

UN Security Council backs US-Russia deal on Syrian chemical disarmament

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On Thursday night, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council approved a resolution negotiated between the United States and Russia, laying the basis for the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons program.

The deal, first proposed by Russia two weeks ago in an attempt to prevent the United States and its allies from going to war with Syria to support Al Qaeda-linked opposition militias, marks a definite pause in the US threat of war with Syria. Only two weeks ago, the Obama administration was threatening to go to war, like the Bush administration in Iraq in 2003, without UN Security Council approval and in defiance of international law.

For now, Washington is negotiating in the context of the UN. This places definite obstacles to a US war with Syria. The resolution to which it has agreed does not authorize the use of force against Syria, even if it is found to be in non-compliance with disarmament plans.

Should Washington or its allies accuse Syria of non-compliance, they would have to return to the UN Security Council to ask for a separate Chapter 7 authorization for military force, which would likely face a veto from Russia, as well as China.

The Obama administration is signaling its support for the negotiations and disarmament proceedings proposed by Moscow and Damascus. US State Department officials have termed Syria's declaration of its chemical inventory as "quite good," after initially voicing concerns that the Assad regime would seek to hide its weapons. Syria reportedly has 300 tons of sulfur mustard, and several hundred tons of liquid chemical precursors of nerve agents, which are described as "un-weaponized" and relatively easy to destroy.

The Kremlin has offered to dispatch troops to Syria to guard the chemicals prior to their destruction. White House officials praised this gesture as "serious and sincere," and praised Russian negotiators as "even more prepared" than their US counterparts to discuss the legal and technical issues involved in Syria's disarmament program.

US officials and their international counterparts all tried to present this situation as a triumph for peace and for their various diplomatic agendas.

US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power said, "Just two weeks ago, tonight's outcome seemed utterly unimaginable. Two weeks ago, the Syrian regime had not even acknowledged the existence of its chemical weapons stockpiles. But tonight, we have a shared draft resolution that was the outcome of intense diplomacy and negotiations over the last two weeks."

After talks with US Secretary of State John Kerry, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said: "The major concerns of all the parties, including China's concerns, have basically been resolved."

If Washington has returned to the negotiating table, this is due not to a triumph of diplomacy, but to the overwhelming opposition to a US-NATO war of aggression against Syria in the American and European working class. Stunned by mass public anger at its war plans, and unable to orchestrate a shift in public opinion through the media, the Obama administration also faced the threat of war with Syria's backers, Russia and Iran. It therefore accepted the Russian offer of talks as the best way to pursue its strategic interests against Syria, Russia, and Iran.

The UN resolution leaves open a number of avenues for the Obama administration and its NATO and Persian Gulf allies to bring pressure to bear on the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In one unusual and stringent provision, the resolution demands that the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have access to any site it suspects could be of relevance to chemical weapons, even if it has not been declared by the Syrian regime.

It demands that Syria grant officials “immediate and unfettered access to and the right to inspect, in discharging their functions, any and all sites.” It also demands “immediate and unfettered access to individuals the OPCW has grounds to believe to be of importance for the purpose of its mandate.”

It also demands that the Assad regime integrate sections of the US-backed opposition into its ranks. It calls for “the establishment of a transitional governing body exercising full executive powers, which could include members of the present Government and the opposition and other groups, and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.”

Far from ending the threat of war, these negotiations over Syria’s chemical weapons tie the Syrian conflict to a much broader, even tenser regional confrontation laid bare by the Syrian war scare—between the US and its allies, on the one hand, and Iran and Russia on the other. These countries are now pressing Syria to appease the United States, as they prepare for negotiations with Washington on a range of regional issues, most prominently Iran’s nuclear program.

The outcome of such negotiations is entirely uncertain, as Washington is poised to demand deep concessions not only on Iran’s nuclear program, but on its broader foreign policy and on Western ownership of portions of its oil industry. It is unclear whether the deeply divided Iranian regime can agree to such terms. Above all, they will face deep opposition in the Iranian working class, for whom they would spell deep social cuts and the re-establishment of US influence in Iran on a scale unseen since the 1979 Iranian Revolution toppled the US-backed Shah of Iran.

The Obama administration has repeatedly and consistently stated that all options are “on the table” should talks on Iran’s nuclear program fail, including the use of military force. Despite the talks on Syrian chemical weapons, the region remains on the verge of the type of major conflict that almost broke out earlier this month.

In an article for Iran’s state-run English-language media outlet Press TV, Zaher Mahruqi said, “Bashar al-

Assad is an intelligent man who at the very least understands that betraying Russia and Iran, who have been supporting his efforts in the past two years, would be a serious mistake. Therefore, any big decision Syria makes has to have been consulted with its main backers and has been given some sort of guarantees that giving up chemical weapons is not as risky as it might appear, and that a credible backup plan is in place.”

Mahruqi suggested that Iran’s strategy is based on the expectation that Russia would intervene in a future US war with Syria, having already dispatched Russian warships to the Mediterranean to monitor NATO warships that stand ready to launch missile strikes on Syria.

“Syria will comply albeit at a calculated pace and will give America and Israel no legitimate pretext to attack it, and as such Russia will have no choice but to stand its ground. If an attack takes place, Russia’s response is likely to be far stronger than the recent showdown in the Mediterranean,” he wrote.



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