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Russia changes tack on Syria

By M K Bhadrakumar

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Russia is throwing in the towel on Syria after an almost two-year long blaze of Cold War-era rhetoric. It dug in tenaciously at the United Nations Security Council holding its veto card to block a Western intervention in Syria but has been outmaneuvered on the ground and is being presented with a fait accompli that the regime it supported in Damascus is fast becoming a thing of the past.

The Kremlin's special envoy for Syria, Mikhail Bogdanov, admitted for the first time on Thursday that the rebels are on a winning spree and the momentum may coast them to outright victory over the government's forces. Bogdanov contemplated a rebel victory. Without mincing words, he said, "One must look facts in the face. Unfortunately, the victory of the Syrian opposition cannot be ruled out."

This candid statement all but echoed the triumphant remark by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen - also on Thursday - that "the regime in Damascus is approaching collapse".

Bogdanov's *glasnost* comes hardly within three days of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's ominous warning that Russia "will not allow the Libyan experience to be reproduced in Syria".

Arguably, Lavrov still has a point insofar as there has indeed been no direct Western intervention until now in Syria, and it seems extremely unlikely that there will be one; in fact, there may be

no need for a Libya-like intervention. The pattern could be similar to Afghanistan in 2001, when the Northern Alliance toppled the Taliban regime and thereafter the Western boots appeared on the ground in the Hindu Kush to take command of the successor regime.

Quintessentially, however, it is Libya all over again. Yet another Middle Eastern regime that showed strategic defiance of the Western world is being overthrown and the world community is being presented with no option but to acquiesce with it. Period.

One can endlessly quibble over the morality of it all or its legitimacy under international law or even as to what happens in such a world order to the Westphalian system (which was also, ironically, born out of Europe's blood-soaked history), but all that matters is that it is happening all the time.

There can be no pretensions anymore that it is the idealism of the Arab Spring that brought about the upheaval in Syria. The name of the game is "geopolitics". The Western powers are meeting with the military wing of the Syrian opposition coalition in Turkey next week. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have been rendered homeless or forced into exile in the turmoil. The Syrian rebels no longer hide that Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are promoting the war by financing and equipping, and providing training, sanctuaries, intelligence and logistics support. Nor do they hide that hundreds of foreign volunteers are fighting on their side.

Pretty much isolated

But Russian rhetoric continued relentlessly right up to this week. As recently as Wednesday, Moscow tore into the decision of United States President Barack Obama to accord political recognition to the newly formed Syrian opposition alliance. Lavrov said:

I was somewhat surprised to learn that the US, through its president, has recognized the national coalition as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people. That is at odds with the agreements recorded in the Geneva communique calling for an all-Syria dialog between the country's government representatives on the one hand and the opposition on the other.

Interestingly, Bogdanov also changed the tune on the sensitive issue of chemical weapons. If only three days back Russia's security boss, Nikolai Patrushev, ruled out any intention by the Syrian regime to use chemical weapons, Bogdanov now added a caveat that there is nonetheless a serious problem, since the chemical weapons may fall into the hands of the radical groups among the Syrian rebels.

He said, "The greatest danger is that parts of Syria continue to fall under the control of the opposition where extremists, terrorists, and al-Qaeda have strong positions. That could have very serious consequences."

What does Russia do now? Moscow is pretty much isolated on the Syrian question and has virtually painted itself into a corner. The point is, over a hundred countries voiced their recognition of the newly formed Syrian opposition alliance at the meeting of the "Friends of Syria" in Morocco on Wednesday.

The only way out for Moscow now will be to seek to strike a deal with the United States, and

Russian diplomats are certainly adept at this. To Russia's comfort, the US also happens to be grappling with a complex situation.

The Syrian rebels have forced the pace of the regime change in Damascus and have virtually taken the initiative away from the hands of the democratic opposition to the regime. The US scrambled (with help from Qatar) somehow to cobble together the recently formed opposition alliance, but, as Josef Stalin once wondered about the Pope in the Vatican, this entity is toothless since it has no control over the fighters, whereas muscle power is the crucial asset when anarchy prevails. The parallel with Afghanistan breaks down at this point, although the need of a "Bonn conference" (December 2001) to hoist a new regime remains.

In the bargain, there is real danger that radical groups amongst the rebel fighters may take undue advantage. This possibility worries Washington too - it already faces a searing experience in Libya. In turn, this "shared concern" provides a window of opportunity for Russian diplomats. Moscow would do well to amplify a convergence of interests with Washington over Syria.

But a "trade-off" over Syria in the best traditions of the Russian-American tango may be impossible to swing because Russia will be negotiating from a position of disadvantage. Put differently, Moscow's need to work with the US is doubtless far greater today than Washington's need for Russian help - and the Americans would know it.

A strategic setback

However, Moscow holds one trump card, namely, the specter of the stockpiles of chemical weapons in Syria that haunts international security if that country were to unravel. It stands to reason that Russian intelligence would have a fair idea as regards the location of Syria's chemical weapon stockpiles. This intelligence becomes a "tradable" commodity in the rapidly evolving situation.

Bogdanov may have done some shrewd kite-flying on Thursday when he openly began speculating publicly on this explosive issue, which is on everyone's mind. "Everyone is afraid of that, including our American partners," he said, adding that militants were already gaining control of Syrian military arsenals on the ground, including anti-aircraft missiles.

That could also happen to chemical weapon stockpiles, Bogdanov said. He added, "This has already happened in Aleppo with the seizure of a plant manufacturing chemical components that can be used for terrorist purposes."

Russia can hope to play on the Manichean fears in Washington. The US decision to brand the Nusra Front as an al-Qaeda group underscores that the Obama administration keeps one eye on Libya. Again, the US hasn't yet taken the final plunge to arm the rebel fighters. In fact, state department spokesperson Victoria Nuland has since clarified that Obama's announcement on Tuesday was "a political step, not a legal step" and is aimed at giving "a boost to those working for a political transition in Syria" and "those planning a future that is democratic, that is pluralistic, that is unified".

Therefore, what emerges, on balance, is that there could still be significant convergence between the US and Russia, emanating out of the two countries' "common concerns" as to what happens in the morrow of a regime change in Syria, and this convergence may well gain critical mass on a political track in the coming days or weeks.

From the US viewpoint, the best outcome in Syria would have been a military takeover, which would leave the state structures intact - as in Egypt - and open the door to expansion of American influence in Damascus to steer the country toward an agreeable democratic outcome. Russia wields big influence over the Syrian military.

Herein lies the basis of some optimism for Russian diplomacy. The Obama administration has just invited the head of the Syrian opposition coalition, Moaz al-Khatib, to visit Washington for consultations. Moscow also made an overture this week to Qatar, the master-blast in Syria, with the announcement that its energy company Gazprom will open an office in Doha.

What remains to be seen is whether at the end of it all, Russia manages to retain its naval base in Tartus, which is its only presence outside the Black Sea. But the current state of US-Russia relations would preclude that from happening. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton alleged only last week that a process of "re-Sovietization" is under way in Eurasia and the US is gearing up to thwart it. She was referring to Russia's projects of the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union.

President Vladimir Putin felt provoked to react sharply that Clinton was speaking "nonsense". Washington has just imposed humiliating restrictions on visits by Russian officials implicated in human rights violations.

All in all, therefore, it is highly probable that Washington will terminate the Russian naval presence in Tartus in the post-Assad phase, and may think of evicting Russia altogether from the Eastern Mediterranean. The US is already blocking Russia's bid to join hands with Israel in developing the massive Leviathan gas fields.

In any case, Turkey also wants Russia out of the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, regime change in Syria becomes a serious strategic setback for Russia. No doubt, Moscow's ability to influence the historic transformation of the Middle East has been seriously impaired.