

The Geneva deal has not put an end to disagreements between Washington and Moscow over Syria

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The American and Russian foreign ministers, John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov, signed a framework agreement on 14 September envisaging international supervision and eventual liquidation of Syrian chemical weapons. They also agreed on the need to convene, as soon as possible, an international conference in order to negotiate a political solution to the conflict in Syria. The agreement is preliminary; the detailed plan for the supervision and removal of the Syrian chemical arsenal is to be drawn up by Russian and US representatives at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The plan is to be backed by a UN Security Council resolution.

Commentary

- The Geneva deal does not mean that Moscow and Washington have managed to remove all the differences between their approaches to the Syrian crisis. A major difference of opinions surfaced already at the beginning of this week, when the wording of the resolution to be adopted by the UN Security Council was being negotiated. The USA (along with the United Kingdom and France) insists that the resolution should allow for the use of force in case Damascus blocks the process to remove chemical weapons. Russia has categorically ruled this out, admitting only verbally that, should Damascus fail to comply with the OPCW's decisions or resorts to using chemical weapons, a separate resolution from the UN Security Council could be considered. Such a resolution could impose sanctions on the Bashar al-Assad regime but would not necessarily involve the use of force. Reaching a compromise on the final version of the text will therefore be difficult. It is, however, just a matter of time. Washington, being more interested in the removal of Syrian chemical weapons than Moscow, will have to accept the text of the resolution that will take into account Russia's proposals.
- The adoption of the Security Council resolution and the decision being passed by the OPCW will merely lead to a long bargaining process between Damascus, the OPCW, Washington and Moscow. Assad will be playing for time, Washington will be pressing and threatening to use force, and Russia will be savouring the role of the indispensable

mediator. From the viewpoint of the objectives of Russia's policy towards Syria, depriving Assad of chemical weapons is a secondary goal. However, Russia may be interested in a political deal, namely the removal of Assad's chemical arsenal in exchange for the guarantees of the survival of for his regime.

- The very fact that the agreement was signed means that Russia has achieved its key short-term goals: to block US military intervention and thus to create favourable conditions for the Assad regime to win the civil war.
- It appears that Moscow sees maintaining the Assad regime as one of its long-term objectives. This does not rule out a possibility of incorporating part of the previous opposition into the regime. To achieve this, Russia, continuing to back Assad with weapons supplies, will be urging Western states to put pressure on the Syrian opposition to put an end to military struggle and strike a political deal with Assad on his terms. It will make use of the argument that it is impossible to remove chemical weapons while the civil war is underway. However, Russia will not be ready to accept the greatest responsibility for the long-term resolution to the Syrian problem since this would require, for instance, providing Syria with significant development aid.