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Russia, China Shield Syria from Possible UN Sanctions

By Thalif Deen

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A resolution inspired by Western nations critical of civilian killings in politically-beleaguered Syria is facing threats from two veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council: Russia and China.

If and when the resolution is adopted by the 15-member Council, perhaps next week, it will be diluted to avoid the customary call for economic or military sanctions against a country accused of "ruthlessly crushing" civilian protests.

"It is pretty obvious the Russians and the Chinese are protecting their own economic and military interests in Syria," an Asian diplomat told IPS, "just as Western nations traditionally continue to protect Israel from any form of sanctions at all."

A country with vibrant political, economic and military ties to both Russia and China, Syria depends heavily on the two countries for arms currently used against demonstrators in the three-month-old revolt against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Dan Darling, Europe and Middle East Military Markets Analyst at the U.S.-based [Forecast International](http://www.forecastinternational.com), told IPS most of Syria's economic ties are primarily with its regional neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

But its military relationships with Russia and China are strong – particularly with Russia, he added.

He said relations between the two date back to the former Soviet Union and the current president's father, Hafiz al-Assad. During the three decades under Hafiz al-Assad's rule, the Soviet Union (and later Russia) delivered some 25 billion dollars in arms to Damascus.

This has resulted in a Syrian military laden with largely Soviet- and Russian-legacy materiel which continues to be serviced, maintained and refurbished by the Russians in lucrative multi-billion-dollar arms deals.

Syria's traditional arms suppliers also include China, the Czech Republic, Ukraine and North Korea.

Expressing his country's opposition to the resolution, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin told reporters, "We are not persuaded (the resolution) can help establish dialogue and reach a political settlement."

"We're concerned it will have the opposite effect," he said.

The resolution, which has been "watered down" to avoid vetoes from Russia and China, is sponsored by Britain and co-sponsored by France, Germany and Portugal.

Britain is confident it can garner the nine votes needed to adopt the resolution – provided there are no vetoes.

The United States is expected to support the resolution which condemns the "systematic violation of human rights, including killings, arbitrary detentions, disappearances and torture of peaceful demonstrators".

According to a draft currently in circulation, the resolution also calls on the Syrian government to "immediately lift the siege of affected towns" and allow "immediate, unfettered and sustained access for international human rights monitors and humanitarian agencies and workers."

U.N. Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said Thursday "it is utterly deplorable for any government to attempt to bludgeon its population into submission, using tanks, artillery and snipers"

"I urge the government (of Syria) to halt this assault on its own people's most fundamental human rights," she said in a statement released here.

Pillay also pointed out that several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and others are now reporting that the number of men, women and children killed, since the protests began in March, has exceeded 1,100, with up to 10,000 or more detained.

She called on the government to respond to her repeated requests to allow a fact-finding mission to visit the country.

Both Russia and China also fear that a strong yet ambiguous Security Council resolution on Syria would provide a mandate for Western powers to misinterpret it and launch military strikes – as it did with Libya.

At a special session in April, the 47-member U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC) authorized a fact-finding mission to Syria to investigate alleged violations of international human rights law.

But Syria has refused access to the country by the U.N. mission.

The HRC resolution was supported by 26 countries and opposed by nine, including China and Russia.

"So far we have not received any official reply from Syria either positive or negative," Pillay said Thursday.

Meanwhile, Darling of Forecast International told IPS that Syria has been virtually inundated with Russian weapons over the last three decades.

The Russians signed a 25-year-old Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Syria going back to October 1970.

At one time, the Russians had about 3,000-4,000 military advisers stationed in Syria, according to news reports.

Darling said that in January 2005 the Kremlin forgave some 9.8 billion dollars of Damascus's 13.4-billion-dollar Soviet-era debt, thus paving the way for new arms agreements, many of which included upgrades to platforms already in Syrian service such as its MiG-21, – 23 and -29 squadrons.

Some of the more recent Russian sales to Syria include the 96K6 Pantsir-S1E (NATO designation: SA-19 Grison) self-propelled, short- range gun and missile air-defense system, the Buk-2M Ural (SA-17 Grizzly) medium-range theater-defense missile system, plus 10-20 new MiG-29SMT Fulcrum combat aircraft (signed in 2007), with another deal for four MiG-31Eh Foxhounds still under negotiation.

Russia is also reportedly creating a naval base at the Syrian port of Tartus, and possibly another at Latakia, he said.

China's military trade with Syria is not as voluminous as Russia's, said Darling, but it does provide Damascus with missiles and missile technology.

From 2002 through 2009, Russia signed 5.8 billion dollars worth of arms agreements with Syria, and with China worth 800 million dollars.

However, Chinese military sales with Syria tripled from 2006 through 2009 from the preceding four-year period.

The Syrian military is broadly outfitted with older, heavy Soviet- style weaponry that may be effective in intimidating civilian populations, but easy prey against more modern foes such as Israeli jets.