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Putin's Credibility on the Line With Syria Plan

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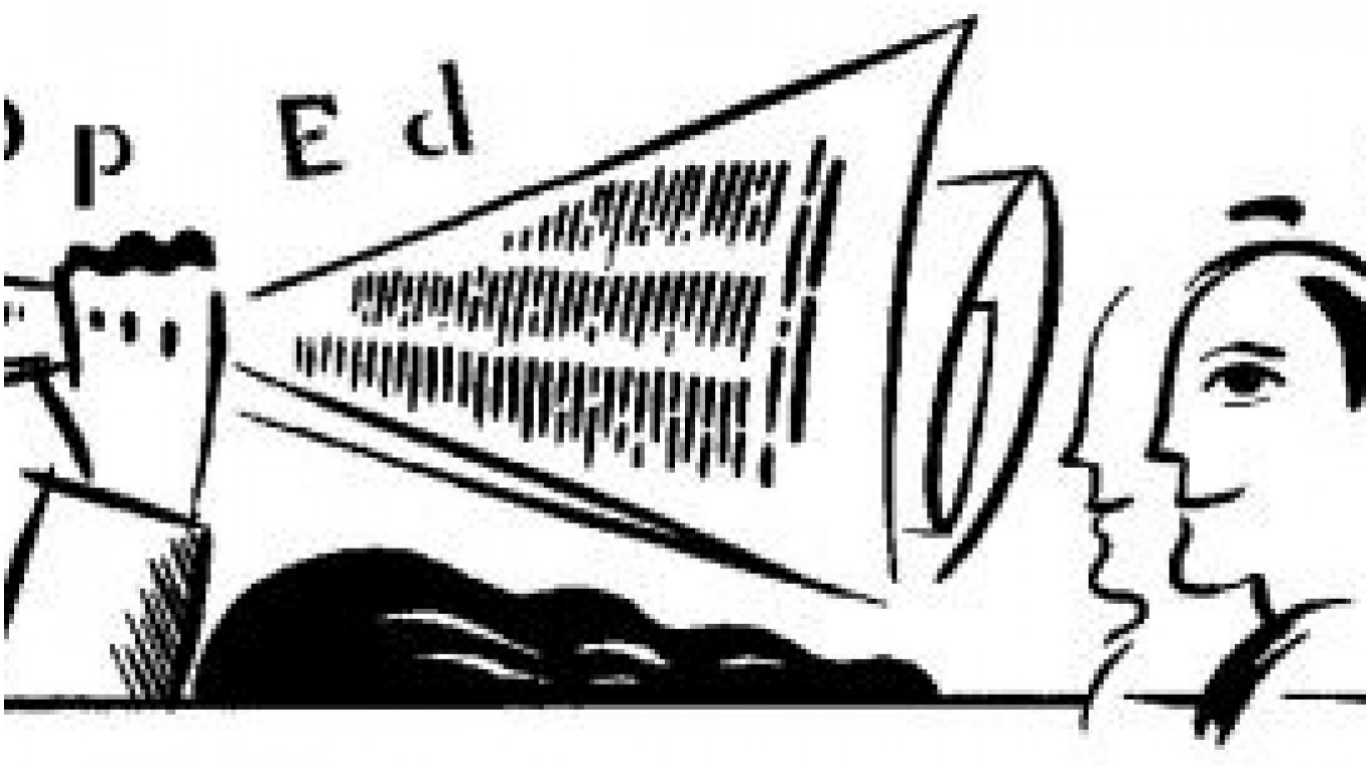

Throughout the devastating civil war in Syria, Russian and U.S. leaders have shared a deep concern about the possible use and potential loss of control of the deadly chemical weapons arsenal of the government of Syrian leader Bashar Assad. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama discussed the problem at the 2013 Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg earlier this month. At least five times in the past year, U.S. and Russian experts had discussed the types of steps that would be required to secure and eliminate Assad's chemical arms.

Russia, however, did not take much interest in U.S. proposals for establishing international control of Syria's chemical weapons until the large-scale, horrific sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, as well as the threat of U.S. cruise missile strikes to degrade the ability of Assad to launch further attacks on defenseless civilians.

These developments, combined with growing evidence that it was Assad's forces that carried out the Aug. 21 attack, have shifted Russia's calculations.

Now, Moscow and Washington are committed to working together on a game-changing plan to establish international control over Syria's chemical weapons and to eliminate them within the next year under auspices of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, or OPCW, the multilateral implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention in The Hague.

Under the plan negotiated by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and announced Sept. 14, Syria is required to declare and cede control of its sizable chemical weapons arsenal within the next month. By mid-2014, the entire stockpile, including chemical agents, production facilities and delivery systems, are to be safely eliminated under the supervision of the OPCW.

The plan is difficult but doable. Moscow bears a tremendous responsibility for its success. Putin's international credibility is on the line. Making the plan work depends heavily on the ability of Moscow to maintain pressure on its client, Assad, to fully cooperate with the process of eliminating his chemical stockpile on schedule. In addition, the U.S. and Russia will have to continue to work together to overcome the serious political, financial and technical challenges that lie ahead.

This week, the OPCW executive council must review Assad's initial disclosure of Syria's chemical weapons sites and approve the plan for international control of Syria's stockpile. United Nations Security Council must also agree on a resolution mandating that Syria comply with the U.S.-Russian plan, including unfettered access by OPCW inspectors.

To ensure that Syria fully implements its commitment to abide by the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Security Council should agree that "serious action" by members under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter would be warranted if there are flagrant violations by Assad. If not, the U.S. and other governments will and should continue to reserve the right to use force to compel implementation by Syria.

Then the tough work really begins.

Together, the U.S. and Russia already know a good deal about the size and nature of the Syrian chemical weapons stocks. Assad's forces are believed to possess about 1,000 tons of blister agents including mustard gas and nerve agents including sarin and VX, most of which consists of precursor chemicals and bulk agent with relatively little already weaponized.

Syria's stockpile is deliverable by aerial bombs, ballistic missiles and artillery rockets. The U.S. believes there are about 40 chemical weapons-related sites inside Syria.

The OPCW will need additional inspectors and chemical weapons destruction specialists to verify the accuracy of Syria's declaration and begin the task of securing and destroying the stockpile in a safe but rapid manner. Currently, the organization only has about 125 inspectors, down from about 200 just a few years ago, and they have ongoing responsibilities worldwide. The U.S. and Russia and other donor states will need to provide additional financing for the OPCW's added work, along with additional technical expertise and equipment.

The U.S. and Russia have already agreed that the most important first steps would be to secure

the chemical sites and begin destroying the equipment needed to mix the chemicals and arm the delivery systems to reduce the chemical weapons threat to Syria's people as soon as possible.

The next step is verifiable destruction. With Syria's stockpile largely in bulk, it can be more easily incinerated and neutralized in semi-mobile units. Munitions can be destroyed in closed, steel-canister systems, or "bang boxes," making destruction within the nine to 12 months difficult but doable.

All of these steps require Assad's full cooperation. Assad's cost-benefit calculation about chemical weapons has already changed. They are now an enormous liability that cannot be used and only through their verifiable elimination can he avoid punitive military strikes that would have the backing of the U.S. and possibly the UN Security Council as well.

Nevertheless, it is possible that Assad could hide some of his chemical weapons stockpile, just as Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi did in 2004. Such cheating would be difficult given U.S. and Israeli intelligence. It will be up to Russia, Assad's main arms supplier and political supporter, to ensure he fully cooperates and avoids a possible U.S. military attack. Syrian cheating would reflect badly on Moscow.

The U.S.-Russian plan does not "absolve" Assad's well-documented past use of chemical weapons. The use of chemical weapons is prohibited by the 1925 Geneva Protocol and is a war crime according to the International Criminal Court. The UN Security Council can refer such war crimes to the International Criminal Court even if the accused are citizens of a state that has not ratified the court's statute.

The recent findings of chemical weapons inspection teams from the UN and OPCW show evidence of the large-scale use of the nerve agent sarin and the direction and type of the rockets used in the attacks. This evidence points strongly, beyond a reasonable doubt, to Assad's forces as having been responsible for the attack. The UN report corroborates the conclusions reached by the U.S. and European intelligence agencies in the days after the attack.

Suggestions by Putin and senior Russian officials that Syrian rebels may have been responsible defy belief and undermine Russian credibility.

Even if Moscow remains unwilling to accept the findings of the UN report, Russia should at least agree to support a Security Council resolution that condemns the use of chemical weapons in Syria as a war crime and hold accountable those persons found to be responsible for the chemical attacks.

Unfortunately, the U.S.-Russian framework for the control and verifiable destruction of Syria's chemical weapons does not resolve the ongoing, brutal conflict in Syria. But it does provide the most effective way of denying Assad the option to use one of his most dangerous and inhumane weapons against Syria's civilians. The agreement has an additional dividend: It can facilitate U.S.-Russian cooperation toward bringing key parties together to reach a political settlement for ending the conflict.

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