

A coalition of the principled

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In the words of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the UN Security Council's resolution on Syria was "neutered" by vetoes from Russia and China. Meanwhile, the killing of Syrians by the Assad regime continues unabated. Russian diplomats rush to the scene of the crime. Western diplomats are recalled. Chinese leaders stand on the sidelines. The Arab League and its erstwhile, western allies wring their hands. The rhetoric accelerates, fingers are pointed and nothing tangible changes. The situation is deplorable as is the inability of the world community to act in a concerted fashion to bring an end to the violence. But the UN setback does not mean the end of diplomacy to avert more bloodshed.

Canada is maintaining its diplomatic presence in Damascus presumably because the government does not see any real threat to the security of our remaining embassy officials. It may also be because of a perceived need to protect the well-being of the 4,000 to 5,000 dual Canadian citizens residing in Syria who have, thus far, resisted overtures to leave. There may also be scope for Canada, along with others, to do more to bring some order out of the chaos.

Secretary Clinton has called on the international community to halt ongoing bloodshed and promote a political transition that would see Bashar al-Assad step down. She said the "friends of Syria" could work with opposition groups to promote those goals. Turkey has now endorsed this proposal and called for a summit meeting of Syria's "friends."

Some suggest that the Russians and the Chinese both feared that a UN resolution endorsing the Arab League's recommendations on Syria would lead inevitably to the "regime change" that resulted from a similar UN effort in Libya.

Russian motives are more strategic than personal. They may well believe that, on Libya, they were tricked when a resolution intended to "protect civilians" transformed into a mandate to eradicate Moammar Gadhafi. They do have leverage but, thus far, their commitment to peace or an end to violence in Syria seems as hollow as Putin's commitment to democracy and political freedom at home.

The Chinese simply prefer to avoid a decision that could trigger negative implications for their more self-interested objectives in the region.

Any call for a "coalition of the willing" is haunted by the spectre of what happened in Iraq. Syria's neighbours — Turkey and Saudi Arabia — have the capacity, but might not have the stomach for direct intervention. As recent history illustrates, military interventions often carry unintended consequences and, more often than not, create situations as precarious as the ones they were intended to resolve.

Inside Syria itself, the opposition is determined but fragmented, increasingly desperate and therefore more militant. The Assad regime has most of the firepower — thanks in large part to Russia — and shows little reluctance to use it indiscriminately against any and all who resist. President Assad clearly does not have the negotiating skills of his father to broker a needed compromise among the various factions.

The region as a whole is more jittery than ever. Egypt struggles to find stability post-Mubarak. Libya has gone from bad to highly uncertain. Iran seems more intent to become a nuclear power. All of this has Israel on edge. And a presidential election year is not the best time for effective U.S. diplomacy. Instead, all eyes watch nervously for what may happen next.

Slightly less than 100 years ago, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria sparked the “war to end all wars.” It fell short of that objective but ignited a conflagration of unprecedented proportions. The fear now is that flashpoints in Syria, or elsewhere in the Middle East, may well prompt eruptions of global proportions.

A prolonged period of messy civil war seems inevitable in Syria. If our principal global institute for peace is impotent in the face of gross injustices, the only option is for concerned and like-minded countries to muster their collective will to support those seeking genuine democracy, freedom and human rights for their people and nurture a peaceful transfer of power. A coalition of the principled as opposed to a coalition of the willing.

Canada and its allies, together with major Arab states, should move beyond their rhetorical denunciations and devise more concerted political measures including sanctions and, where feasible, support to the opposition forces in Syria in order to contain the violence and establish a semblance of stability in this volatile region.

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