

## Prize of long game in Syria is defusing threat of Iran

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THAT Syria appears to be honouring its commitment to destroy its chemical weapons is to be welcomed. Upholding the taboo against the use of such weapons is a humanitarian goal that most can agree on.

As disarmament is being verified by on-the-ground experts, the international community can have a degree of confidence that it will actually happen. This would not have been the case had military action been taken.

Yet we should not forget how we got here and what is at stake for American leadership, the wider Middle East region and the Syrian people.

The weapon inspectors, winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, are on the ground in part because of the ambiguous nature of US foreign

policy. President Barack Obama's plan to use force was enough to get the attention of the Russians who used their leverage over the Syrians. This might have been a classic case of coercive diplomacy. However, the reaction of Congress and America's allies (in particular the UK) made it difficult for Obama to enforce his own warnings. In the end diplomacy represented an escape route for Obama as well as Assad.

However we should be wary about Secretary of State John

Kerry's statement that the Syrian President "deserves credit". Apart from conveying insensitivity to the fact that many consider Assad to be a war criminal, his statement reveals something about the weakness of the White House's position.

The Obama administration is desperate for the weapons inspections to work and this will no doubt influence its perception and presentation of their activity. Just as the UN inspectors in Iraq were dismissed as ineffective because the US wanted to invade, so the inspectors in Syria will likely be given the benefit of any doubt because the US does not want to intervene.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that the US reluctance to intervene is a consequence of a new found isolationism. There is another issue that needs to be understood when assessing Obama's Syria policy: Iran.

If Iran were to develop a nuclear weapon capability, it would have far greater impact on international security than Syria's chemical

weapons. Obama will not want to let the process of enforcing Syrian disarmament get in the way of an agreement with the new Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani.

Despite the claims of some hawks in Congress, a US military strike against Iran's ally Syria would damage the prospects of such an agreement. Obama will go the extra mile to stay out of Syria, and again we might expect the US to talk up the success of the UN weapons inspectors for that reason.

Indeed Obama's focus is likely to be even wider still. David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* writes that Obama is facing a moment in US foreign policy akin to the opening of diplomatic relations

with communist China or the end of the Cold War.

If the US can cultivate that relationship without alienating regional allies like Saudi Arabia and Israel, it will mark a profound shift in the diplomatic framework of the Middle East. It could also put further pressure on Syria's President Assad to step down, which would be a major boost to hopes that peace can be negotiated at Geneva.

The problem with realist strategies that emphasise international stability is that they are rarely cost free. Obama's response to the violence accompanying the Arab Spring has been to minimise the costs to the US.

That there are immense human costs to the diplomatic long game is however undeniable.

In Syria, the death toll of the conflict has now passed 110,000, 4.2 million people are internally displaced and over two million are refugees in other countries. Recent reports suggest this situation is set to get worse.

As complex as the situation is, the international responsibility to protect these people remains.

The diplomatic long game might be the most prudent course but it should not be an excuse for rejecting more intensive forms of non-military humanitarian intervention.

Realism and humanitarianism do not always clash.

The skilful leader can find ways to navigate an appropriate course between the demands of international stability and a responsibility to humanity.

