The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin's Spectacular Syrian Smoke Screen

By Michael Bohm

September 19, 2013



President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar Assad, taking advantage of global fatigue for foreign humanitarian interventions, have created a smoke screen of mammoth proportions. Instead of holding the Assad regime responsible for war crimes, the world is now focused exclusively on Russia's "peaceful plan" to destroy Assad's deadly stockpile of chemical weapons.

This could well prove to be the largest smoke screen that the world has witnessed since Operation Fortitude, the Allied's legendary military deception that diverted Axis attention away from the Normandy invasion in France during World War II.

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"Operation Disarm Syria" came to life last weekend after two days of negotiations between Russia and the U.S. The two countries signed a framework agreement in Geneva to identify and destroy Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons. Now the two countries, along with the other three permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, must agree on the wording of a UN resolution that will govern the disarmament plan.

One of the biggest sticking points is determining what punitive measures should be included in the resolution if Assad does not comply with the plan. The U.S., France and Britain are in favor of including the UN Chapter 7 provision, which would sanction military operations against Syria for noncompliance. Russia and China categorically oppose foreign military intervention and would veto such a resolution, citing the "abuse" of the Chapter 7 provision in Security Resolution 1973, which allowed the U.S., France and other allied countries to bomb Libya in 2011 and force a regime change there.

But the only chance that Assad will destroy Syria's chemical weapons is if he feels a constant and real threat of military intervention. Notably, it was only the imminent threat of an attack by U.S. cruise missiles that prompted Assad and Putin to propose chemical weapons disarmament in the first place.

This principle of "peace through strength" is the only way to deal effectively with totalitarian regimes. U.S. President Ronald Reagan, for example, used this strategy successfully to face down the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It is even more essential when the West is trying to deal with Assad, one of the most brutal dictators of the 21st century. Without the threat of force, Assad will string everybody along for years, violating every UN resolution at will while keeping a large stash of chemical weapons in secret locations just in case.

U.S. President Barack Obama has said that even if the Security Council fails to adopt the Chapter 7 provision, the U.S. reserves the right to carry out punitive military measures against Assad for noncompliance or if he commits further crimes against humanity.

The only problem, though, is that few believe that Obama has the will to lead a strong military campaign against Syria, particularly without the support of the U.S. Congress and the majority of Americans. Despite his "red-line" threat made a year ago, Obama always opposed a serious military intervention in Syria, and he was clearly relieved when Russia's proposal on disarmament gave him a convenient excuse not to bomb.

Meanwhile, Russia has emerged as Assad's largest supporter and PR agent. Notably, Assad's first global television interview after Russia went public with the proposal to destroy Syria's chemical weapons on Sept. 9 was his interview with state-controlled Rossia 24 on Sept. 12.

In the interview, Assad brazenly set his own conditions for disarmament: Obama has to stop his threatening language, and Israel has to get rid of their weapons of mass destruction. This is like a mass murderer saying during his trial: "I don't like the way the judge is talking to me. Give me a new judge or I refuse to appear in court."

Given the war crimes he has committed, Assad should be answering questions not from Rossia 24 journalists at his luxurious mansion in Damascus but from prosecutors at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Even before the chemical weapons attack that killed about 1,400 Syrians on Aug. 21, Assad has always had a free hand in committing war crimes against civilians — thanks in no small part to Russia, which Assad knew would offer diplomatic cover in the Security Council, including vetoing even the mildest UN resolutions that simply condemned the Assad regime for its crimes. Now, when faced with overwhelming evidence of Assad's atrocities — including the UN report on Monday that points to Assad's forces as having carried out the chemical weapons attack — Russia continues to stubbornly repeat the Assad line that it was the "terrorist" opposition forces that committed all the war crimes.

Putin has won accolades for last weekend's disarmament agreement, with supporters calling it "an ingenious diplomatic coup" worthy of a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize.

But Putin seems to be blind to the fact that he is playing with fire by embracing the Assad regime so tightly. This myopia is particularly strange given Russia's own painful history. Seventy-four years ago, the Kremlin signed a pact with another dictator and henchman: Adolf Hitler. The 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop "nonaggression pact" ended less than two years later when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union.

By embracing the chemical weapons disarmament plan as a "peaceful solution" to the Syrian conflict, the West is at risk of repeating British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's naive "peace in our time" mistake when Britain and its allies appeased Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland.

If Western powers appease Assad, they will likely give him a decade or more in power since it will take that long, particularly during a civil war, to destroy even a portion of Syria's 1,000 tons of chemical weapons, the third-largest supply in the world.

If Assad's regime has killed nearly 100,000 civilians in 2 ½ years, this figure could easily grow to 500,000 in 10 or so years, particularly if Russia continues to send advanced weapons to Assad's army and if the West continues its policy of appeasement.

The West should be aware of dictators bearing disarmament gifts. It should also not allow itself to be blinded by Putin's and Assad's smoke screen.

But the Kremlin is playing an even more dangerous political game with the Assad regime. Putin is much like a circus trainer who thinks he has befriended a lion. The trainer feeds and even pets the lion, and for many years both enjoy a warm relationship. At the same time, however, there are many documented cases when this seemingly tame, loyal lion suddenly turns against his patron and rips him apart in shreds. In essence, little separates wild, predatory lions from ruthless, bloodthirsty dictators.

Unlike Hitler, Assad will never attack Russia, of course. But if it suits his interests, Assad will not hesitate to turn against Putin and eat his lunch.

Bon appetit, Bashar.

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