

Taking out Syria's chemical weapons

Rasul Bakhsh Rais

The agreement between the United States and Russia to place the chemical weapons of the Syrian regime under international control and destroy them is remarkable for averting the military strikes that Washington was giving a serious thought and final touches to. Diplomacy, quite unexpectedly, succeeded in hammering out a deal that satisfies the two sides. There are, however, three questions that we need to address in analysing this agreement — what has really brought Moscow and Washington together? Does this agreement mean the US has given up on regime change in Syria and does it set any precedent for other states?

Before we answer these questions, a few words about the agreement and Russia as a major power are in order. The agreement has all the critical elements in it, absolute surrender of weapons, strict compliance, verification and enforcement action in case of failure. In view of a credible threat of sanctions under Article 7 of the UN Charter, the Assad regime has no choice but to give up the weapons.

Russia is not a global power in the sense of the Soviet era but it is a major player. It has influence with Syria and has wider relations with Iran, another backer of Assad. Moscow is in no position and has no desire even to challenge American hegemony in the Middle East, but may weigh heavily in American calculations of particularly military interventions.

The US and Russia have a lot in common in the post-Cold War world. In the present climate of the Middle East and Central Asia, they share a common threat perception of extremism. It is precisely the radical challenge that has nudged them to an agreement on Syria. Incidentally, the Syrian regime portrays itself as a secular alternative to the radicals in the region that it accuses of waging a war to topple it. This is far from the truth, but extremism in Syria and other countries descending into chaos presents a major security problem.

The agreement may provide a new starting point for Moscow and Washington to negotiate a transitional regime in Syria, as Assad's tenure is ending next year. That is what the Syrian government and its armed opposition must have been working towards. It is never late to negotiate the end of civil war before it results into genocides and chaos. The destruction of Syrian cities and displacement of population inside and outside have already created one of the major humanitarian crises.

The agreement actually is a big face-saver for President Obama. He was about to order strikes against the Assad regime targets on which he didn't find support even in the rank-and-file of his own party. Nor does he enjoy the support of his closest allies in the world such as Britain, France and Germany. This doesn't mean the US is going to roll back its policy of covert intervention in support of anti-Assad forces. Arming the Syrian Liberation Army and attempts to tilt the balance in favour of a moderate opposition to replace Assad by force or as a result of a negotiated settlement will remain on its agenda. Its policy of regime change through military intervention has run its course. This policy has achieved very little except chaos and conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

Acquiring control of chemical and other weapons of mass destruction by the US and the UN has happened before in Iraq and Libya. The agreement over Syria just strengthens that pattern. Their use by any state in future, if not mere possession, may invoke similar reaction.

Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of ISS or of the Government of Pakistan.