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Syria

Michael Ignatieff

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In sixteen months, the Syrian conflict has mutated from an uprising in a few outlying cities into a full-scale civil war. Now it has mutated again into a proxy war between the Great Powers. The Russians have been arming the regime—it was a Russian air defense system that shot down the Turkish F-4 Phantom—and the West is now arming the rebels. The Saudis and the Gulf states are funneling weapons straight to the Sunnis, especially to anyone with Salafist and Islamic radical credentials. Arms are now trickling across the borders with Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan and the CIA have been given the difficult task of ensuring that at least the Turkish weapons are channeled to the right people and away from El Qaeda affiliates. Who the right people are is anybody's guess. In a village war, not even the CIA can be sure who is going to be a reliable proxy for long.

To the extent that there is a strategy on the Western side—and that's a big assumption--the strategy seems to be to tip the military balance inside, without backing the US and NATO into a direct confrontation with Assad's Russian protector. Slowly, this strategy, such as it is, may be turning the momentum in the rebels' favor. A rag tag rabble of village insurgents and army defectors is slowly coming together as a fighting force. The videos they uplink onto You Tube are now showing not only the pounding they endure but the damage they have inflicted on Assad's forces. More and more villages and towns have slipped out of the regime's control, at least by night.

The defections—of regime confidantes and senior generals--are becoming eloquent. Conscripts are not reporting for duty. Sunni officers are staying at home, and the burden of defending the regime is falling on the minority Alawites.

Both sides, the regime and its opponents, are now fighting with the special savagery of those who know what they face if they lose. The flames of the conflict are now flickering around the edges of Damascus. The war for Syria is likely to end only when the flames engulf Assad's palace.

While the rebels are gaining momentum inside Syria, the Syrian opposition is frittering it away outside. When the outside opposition was placed in hotel rooms in Cairo and told, by the Arab League and other foreign diplomats, to get their act together, the meeting degenerated into chaos. Divisions of clan, tribe, ethnicity and religion would make a united front difficult at the best of times, but it's become clear that the Assads, father and son, were more skillful than Libya's Gaddafi at infiltrating and dividing their opposition.

These divisions will cost the Syrian opposition any chance of further outside military help in the form of air-strikes or safe havens. Escalated engagement of this sort makes sense only if there is a regime in waiting that military action can propel into power.

In Libya, the Benghazi rebels did manage to hammer together a provisional administration that provided NATO with just enough cover to engage in regime change. No such luck in Syria. From the West's point of view, we have a proxy war without reliable proxies. The regime that will emerge out of the ruins of Syria will be composed of the local commanders

who survive the war with their private militias intact. They will owe little to NATO or the United States.

So now we have a Great Power proxy war in the most volatile region on earth, a proxy war that is already destabilizing the domestic politics of Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. It will go on like this for some time. Neither Russia nor the US wants to fuel the escalation that would bring the civil war to an end, lest this risk a direct confrontation between the two of them.

A second factor holding the Russians and Americans back is they are in a second stand off next door over Iran that is equally dangerous. Each must defend their proxies. Here too neither side has an interest in war, but neither side can afford to back off. So the confrontation continues, simmering just below boiling point.

The Syrian conflict has laid bare both Russia and China's new approach to the world. Kofi Annan's plan for Syria was based on the assumption that Russia's real interest was in demonstrating to the US that they were the indispensable ally in the creation of a post-Assad transition. Annan's attempt to secure Chinese support for his plan made a similar assumption.

What makes Syria a hinge-moment is that Russia and China are proving that they have no strategic interest in transitions beyond dictatorship, not just in Syria but anywhere else. Both Russia and China see Syria through the prism, not of international peace and security or human rights, but through the logic of their own despotism. For Putin, Syria is Chechnya; for China it is Tibet. They understand Assad perfectly. He is doing what they have done many times and they want the world to understand that they will support any dictator facing similar challenges.

None of this should come as a shock. By now we ought to know the Russian and Chinese regimes for what they are. But it *is* a surprise.

At the end of the Cold War in 1989, we told ourselves history had a libretto-- a story of liberty-- set to a happy tune. Once regimes like Russia and China allowed market freedoms, political freedoms would follow, since peoples with economic freedom were bound to demand political freedom to. They have done so repeatedly, since 1989, and the regime has shut them down.

Our idea that history was a libretto of freedom led us to misread Russia and China's strategic intentions. We brushed aside signs that they were refusing to embrace our view of the world. Russia resisted NATO expansion to its border and refused to give the alliance a green light over Kosovo, but we thought their need for foreign capital would soften their intransigence over time. China dug in when asked to devalue their currency and they continued to imprison dissidents, but we assumed they would co-operate with us on other issues because they sought integration into the global economy. For too long we believed they were behind us on the march to freedom but were heading in the same direction.

Syria marks the end of these illusions and the post Cold War period that went with them. Syria is something more than a difference of opinion over intervention, something more than an argument about whether the Security Council should authorize the use of force. It is a moment in which the West should see that the world has truly broken into two. A loose alliance of struggling capitalist democracies now finds itself face to face with two authoritarian despotisms that are

something new in the annals of political science: kleptocracies that combine economic freedom with police state rule.

A vast swathe of the globe, from the Russian border to the Pacific, including the tributary states of the Russian near-abroad, is now in the hands of venal, ruthless, deeply corrupt single party elites. These elites—Russian and Chinese—will draw closer together, as they understand that they have made the same strategic choice. Both are using capitalism to consolidate political despotism. They see the world the same way: as a battle between elites like themselves with unlimited power and Western elites whose power is limited by democratic liberty. When they look at the world this way, the Russian and Chinese regimes mock our view that history is a libretto of liberty. They believe history is on their side. The economic crisis now entering its sixth year confirms their view that democracies are divided, incompetent, venal, hypocritical, and above all, weak. Our inability to back words with actions in Syria further confirms their scorn.

Syria tells us the post Cold War era is truly over. The era of humanitarian intervention, ‘responsibility to protect’ is over, because it assumed a historical libretto that has turned out to be false. Shouldering together the responsibility to protect people from murderous regimes made sense only on the assumption that we all wanted people to live in tolerably decent ones. Neither Russia nor China take this view. They are perfectly content with a world of Mugabe’s and Assads and they suspect, with more than just cynicism, that the West, for all its protestations, is too. For we are tired and worried about our economies back home and responsibility for other people’s freedom has turned out to be a costly and dirty business.

We need to understand this new division of the world and act accordingly. It is not a new Cold War. There is no competing ideology—not yet—to provide Putin and the Chinese leadership with an expansionary strategy. They are not yet our enemies, since they have no design to upset the existing order of states and alliances. But they are adversaries, with interests opposed to ours. To assume that they could ever be allies with us on Syria was not just Annan’s mistake. It was a general illusion that must now come to an end.

Russia and China’s defense of dictators is not ideological. Neither cares about Bashar al Assad. When the flames of Syrian popular anger eventually engulf his Damascus palace, they will cut their losses and move on. But they have put down a marker. This is not your world, they want us to know, and history is not moving in your direction. You will have to reckon with us. We shall.

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Michael Ignatieff teaches human rights and international politics at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto.