-colonial intervention in Libya as a “cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people.” She staged a walk-out by the US delegation after Syrian ambassador *Bashar Jaafari* accused the US of “partaking in genocide” by supporting Israel. The US has repeatedly wielded its veto power to block resolutions critical of Israel.

Rice’s comments reek of hypocrisy. While denouncing the Syrian regime’s anti-democratic measures, the US and European powers turn a blind eye to the repressive methods of their allies in the region, including the Saudi monarchy and, up until this year, the regime of Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak—to name just two. As in the case of Libya, the concern of the US and European powers is not democratic rights, but the advancement of their economic and strategic interests in the Middle East.

The US and major European powers have already put “regime change” in Syria on the agenda, demanding in August that Syrian President Bashar Assad resign. France, Britain and Germany issued a joint statement declaring that Assad “had lost all legitimacy.” The US and its European

allies are seeking to establish a regime more amenable to their interests, in particular to further isolate and pave the way for tougher measures against Syria’s ally, Iran.

Joining with Washington, British Foreign Secretary William Hague yesterday described the veto as “deeply mistaken and regrettable.” Hague ominously declared that Britain would redouble its efforts “to increase the pressure on the regime wherever we can.” After branding the vote as “a sad day for the Security Council,” French ambassador Gerard Araud also pledged to “firmly support” anti-Assad opposition inside Syria. The US and its allies have already imposed their own economic sanctions, including, in the case of the European powers, a crippling ban on energy imports from Syria.

The US, Britain and France had clearly been hoping for a UN resolution that could be exploited to justify far tougher measures against Syria. The Europeans had modified Tuesday’s resolution to exclude targeted financial sanctions and an arms embargo as first proposed in August. But the final resolution, as well as condemning Syria’s “grave and systematic” human rights violations, allowed for the Security Council to consider unspecified measures against Syria after a 30-day period.

Having been badly burnt in Libya, Russia and China were not about to leave any room for a repetition in Syria. In the case of Libya, the NATO powers exploited a resolution authorising the imposition of a no-fly zone to “protect civilians” to justify a full-scale air war in support of anti-Gaddafi forces to oust the Libyan strongman. As a consequence, Russia and China, which had substantial economic interests in Libya, both lost out.

Russia has even more to lose in Syria. Moscow has longstanding economic and strategic ties with Damascus. According to the *Moscow Times*, the Russian embassy reported exports of \$1.1 billion to Syria in 2010 and investment valued at \$19.4 billion in 2009. Russian companies are involved in joint oil ventures and construction

as well as substantial arms sales. Russia has a servicing point for its naval vessels in the Syrian port of Tartous—the only Russian military facility outside the former Soviet republics. China also has significant economic interests at stake in Syria.

In opposing the UN resolution, Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin declared that it was “based on a philosophy of confrontation” and described the threat of action as “unacceptable.” He warned that the resolution, combined with Western calls for Assad to go, “could have provoked full-scale civil war” in Syria that could be “destructive in the whole Middle East.”

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich told reporters in Moscow: “We’ve warned from the beginning that efforts to turn what happened with the UN resolution on Libya into a model for action by Western coalitions, NATO, are absolutely unacceptable.” Russia’s own proposed resolution, calling for non-intervention in Syrian affairs and a negotiated settlement of the Syrian civil conflict, was rejected by the US and its allies.

Significantly, along with vetoes by Russia and China, the other members of the so-called BRICS group of “emerging economies”—South Africa, India and Brazil—abstained on the resolution. These countries are all concerned that the aggressive actions of the US and its allies in the Middle East and North Africa will pave the way for interventions in other parts of the globe and compromise their interests.

In an obvious reference to Libya, South African ambassador Baso Sangqu issued a statement declaring that the Security Council had been abused and that implementation of its resolutions had gone far beyond mandates. South Africa was concerned, he said, about the imposition of punitive measures on Syria, believing that they had been designed “as a prelude to other actions.” Explaining South Africa’s abstention, Sangqu insisted that the Council should not be part of any hidden agenda for regime change.

As Britain and France have already made clear, the defeat of the UN resolution will not halt the escalating push to oust the Assad regime. The *Guardian* reported that the US and its allies were considering a new resolution to put before the Security Council. Undoubtedly the same powers will ramp up their campaign for other countries to take measures against Syria.

Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced yesterday that his country would impose economic sanctions on Syria in addition to its present arms embargo. The Turkish government is deeply concerned that unrest in Syria could spread over the border, particularly among the Kurdish population. In recent weeks, the Turkish military has mounted air and artillery attacks on areas of northern Iraq against alleged strongholds of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK).

Syrian opposition groups met last weekend in Istanbul to form a Syrian National Council—along the lines of the NATO-backed National Transitional Council in Libya—to seek support from the “international community.” Announcing the new organisation, Paris-based academic Burhan Ghalioun declared that the council called for peaceful opposition to Assad and opposed foreign intervention in Syria. The *Washington Post*, however, reported growing support among opposition groups, particularly inside Syria, for a call for international military intervention.

The Syrian National Council no more represents the legitimate democratic aspirations of the Syrian people than the ruthless Assad regime, or the council’s counterpart in Libya. It is a fractious coalition of organisations representing dissident sections of the Syrian bourgeoisie seeking to establish their own anti-democratic regime in Damascus with the backing of the Western powers.

More broadly, the veto by Russia and China of the UN resolution marks a ramping up of global tensions. Having abstained on the Libyan resolution earlier this year, the two countries were clearly determined to block a repetition despite the potential damage to their relations with the US and Europe. The danger is that the escalation of bitter rivalry over vital strategic and economic interests has the potential to trigger a wider conflict involving nuclear-armed powers.



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