- G20: No excuse for inaction on Syria
- Sweden's future involvement in Afghanistan
- Russia's new anti-gay law 'Disgusting, Inhuman'

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In comparison to the discussion about how the United States might, or might not, respond to allegations that the regime of Syrian President Bashir al-Assad used chemical weapons against civilians on 21 August, there has been relatively little focus on the responsibilities and credibility of other actors. SIPRI's Ian Anthony argues that the current Russian proposal, whereby Syria places its chemical weapons under international control, presents an opportunity for Russia to demonstrate global leadership.

On 9 September the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, called on the Syrian authorities to put chemical weapons under international control, and then to destroy its stockpiles and join the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). The Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem, welcomed the Russian proposal, which Lavrov has indicated is currently being elaborated in consultation with the United Nations Secretary-General.

The proposal to put chemical weapons beyond use—and thereby eliminate any threat posed by them—was welcomed by a number of states, albeit with a note of suspicion. The risk that the Russian proposal was only intended to delay an international response to the alleged chemical attack was explicitly raised by the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, who said in Parliament: 'We have to be cautious and to make sure this is not a diversion tactic.'

An opportunity for Russia to demonstrate leadership
Russia could take a leadership role within a multilateral framework where the rules are universal. While the general discourse between Russia and the Western powers no longer emphasizes common norms and shared values, on the issue of chemical weapon disarmament their views are identical. For well over a year, Russia has emphasized that the 1925 Geneva Protocol applies to Syria, and that it is completely unacceptable to threaten the use of (let alone actually use) chemical weapons.

Russia would be well positioned to take the lead in organizing a rapid follow-up to implement the initiative for a number of practical reasons. First, more than any other country, Russia has the trust of the current Syrian Government. Second, Russia (which has the largest stockpile of chemical weapons in the world) has the technical expertise needed to manage chemical weapons in a safe and secure manner. Third, Russia has extensive experience in implementing chemical weapon disarmament projects.

The precedent provided by post-cold war cooperation
After the end of the cold war, former adversaries worked together to reduce the risks posed by huge stockpiles of chemical weapons. Military threat reduction programmes in Russia included establishing a secure chain of custody over weapons; consolidating them in places where stocks could be protected; and cooperating to facilitate the dismantlement and destruction of weapons, followed by demilitarization and conversion of military facilities.

By the beginning of 2013 Russia had destroyed nearly 28 000 tonnes of complex chemical weapons (around 60 per cent of its declared stockpile), as well its entire stocks of less complex chemical weapons and unfilled munitions, devices and equipment designed specifically to employ chemical weapons. The specialized facilities in which weapons were produced were either destroyed or converted to peaceful use in the civilian chemical industry.

Using Russian expertise to eliminate the threat of chemical weapons in Syria

There is huge expertise in Russia on technical aspects of chemical weapon disarmament, but not under conflict conditions. The international community has experience of chemical weapons disarmament in Iraq and Libya. In Iraq, the work to eliminate chemical weapons was carried out under the auspices of the UN, supported by contributions of different kinds from many countries. However, while the background security environment was fragile in those countries, in Syria a major armed conflict is still in progress.

In considering a programme for chemical weapon disarmament in Syria, in other words, there is considerable experience to build on, but the challenges are unprecedented. To succeed, Russia and the UN would need help from other partners.

The consolidation of weapon stocks may require transportation of munitions and/or toxic chemicals and chemical weapon precursors in wartime conditions. All parties (including those outside Syria) would have to agree not to interfere with or attack items during transport. Once items were consolidated, it would need to be made clear that this was not simply creating a convenient target for one or other actor (inside Syria or outside) to attack.

The degree to which the Syrian Government trusts the intentions of external actors is difficult to assess. Syrian authorities may require some guarantees from armed opposition groups that they will not exploit the process of disarmament to inflict damage on the governmental forces.

A genuine opportunity for disarmament

To plan for disarmament, Syria would need to declare the numbers and types of chemical weapons in its arsenal. The Director-General of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Ambassador Ahmet Üzümcü, has pointed out that a selective approach, leaving some weapons in place, would probably not be acceptable. Without a declaration by the Syrian authorities it would be impossible to be confident that a disarmament process has captured all of the chemical weapons.

The level of trust in the Syrian authorities is probably too low to accept a declaration without verification by a trusted body like the OPCW. Meeting the challenge of disarmament would require reassurance that measures to ensure the safety and security of the personnel assisting the process were being taken.

The Russian proposal could be a basis for a practical set of projects, jointly implemented by a coalition of partners that include the Syrian Government, international organizations, governments in the region and elsewhere, as well as the local and regional authorities in Syria.

Russian experience suggests that there may also be a role for non-governmental organizations

and the private sector. Facilitating the development and implementation of this programme is a formidable challenge, but by pooling its own considerable capacities and resources with those of partners, Russia could play a constructive leadership role.

Dr Ian Anthony (United Kingdom) is the Research Coordinator at SIPRI and the Director of the SIPRI Programme on Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-proliferation.

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