FRANCE TO TAKE KERRY'S ACCIDENTAL DIPLOMACY TO UN

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The Russian gambit to take accidental diplomat John Kerry up on his offer of an "impossible" scenario under which Syria could avoid US military action continues to gather steam. This morning, both the Washington Post and New York Times fill us in on French plans to take the Russian proposal to the UN, where there seems to be a chance that there will not be a veto at the Security Council.

The Times gives us some information on the sequence of events leading to the proposal:

> Mr. Lavrov said he had discussed the proposal with the Americans before announcing it at a hastily arranged briefing on Monday evening. Mr. Obama and Mr. Putin discussed the idea privately on the sidelines of last week's summit of the Group of 20 nations, and Mr. Lavrov discussed it with Secretary of State John Kerry.
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> They spoke as Mr. Kerry flew home to Washington after first raising the idea in a dismissive way in London on Monday, making clear that the idea of Mr. Assad giving up Syria's weapons seemed improbable.
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> In their conversation, Mr. Kerry told his Russian counterpart, "We're not going to play games," according to a senior State Department official.

That's a good idea from Kerry not to play games, since he had been so badly outplayed to that point. So the official position appears to be

that Obama and Putin had discussed the idea but Kerry stumbled onto the same concept, but only as an impossibility? Okay, then.

The Post has similar language on the sequence of most of the events between Kerry and Lavrov, but is a bit more nuanced as to the Obama and Putin discussion:

> Obama said in an interview on “PBS NewsHour” on Monday that he had discussed the possibility of international monitoring with Russian President Vladimir Putin at last week’s Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg.
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> The senior State Department official said Lavrov had previously discussed the idea in conversations with Kerry, including a telephone call as recently as Thursday, but never in the context of the proposed U.S. military action.

Clearly, the plan being discussed now, where Syria turns its chemical weapons over to international groups for eventual destruction goes well beyond “monitoring”. Is Obama claiming that discussions on monitoring are the equivalent of discussing this plan? Or is it just a desperate attempt to save face? I’m okay with face-saving if the lives of Syrian civilians are also spared.

Putting those considerations aside, though, I have one major concern about the French plan as described. Here is the Times description:

> In Paris, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said the French approach to the Security Council would be made under Chapter 7 of the United Nations Charter, which provides for an array of action, including military, to restore peace and would urge the Syrians to accept that their chemical stockpiles would be dismantled.
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> /snip/

> The French proposal will call for Syria to allow inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to oversee the destruction of chemical weapons in the country and will require that Syria become a member of the organization. It is one of five states that have not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, an international convention banning the use and stockpiling of chemical arms and the materials required in their production.
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> “Extremely serious consequences” would be planned for any deviation from the obligations of the resolution, Mr. Fabius said, though he remained cautious about the prospect of the French proposal being adopted. Russia, a firm ally of Mr. Assad and permanent member of the Security Council, has vetoed three Security Council resolutions on Syria since the start of the conflict.
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> “It is upon the acceptance of these precise conditions that we will judge the credibility of the intentions that were expressed yesterday,” Mr. Fabius said.

And here is the Post description:

> The resolution will “condemn the massacre of August 21 committed by the Syrian regime,” Fabius told reporters in Paris, “require that this regime sheds light without delay on its chemical weapons program, that they be placed under international control and that they be dismantled.”
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> The resolution would warn of “extremely serious consequences” if Syria violated those guidelines, he said. It would also seek to bring to justice those responsible for the Aug. 21 attacks.

> Fabius said he hoped the resolution would not be blocked by other permanent members of the council – a reference to previous efforts on Syria that were blocked by Russia and China.
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> He said that "all options are still on the table" and he acknowledged that there were many practical difficulties in actually carrying out any plans to destroy Syrian chemical weapons in the middle of a civil war. "It's something that's difficult to do, that takes take time, and is very complicated in the middle of conflict, the kind of conflict that exists currently in Syria," Fabius said.

Despite the Post account noting how "difficult" this will be "in the middle of a conflict" and the Times account even saying "action, including military, to restore peace" might be needed, I see nothing in the coverage to suggest that France will call for a ceasefire in the conflict. It is very hard to see how the chemical weapons can be rounded up and destroyed without a ceasefire in effect.

A secondary concern is the need to assign blame for the August 21 attack. The US claims very strong evidence for Assad's forces to have carried out the attack (but that evidence has also been called into serious question) and Russia has what they consider to be extensive documentation of the rebels using CW in attacks earlier this year. It would seem to me that language assigning or accepting blame will likely be stripped before the resolution has a chance of avoiding a Security Council veto from one side or the other.

At any rate, this new-found, if only stumbled-upon, opportunity for diplomacy is a very welcome development. All sides in this conflict suddenly find themselves under a new kind of scrutiny and will need to guard against being the party to derail a sudden chance for a

peaceful resolution to the conflict.