

US, RUSSIA AGREE ON SYRIA PLAN; UN SECURITY COUNCIL VOTE COULD COME LATER TODAY

In a continuation of Barack Obama's pivot to diplomacy, it appears that the US and Russia, along with several other UN Security Council members, have come to an agreement on how to structure the UNSC resolution on the surrender and destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. Further good news comes in the early analysis of the disclosure by Syria of its chemical weapon stockpile, as it appears that most of the material is composed of binary precursors. Because of this, Syria can be effectively disarmed quickly by destruction of the mixing equipment. Further, these sarin precursors can be destroyed more quickly and safely than sarin that has already been prepared. Finally, hints are now being dropped that the rapid progress on the diplomatic front may have been brought about by a realization that Assad may not be in full control of the use of Syria's chemical weapons.

Talks between the US and Russia had been stalled for some time over the issue of how Chapter 7 of the UN Charter would be invoked in the UNSC resolution. The US has favored putting that language into the resolution currently under discussion, spelling out military action to be taken should Syria default in its responsibilities in the disarming process. Russia has resisted such an automatic process. It appears that the issue has been resolved by making it clear that if Syria should violate the initial agreement, the Security Council will meet again to vote on invocation of Chapter 7 and potential military action. Although war hawks will dismiss this approach as allowing Syria to delay and obfuscate, it also prevents manipulation by the US to blow a minor violation

out of proportion and initiate military action without a full hearing before the Security Council.

Reuters emphasizes the current absence of Chapter 7 consequences in the draft resolution in the opening of its article on developments:

Ending weeks of diplomatic deadlock, the United States and Russia agreed on Thursday on a U.N. Security Council draft resolution that would demand Syria give up its chemical arms, but does not threaten military force if it fails to comply.

Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said a deal was struck with Russia “legally obligating” Syria to give up its chemical stockpile and the measure went to the full Security Council in a closed-door meeting on Thursday night. U.N. diplomats said a vote could come within 24 hours.

The process which would be followed in the event of a violation of the agreement by Syria is described by the New York Times:

Western diplomats said the resolution would be legally binding and would stipulate that if Syria failed to abide by the terms, the Security Council would take measures under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, the strongest form of a Council resolution. Such measures could include economic sanctions or even military action. But before any action could be taken, the issue would have to go back for further deliberations by the Security Council, on which Russia, like the other permanent members, holds a veto.

By making any Chapter 7 actions subject to a separate vote both the US and Russia will be

forced to provide convincing evidence for the positions they take. The US won't be able to move for military action on shaky grounds and Russia will be under a huge amount of pressure if they attempt to prevent a response to a clear violation. Gosh, such a process would put the UN into a position of functioning as it was intended. What a concept.

With all of the usual caveats that this is yet another transcription by Joby Warrick, there is very interesting and encouraging news coming from the initial disclosures on Syria's chemical weapons:

U.S. and Russian officials now believe that the vast majority of Syria's nerve agent stockpile consists of "unweaponized" liquid precursors that could be neutralized relatively quickly, lowering the risk that the toxins could be hidden away by the regime or stolen by terrorists.

A confidential assessment by the United States and Russia also concludes that Syria's entire arsenal could be destroyed in about nine months, assuming that Syrian officials honor promises to cede control of the chemical assets to international inspectors, according to two people briefed on the analysis.

Because most of the material exists in a form where two components must be mixed to make the poison gas (remember the old two part epoxy glues?), destruction of the material is less of a problem:

Weapons experts not privy to the briefings described the findings as encouraging. Several noted that it is far easier to destroy precursor chemicals than battlefield-ready liquid sarin or warheads already loaded with the toxin.

Even more importantly, though, a new route to disarming Syria quickly has opened up with this information:

If U.N. inspection teams can remove even one of the sarin precursors – or the equipment used for measuring and filling – they can all but eliminate Syria’s ability to launch a chemical attack even before the stockpile is completely destroyed, said Daryl Kimball, director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association.

“The mixing equipment itself is essential to using chemical agents,” Kimball said. “If you prioritize the destruction of the equipment, you can largely deny Syria the ability to use these weapons again on Syrian soil.”

Warrick has also sprinkled his article two interesting nuggets for us to chew on regarding the August 21 chemical weapons attack. First, he reminds us of the US claim that Syrian soldiers were observed mixing sarin a few days before the attack:

U.S. surveillance systems observed Syrian troops mixing chemical precursors three days before sarin-filled rockets exploded in a Damascus suburb.

Warrick gives us no information on why the US saw this mixing going on but did not sound a general alarm or provide further surveillance information tracking the material to a specific launch site for rockets bearing the agent.

The second nugget is even more interesting, bringing out into the open speculation that the use of chemical agents may have been by Syrian troops operating without a direct order from Assad:

Both countries expressed optimism that Syria will comply with U.N. demands to

surrender its chemical weapons. Syria's arsenal was initially developed as a deterrent to a future Israeli attack, but Assad may now view the weapons as a liability after the international outcry over the Aug. 21 attack, White House officials said at the briefings.

The apparent change of heart also could reflect discord within the Syrian government over the use of sarin, which some U.S. officials suspect may have been ordered by a senior regime official without Assad's authorization, the briefers said.

The rapid developments on the diplomatic front are much easier to understand if that is what happened. If Assad no longer feels that he is in control of the chemical weapons, his willingness to work with the UN and to join the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons become rational and responsible actions. Further, if Assad has shared this information with Russia, then their sudden move to stop protecting Syria at the UNSC makes more sense, as well. In fact, I wonder if the US dropped the insistence on automatic Chapter 7 language in the resolution because they now believe that to be the case, as well.

Despite all of this good news, I remain concerned about the lack of calls for a ceasefire to accompany the process of destroying the chemical arms. The very beginning of this process may have been planted, though, as I have seen several articles over the last few days mention the need for a negotiated settlement to the Syrian civil war.