

Obama Syria Plan: Did He Just Get the Russians On Board?



By [Brian Frydenborg](#) September 10, 2013

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Let me begin by saying that I don't know if the proposal [made by Russia](#) to have international monitors take over Syria's chemical weapons is serious, but if it is, it can only be a good thing. I welcome it ([as has, apparently, Syria](#) — a tacit first public admission that they have the weapons), and am pleasantly surprised that Vladimir Putin and the Russian government are rising to the occasion. A Russia working together with the U.S. through the UN to make the world a safer place—well, that's kind of the whole point of the UN. [I earlier compared Russia to the Tea Party](#) for its obstructionism and refusal to solve problems. But if Putin is ready to play ball, I say great, and it seems Obama's threats of strikes against Syria already seem to be leading to positive change.

We know that [Obama and Putin](#) discussed such an idea at the G20 summit. Maybe this is [part of a plan between Russia and the U.S.](#), and maybe it isn't. Secretary Kerry had an [apparent "gaffe"](#) in which he offered Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a way to avoid strikes if he gave up his chemical weapons. Such off-the-cuff remarks are hardly uncommon in the history of international relations for being catalysts to something unplanned. Then again, diplomatic stagecraft and theater is also hardly new, and Kerry's statement may have been part of some sort

of coordinated effort. I honestly don't know, and neither does the commentariat.

Whether Kerry's comment was planned or unplanned matters far less than the fact that the Russian proposal it helped lead to might yield something very significant. And this is remarkable. While I do think that Obama *personally* has done a terrible job in general of explaining why strikes are one of the least bad options ([with the exception of his Rose Garden speech](#)), and seems to have confused much of the public, I still think he is right in trying to intervene in this awful conflict. Many on the right are often too eager to use force, while the far left fails to see that the actual threat of force can accomplish much, and that sometimes, in our imperfect world, force is necessary. In this case, Russia realized that it could, again, be irrelevant, simply delaying and adding a layer of difficulty to U.S. action. But it also realized it could be part of the solution. It is possible that Putin was skeptical of U.S. claims at one point, and that Russian intelligence confirmed, quietly, that indeed Assad's regime did use chemical weapons on its own people. Maybe Putin's heart was moved. Maybe he wanted to look strong. I don't pretend to know Putin's motives — I only care if his proposal is serious.

If the UN Security Council, with Russian support, sends in teams to collect and destroy all or most of Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles soon, this will be great for the international order. Assad, his military, and his regime should still be punished, possibly with military force, for how he has brutalized and murdered his own civilians en masse, and especially if he continues to do so. But having UN inspectors in Syria will likely bring down the level of fighting, stop some of the killing in Syria, slow the flow of refugees, and perhaps let in some much-needed aid. While Russia's proposal is considered, these trends are likely to continue. And if Assad doesn't cooperate, there will be much more of a consensus for action.

Already, [Assad has been moving his heavy weapons and many of his troops into hiding](#) in anticipation of a U.S. strike, which means they are not currently being used to kill his own people. And Russia is now (apparently) working with the international community to make a positive difference. Already, Obama's threat of the use of force has yielded positive results and saved lives. One of the [lessons of Kosovo is that group troop deployments can have a deterring effect even without combat](#). It is unfortunate that Bush didn't use the threat of force to get Saddam Hussein to comply with U.S. demands in 2003, and instead opted for invasion. The buildup seemed to convince Hussein that Bush was not bluffing, and nearly a year later, former UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said that [the 12,000-page document submitted by Iraq to the UN on December 7, 2002](#), claiming Saddam had no WMDs, [may have actually been true](#). Here, just the threat of limited strikes seems to have propelled Russia, and maybe even Syria, to positive action. We might not like it, but Obama is not Pope Francis, and this is the way the world works.