The inside story of the West’s disarray over chemical weapons in Syria.

Chemical reaction

BY JOHN IRISH AND WARREN STROBEL
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In early spring France’s ambassador to the United Nations dined with a Russian colleague and discussed the crisis in Syria.

Ambassador Gerard Araud told the Russian diplomat France was going to go public with proof from its intelligence services that Syria’s government was using chemical weapons against its own people. The Russian diplomat laughed, according to a source familiar with the meeting. “Gerard,” he told his counterpart, “don’t embarrass the Americans.”

It was a revealing exchange. France and Britain had been pressing for almost a year for the United States to engage more directly in the war in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad’s battle against a popular insurgency has killed 100,000 people and displaced more than 6 million. But Washington had resisted pleas for action, reluctant to get sucked into another Middle East quagmire after a decade of fighting and misadventure in Iraq and Afghanistan. It had no desire for France to pile on further pressure by telling the world Assad was committing atrocities with weapons of mass destruction.

Even when the French went public with their claims in early June, the Obama administration said it needed more time and evidence to judge what had happened. A couple of weeks later the White House said that U.S. intelligence agencies had “high confidence” that Assad had launched small scale chemical attacks at various points over the previous year. But while Paris said all options were on the table, Washington played down the attacks, merely promising to give more aid to the anti-Assad rebels in Syria.

The gap between the two Western allies was just one awkward step in an extraordinary two-year dance around the civil war in Syria. That dance, detailed here with reporting drawn from interviews with senior diplomats and officials over the past year, has grown ever more complicated in recent weeks after graphic evidence of a much bigger chemical attack hit computer and television screens around the world on Aug. 21.

Videos posted online after the attack showed hundreds of people in suburbs of the Syrian capital Damascus struck by a mysterious, lethal affliction. Men, women and children struggled for breath, foaming at the mouth and twitching. Other scenes showed scores of corpses with no obvious wounds.

Rebels said Assad had killed hundreds of civilians with chemical weapons. Assad denied it, but the evidence suggested otherwise.

In the first few days after the attack it appeared likely that the United States and some of its allies would launch airstrikes on Assad and his military. In 2012, Obama had called a chemical attack in Syria a “red line” that should not be crossed.

But as the U.S. president began trying to convince Congress to back military strikes, the lack of political enthusiasm became obvious – and not just in Washington.

Many in the West questioned the logic of military intervention. Fatigued – financially, politically, emotionally – by Iraq and Afghanistan, voters in the United States, Britain and elsewhere worry whether...
military action will help in Syria; from Louisiana to Leeds they have let their elected officials know they oppose a strike.

Britain's parliament voted against military action, and last week, with a vote on the issue in the U.S. Congress seemingly headed for defeat, an alternative response emerged, partly by design and partly by accident.

After nearly three days of talks between Washington and Moscow, which has long backed Assad and his forces, the United Nations Security Council will vote on a resolution that will see Syria hand over control of its chemical weapons to international inspectors, who will destroy them.

The resolution targets only the chemical weapons and does not address the wider war in Syria, which seems likely to rage on.

**EARLY PRESSURE**

It was the recently defeated French president Nicolas Sarkozy who first urged the West to confront Assad with military force. As most of France's political class headed for their holidays in August last year, Sarkozy, who had lost out to Francois Hollande for the presidency in May, spoke by telephone with a key figure in the opposition to Assad – Abdulbasit Seida, then leader of the Syrian National Council.

His 40-minute call with Seida was aimed at putting pressure on Hollande to get more involved in Syria.

How far it influenced Hollande is unclear. But soon afterwards, France called an urgent meeting of the U.N. Security Council at foreign minister level. The U.S. response was lukewarm: Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, did not attend. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also did not show. France's push to provide aid directly to rebel areas met with little support other than from Britain and Turkey, who called for the immediate establishment of safe zones in Syria.

The French, who had been disparaged in the run-up to the Iraq war as "cheese-eating surrender monkeys" for their aversion to military action, did not give up. They put out feelers about the possibility of imposing a no-fly zone. French diplomatic sources told Reuters that Paris was considering supplying heavy artillery to the rebels to protect them from government attacks if the opposition were able to create a transitional government.

France's ambassador to Syria, Eric Chevalier, who had been withdrawn from the country earlier in the year as Assad's crackdown intensified, publicly said that Hollande had instructed him to help organise the opposition and make contact with armed groups. Paris, he said, was "seriously" discussing the issue of arming the rebels. Chevalier was the first Western envoy to meet General Salim Idriss, a defector from Assad's forces who had become the chief of staff of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

"If the U.S. was not completely on board ... we wouldn't be able to wrestle the Russians.

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French diplomat

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But Obama's reluctance to get involved was made clear in an interview in January with the American magazine New Republic. “In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact? ... Could it trigger even worse violence or the use of chemical weapons? ... And how do I weigh tens of thousands who’ve been killed in Syria versus the tens of thousands who are currently being killed in the Congo?”

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ALLIES IN WAITING: Both Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron and France’s President Francois Hollande were prepared to join military strikes in Syria, but the UK was forced by parliament to reject the idea. REUTERS/PHILIPPE WOJAZER
The British fared little better than the French in convincing Obama to get tough. “The British were always closer to us than the Americans,” one French diplomat said. “The clearest example was the chemical weapons because when we made our findings public, the Americans were still asking for more evidence.”

During a marathon meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels on May 27 the British, backed by Paris, succeeded in lifting the EU embargo against sending arms to the Syrian rebels, although both countries agreed to hold back on making a decision on deliveries until at least Aug. 1. The Americans were not involved in the EU decision, though they quietly backed it.

The froideur between the United States and the French was clear. John Kerry, the U.S. Secretary of State, and Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, were due to meet in Paris that evening to discuss their Geneva 2 initiative to get Assad and the opposition to the negotiating table. Despite the location, the French were not initially invited to the talks, diplomatic sources said.

NEW ISOLATIONISTS?
In June, when France announced that tests it had carried out on blood, soil, urine and clothes samples from Syria showed that sarin had been used, Washington vacillated. It eventually agreed that sarin had been used in “limited” amounts.

Washington remained more interested in negotiating a solution to the crisis than any form of military action. A U.S. diplomat told Reuters at the time: “This U.S. administration is extremely worried about falling into the regional trap and getting sucked into the Middle East, and with Syria they are facing a country that is very well-armed and they really don’t know what the consequences would be and for that reason they don’t want to get caught out.”

Almost two and a half years after protests first began in Syria, the West had still given little help to the rebels, least of all weapons capable of countering Assad’s vastly superior firepower, in particular his fighter jets.

Speaking before the chemical attacks in April, a senior Western diplomatic source said: “Obama has Iraq, Afghanistan behind
him. He tells his entourage ‘prove to me that American intervention (in Syria) would improve the situation’. It’s a legitimate position.”

The source added: “Obama’s focus is rebuilding America and putting its interests first.”

Washington’s interest in Syria was also influenced by Russia’s stance. After Moscow first used its veto in the U.N. Security Council to block a move towards sanctions on Assad in October 2011, the United States felt it was futile to push for strong action. Washington had concluded that the “re-Putinization of Russian foreign policy,” as one senior European diplomat called it, meant an agreement with Moscow was out of the question without a major shift in the military situation on the ground.

IN LONDON, A VOTE

Britain’s David Cameron was on a beach holiday with his family when news of the Aug. 21 chemical attack in Syria broke. He and Obama spoke on the phone about what to do next. Haunted by his country’s unpopular intervention in Iraq in 2003, Cameron had until now privately ruled out arming the Syrian opposition, focusing instead on supplying humanitarian aid and trying to set up peace talks. But the images he saw changed his mind.

Cameron promised Obama that British forces would take part in punitive military strikes if serious proof that Assad and his lieutenants had been behind the chemical attack was obtained. The British prime minister recalled parliament, which was on its annual summer break, for a one-day debate to vote on taking military action against Syria “in principle”.

In the days before the debate, British MPs were inundated by phone calls, emails and Twitter messages from voters opposed to an attack. The first time a British leader had been defeated on such a matter since 1782. Even some of his own Conservative lawmakers rebelled against him and the opposition Labour party lined up against him too, despite demanding and getting numerous concessions. Visibly angry, Cameron conceded defeat. “It is clear to me that the British parliament, reflecting the views of the British people, does not want to see British military action – I get that and the government will act accordingly.”

British government officials said later that they could have won a vote a week later because more Conservative lawmakers could have been present and it would have given Cameron more time to broker a deal with Labour.

In Washington, White House officials realised even before the vote in London that British resolve had begun to crumble. One U.S. official said the administration had underestimated how much of a hold the memories of Iraq still had on British lawmakers.

Obama had to decide whether or not to proceed with military action without British support. The day after the UK vote, during a stroll around the White House grounds with his top adviser, he chose a middle route, deciding to get Congress to sign off on a military strike.

Despite the British ‘no’ vote and Obama’s decision to go to Congress, France appeared as determined as ever to act. Even if Congress decided to vote against a strike, Paris said, France would up its military aid to Syrian rebels as a way to change the balance of power on the ground. A senior French official lamented that the West should have intervened 18 months ago. “We told the Americans that they had to go in hard, but they kept insisting that they would be leading this and it was them on the front line if it happened,” he said.

In Moscow, Putin saw things differently. Publicly, he said rebels were behind the chemical attack. Behind the scenes, though, some diplomats were hearing that
Russia and Syria would try to head off a strike with a deal to decommission Assad's chemical weaponry. “This is something being discussed by Russia and Syria,” a source close to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told Reuters on Aug. 29.

As leaders headed to a G20 meeting in St. Petersburg, opinion was split on how to proceed. The likelihood of a military strike was beginning to fade.

A SURPRISE

At the G20 events took an unexpected turn. During a break in a morning session, Putin approached Obama. They moved to a corner of the room where they pulled chairs together and spoke for about 30 minutes while other leaders looked on. “It was not acrimonious” but neither was it especially productive, one senior U.S. official said on the flight home. But the two leaders, as Putin later confirmed, had discussed “placing Syria’s chemical weapons under international control.”

On Sept. 9, in a London press conference, Secretary of State Kerry noted that Assad might avoid an attack if he surrendered his chemical weapons to international inspectors. “He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay and allow a full and total accounting,” Kerry said.

The State Department quickly sought to downplay the statement, describing it as an off-hand “rhetorical argument.”

Hours later, though, Kerry called Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov from his plane. Lavrov noted Kerry’s remarks in London and said Russia would be willing to engage in the idea of Shocking surrenders his chemical stockpile had been discussed by Obama and Putin both at their talks at the G20 in Mexico last year and again in their private chat in St. Petersburg.

Soon afterwards, Russia’s ambassador to Washington, Sergei Kislyak, met Wendy Sherman, the No. 3 State Department official, and handed her a two-page document containing ideas on how to implement the initiative, a senior State Department official said. At that point, “no one had a full-blown plan, no one,” the official said.

Kerry called Lavrov again on Sept. 10 and suggested the two men and their teams meet in Geneva. The White House was furious when a French draft resolution on chemical weapons inspections appeared later that same day. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius wanted a resolution that could lead to the use of force, lay blame on Assad and include a line that those who committed the Aug. 21 attack would be brought to justice. U.S. officials fumed that France was trying to look like it was driving events.

Though Obama told Hollande he backed the French resolution, Kerry called Fabius and asked him what he was playing at by putting a resolution forward.

French officials, for their part, were annoyed that they had not been invited to Geneva. They feared the Americans might accept a weak resolution just to avoid strikes. Luxembourg’s Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn told Reuters after talks with Kerry that he sensed the White House was looking for a way out of military action “to get the responsibility off their back.”

BACK TO GENEVA

The Americans prepared extensively for negotiations in Geneva. Kerry carried an intelligence presentation, cleared for sharing with Russia, that detailed U.S. estimates of Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal and infrastructure: 1,000 tonnes of weapons and agents, and at least 45 research, production and mixing sites, U.S. officials said.

The State Department also asked the U.S. military's Central Command to
prepare a brief paper outlining the challenge of securing the chemicals and the sites, said a senior U.S. official.

U.S. officials were heartened to learn that Lavrov had brought with him a large team of chemical weapons specialists, and intelligence and legal experts, indicating that Moscow was ready to get down to work. “They brought the people who really know the substance of this. So that was an early positive indication,” the senior State Department official said.

The teams met at Geneva’s Intercontinental Hotel, which is famous for historic diplomatic encounters. Among the biggest differences was the huge gap in estimates of the size of Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile. The Russians, U.S. officials say, eventually moved to the American position.

At several points on Sept. 13, rumours spread through the press corps that the Russians planned to wrap the talks up that day, and leave. Lavrov did leave the hotel twice – to take phone calls from Putin, at Russia’s diplomatic mission nearby.

The talks continued through the night and into Saturday morning.

At one point, negotiators discussed how to destroy at least part of Syria’s binary chemical weapons – in which two non-lethal ingredients are mixed to produce poison gas – without moving them out of Syria. Someone suggested one of the ingredients, alcohol, could be dumped in the Syrian desert, a U.S. official said.

“We Russians don’t pour alcohol out in the desert,” Lavrov dead-panned.

According to a senior U.S. official, American negotiators wrote most of the draft deal. In diplomatic parlance, the Americans “had the pen.” A senior Russian diplomat disagrees: “We all held the pen together. Our experts and the American experts really worked like one team. Lavrov and Kerry barely ever separated throughout those three days.”

Agreement was reached at a teak table next to the hotel swimming pool, where Kerry, Lavrov, and two aides huddled. Once done, Kerry and Lavrov shook hands and strolled along the pool deck, the U.S. official said.

On Sept. 14, the United States and Russia announced they had agreed to send a draft decision to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the body that implements the 1997 convention aimed at ridding the world of chemical weapons. The decision set down “draft procedures for expeditious destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons program and stringent verification thereof.”

A U.N. Security Council resolution will enforce that move, including steps to ensure verification and effective implementation. All Syria’s chemical weapons material and equipment will be destroyed by the first half of 2014. “In the event of non-compliance, including unauthorised transfer, or any use of chemical weapons by anyone in Syria, the U.N. Security Council should impose measures under chapter VII of the U.N. charter,” the agreement states. For now, the nature of those measures has been left undecided, like many of the details that could potentially trip the plan up. Washington says military action is still a possibility.

One European diplomat said Washington’s frequent diplomatic shifts might hurt it. France, said this non-French official, had been “treated like a useful idiot.”

Asked about his earlier remarks that Assad would never agree to give up his chemical weapons, Kerry conceded that, “I did indeed say it was impossible and he won’t do it, even as I hoped it would be possible and wanted him to do it. And the language of diplomacy sometimes requires that you put things to the test, and we did.”

Kerry and Lavrov had spoken by phone 11 times between the chemical attack in Syria and their meeting in Geneva last week. A deal, Kerry suggested, was always a possibility. “He talked to his president and they talked – our presidents talked in St. Petersburg, and the rest is history. We’re here.”

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