

## Russia's diplomatic offensive over Syria

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On 9 September, after a meeting in Moscow with the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put forward an initiative to establish international control over Syria's chemical weapons, with the aim of their eventual liquidation, and suggested that Syria should join the Chemical Weapons Convention, which prohibits the possession of such weapons, on condition that Washington renounces its intention to carry out a military attack on Syria. At the same time, Lavrov offered Russia's help in negotiating a suitable agreement with Damascus. The Russian initiative was welcomed by the regime of Bashar Assad. The idea of subjecting the Syrian arsenal of chemical weapons to international control also met with a favourable, if cautious, response from leading Western countries.

### Commentary

- The Russian proposal, which opens up the prospect of a mechanism that would prevent Assad's regime from further use of chemical weapons in the civil war, and of decommissioning such weapons in the longer term, has deprived supporters of military action against Syrian government forces of one of their main arguments, and has thus made it politically extraordinarily difficult for the United States to carry out any such action.
- The possible opening of negotiations between Damascus and the international community on establishing international control over Syria's chemical weapons will effectively protect Assad's regime from military intervention by the United States and the group of states seeking to overthrow it (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France). Thus, Russian diplomacy will have achieved the key objectives which it has pursued since the beginning of the civil war in Syria: preventing military intervention by the United States, which would have been legitimised by reference to the 'Responsibility to Protect' principle (which states that the international community can in the last resort use force to stop mass murder of a civilian population); and preventing the collapse of the friendly, secular regime in Damascus.
- In any negotiations on chemical weapons in Syria, Russia would play the role of principal mediator, due to its close relations with Damascus. This would strengthen its international position, firstly as an influential player in the Middle East, and secondly as a

great power which can put forward constructive solutions both for regional conflicts and global problems (e.g. the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction). At the same time, by playing a key role in blocking US intervention, Russia has gained a strong position among the 'new powers' (China, India, Brazil, South Africa), which contest the hegemony of the United States and the Western community in the international order.

- The Russian proposal has given the US president the opportunity to avoid military intervention in Syria, which would have been unpopular both internally and internationally, without losing face and credibility. By offering a solution to the problem of chemical weapons in Syria, Russia is becoming a necessary and valuable partner for the United States. This could make it difficult for the American administration and other Western capitals to respond to any violations of human rights and democratic principles in Russia in the future.