Syria chemical weapons deal—US war postponed, not canceled

Bill Van Auken
16 September 2013

There is no doubt a sense of relief among many who oppose a new war of aggression in the Middle East as a result of the deal reached in Geneva between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the elimination of the Syrian government's chemical weapons arsenal.

The bitter truth, however, is that war has only been postponed. Those who think that the Obama administration has embraced peace do not understand the objective social, economic and geopolitical interests that drive American militarism. Notwithstanding the agreement with Russia, the administration has done no more than execute a tactical retreat. It remains committed to regime change in Syria, which US imperialism sees as an essential part of its preparations for a military confrontation with Iran.

Significantly, President Obama stated in an interview broadcast Sunday on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" that Iran "shouldn't draw a lesson that we haven't struck [Syria] to think we won't strike Iran."

In the space of barely one week, the Obama administration went from the brink of launching a savage bombardment of Syria to a negotiated agreement with Russia. Behind the rapid shift in US policy was the unprecedented depth of popular opposition to war, finding its expression first in the August 29 vote of the British Parliament against a resolution in support of military action.

Unable to gain a fig leaf of legality through a United Nations resolution—opposed by both Russia and China—and deprived of even the support of its closest ally, the Obama administration turned to the US Congress in an attempt to push through an Authorization for the Use of Military Force resolution. It saw in the approval of such a measure a means of claiming a false legitimacy and facade of popular support for what would be an illegal and unilateral act of international aggression.

Here too, the administration failed. With members of Congress being bombarded with messages from their constituents running better than nine-to-one against war, it became evident that Obama would lose the vote in the Republican-led House and likely in the Democratic-led Senate. This would have been the first time in US history that a president seeking authorization for military action received such a rebuff, and would have fatally undermined Obama's presidency.

It was under these conditions that the White House ended up going along with Russia's proposal for an agreement on Syria's chemical disarmament. It had made its pretext for war the unsubstantiated allegations that the Assad regime bore responsibility for an August 21 chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs. US military action, it claimed, would be used to "deter and degrade" Syrian chemical weapons capabilities.

It then found itself outmaneuvered by Moscow, which seized on an apparently off-the-cuff remark by Kerry that the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad could avoid a US military attack only by completely destroying its chemical weapons stocks. Moscow gained Assad's agreement to do just that, and the Obama administration found itself in the untenable position of going ahead with an immensely unpopular war for ostensible purposes that could be achieved without a single Tomahawk missile being fired.

Having embraced the so-called "path of diplomacy," Obama and his aides have been at pains to make it clear that war remains firmly on the agenda. Obama himself stressed that the deal reached in Geneva had come about only as the result of a "credible threat of US force," and declared, "If diplomacy fails, the United States is prepared to act."

For his part, Kerry made it clear that the US would make its own determinations as to whether the Assad regime was out of compliance with the chemical weapons

agreement, and would take military action accordingly. In the absence of UN sanction, military strikes would be taken "with a decision by the president of the United States and likeminded allies, if they thought that was what it came to."

It is also evident that the White House will not likely make the same mistake twice of going to Congress for approval. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, the second-ranking Democrat in the House of Representatives, told Bloomberg Television over the weekend that neither he nor House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi "believe the president is required to come to Congress in this instance, and could act on his own."

Hoyer added, however, that the agreement with Russia could be used to help sell a war to Congress. "People would say, 'Well, he went the extra mile, he reached out, he took the diplomatic course that people had been urging him to take—and it didn't work,'" Hoyer said. "And therefore under those circumstances, the only option available to us to preclude the further use of chemical weapons and to try to deter and degrade Syria's ability to use them is to act."

These are no doubt the political calculations being made by the Obama administration as well. History does not bode well for Syria. Two other Middle East leaders agreed to destroy their chemical weapons stockpiles—Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi. Their countries were subjected to US wars for regime change, and neither is alive today.

The US-Russian agreement places a series of demands upon Syria that are, according to chemical weapons experts, virtually impossible to meet. While the chemical weapons treaty gives nations 60 days to account for all of their munitions after signing the agreement, the deal reached in Geneva gives Damascus one week. And while the United States has spent the last 18 years disposing of its own chemical weapons stockpile—and projects that it will be another decade before it is done—Syria is supposed to complete the same task in nine months.

If failure to clear these hurdles fails to provide a pretext for war, there is always the potential for another chemical weapons provocation staged by the Al Qaeda-led "rebels" and blamed on the Assad regime.

Chemical weapons were never the motive for direct US military intervention, merely the pretext. The narrative, promoted by a corporate-controlled media dedicated to war propaganda, that Washington was merely a horrified bystander to Syria's civil war, concerned solely for the welfare of defenseless civilians, is a bald-faced lie. US imperialism has been a principal instigator of this war, pouring some quarter of a billion dollars worth of aid into the anti-Assad insurgency and coordinating even larger amounts of funding and weaponry from the reactionary Sunni monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, its principal allies in the Arab world.

Now the CIA has begun directly training and arming the "rebels," a collection of Islamists, criminals and mercenaries who have ravaged the country. It is the string of military defeats suffered by Washington's proxy forces, beginning with the loss of the town of al-Qusayr last June, that provided the immediate impulse for the US invoking the "red line" of chemical weapons and rushing to war. Having earned the enmity of broad layers of the Syrian population with their sectarian bloodletting and retrograde Islamist ideology, the CIA-backed forces were on the brink of defeat.

More fundamentally, the US-orchestrated war for regime change in Syria is part of Washington's strategy for asserting its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and, more broadly, the strategically vital landmass of Eurasia. The Obama administration is pursuing the same predatory aims as its predecessor in Afghanistan and Iraq, seeking to use US imperialism's military superiority as a means of offsetting its relative economic decline. The intervention in Syria is aimed not merely at the regime in Damascus, but at breaking the power and influence of Iran, as well as Russia and China, in the region.

A US naval strike force and a growing Russian fleet continue to face each other in the eastern Mediterranean.

The US-Russian deal on Syrian chemical weapons does not herald a new era of peace. It is merely another episode in a period of escalating military provocations and war scares similar to those that preceded the First and Second World Wars.

The threat of a widening regional war and a new global conflagration can be answered only by the international working class mobilizing its independent strength in a united struggle against capitalism.