



# The EU and Syria – Time to Play behind Closed Doors

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# The EU and Syria – Time to Play behind Closed Doors

By Maxime H.A. Larivé\*

Since the – presumed – utilization of chemical weapons against civilians by the Assad regime late August, the members of the Euro-Atlantic community have been building the case for a military intervention, a punishing mission against Bashar al-Assad. Despite evidences that sarin gas was used, the UK and Germany seem to be out of the race – for a similar reason: domestic politics –, leaving the US and France in the starting blocks. French President Hollande has expressed his commitment to go to war. The world is now on hold waiting for the US as President Obama, after asking US Congress to postpone a vote on a military intervention, is working on a possible diplomatic solution with Russian President Putin. Since Kerry's comments in London earlier this week, Russian President Putin has been seeking for a diplomatic solution that would put all Syrian chemical arsenals under international supervision.

After a day of discussion and having Senators Graham and McCain over at the White House two weekend ago to talk strategy, it is still unclear if the US will be leading the way to Syria. On Wednesday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, the [Senate Foreign Relations Committee](#) voted 10 to seven to approve a limited strike against Syria. However, if Congress can vote on it, the [motion](#) agreed by US Democratic and Republican senators, would authorize a limited attack on Syria, but rule out boots on the ground and giving a 60-day deadline. Since the Presidential address on September 10<sup>th</sup>, American and Russian diplomats have been working on a different road, or the Putin alternative.

Until then, where has the European Union been so far? What has been its role since the beginning of the violence in Syria? What should we expect from the EU in tackling the Syrian mess? Once again where is the EU and the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP)? High Representative Catherine Ashton, the EU foreign minister, has been vocal and condemning the attacks and violence in Syria. But aside from technocratic narratives and soft condemnations, the gap between words and actions has remained considerably wide. Very little has transpired from Brussels giving a sense of what is happening within the European External Action Service (EEAS) in trying to solve and/or avoid the Syrian file. Additionally, the Big Three – Berlin, London and Paris – should receive a share of the blame in the European disappearance from the Syrian spotlight. Paris and London have once again sidelined the EU and avoided another occasion to empower the CSDP. With the House of Commons' decision, London seems to have forgotten about Syria. Even Prime Minister Cameron is not considering bringing up the issue before the House even though he really wants to remain in the game. One way for Britain to remain in the game could be through the EU; but Cameron has been more focused on fighting supranationalism and the EU than anything else. In the case of Paris, President Hollande and his government are committed to act along the US. The rough reality is that France cannot go to Syria alone – due to its military overstretch caused by the current war in Mali and defense cuts – and is now waiting on President Obama to make a decision. President Hollande has been criticized by the left and right wanting to see the Syrian

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issue discussed inside the Parliament. When it comes to Germany, Chancellor Merkel is in the middle of her campaign for reelection. Syria does not figure on her platform for reelection considering the gamble that it represents and the domestic taboo over foreign policy and intervention. Ultimately, the image emanating from Europe is one of disunion and a lack of coherence. Europe looks like a group of atoms floating away from one another without any coherence and wandering in an empty space.

### **Early European policies towards Syria**

Since the first violence broke down in Syria in mid-march 2011, the EU has played a limited role. By the end of March 2011, European diplomats in Syria were wondering if the Assad regime would be the [next one to fall](#). Soon after alleged violence and killings, HR Ashton [declared](#) “I am appalled and extremely concerned by the situation ... I strongly condemn the brutal repression, including the totally unacceptable use of violence and live ammunition, which must cease now.” The narrative game of the EU officially kicked in.

The first desire to act against Syria emerged in April 2011 with the first mention of eventual sanctions against Syria through travel bans, asset freezes among others. The EU [sanctions](#) finally began early May 2011 and included travel bans of members of al-Assad’s inner circle, arms embargo and ban on sales of other security equipment. By the end of the summer 2011, the EU sanctions were extended with more travel ban and assets freeze against Syrian nationals, but as well new bans on [oil explorations](#) contracts in Syria.

By the end of 2011 and early 2012, the first narratives of an eventual military interventions emerged from some EU Member States, especially France. In the meantime, European division on Syria between EU ministers appeared and have since lingered. In 2012, the EU recognized the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the representations of Syrian people. Some months later, Ashton called on al-Assad to [step down](#) and contribute to a political transition for the country.

Since March 2013, the EU has not been able to operationalize a clear strategy and policy. “The European Union was slow with its contingency planning, the initial sanctions regime was weak,” wrote [Christopher Meyer and Karen E. Smith](#) “and diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Russia lacked political urgency.” Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the EU has clearly demonstrated the limited power of soft power and its limited role and influence as a global actor. The EU, as the members of the Euro-Atlantic community, has been playing catch up enabling any types of meaningful strategy.

Since the early moments of the Arab Spring, the EU, as the rest of Western powers, have not been able to influence any developments. What is most surprising is the limited EU strategy towards this crucial neighbouring region. The consequences of the war in Libya, instabilities in Egypt and the violence in Syria are real for the EU and its Member States. The violence in Syria alone have caused a flood of refugees, reaching almost 1.5 millions, spilling over neighbours. The regional power vacuum is creating direct risks to the EU.

### **After the use of sarin gas**

Since the allegation of al-Assad’s utilization of sarin gas against Syrians late August, the Euro-Atlantic community has been on a fast-track to send a message against the use of chemical weapons. Members of the community have committed themselves to [punish Bashar al-Assad for using chemical weapons](#) in the name of the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Al-Assad crossed the Rubicon by using chemical weapons – act that

still need to be confirmed by the UN inspectors –. One of the last uses of chemical weapons by a government against civilians took place in 1987 when Saddam Hussein dropped gas bombs over Kurdish villages. Since their first uses during World War I, a taboo over chemical weapons has remained. The norms and principles of non-utilization of chemical weapons have been enforced since the end of World War II through international agreement and the United Nations.

Days after the use of sarin gas, on August 26<sup>th</sup>, HR Ashton made several comments on the Syrian crisis after her meeting with the Minister of Estonia. [She remarked that](#)

*[...] when it comes to Syria, I think everyone has been really horrified by the reports of the chemical attack. I have spoken of course with colleagues on the Foreign Affairs Council, Secretary Kerry and with Minister Lavrov about this. I think two things are especially important.*

*First is to ensure the inspectors who are in Syria are able to examine the evidence as quickly as possible and reach clear conclusions about what looks like an attack of this kind.*

*Secondly, of course the Security Council is extremely important in this. It is the role of the Security Council to look and see how the international community can and should respond but that does not excuse the rest of us from considering very carefully what we need to do. The position that I have laid out for well over a year is that ultimately we have to find a political process that is going to bring peace and security to Syria and we have talked often about Geneva Two.*

*The continuation of the process that began in Geneva - the venue is irrelevant, the process is what matters - and in my conversations with both the United States and with Russia I have said that more than ever we need to find a way to stop this violence for all time and we need to find a way that is going to bring peace and security back to the people.*

*Of course, a lot of countries are considering very carefully the implications of this attack but as yet I don't think there have been any decisions made. However, as I have said before the most important thing in the end is we have to find a political solution to this and quickly. [...]*

Such comments fall short from any clear condemnations or even a EU policy for actions. *Le mot d'ordre* has been political solution without a clear strategy, which remains quite of a challenge. Since 2011, Ashton has continuously worked on defending EU actions and even declared that the EU's responses were not "[marginal activit\[ies\]](#)."

In a recent announcement, Michael Mann – Ashton' spokesperson –, underlined the need for the international community to wait for the UN inspectors to complete their report. He [said that](#) "We of course condemn in the strongest terms the attack and we call for the international community to take strong action ... But let's wait until definitive information has been drawn together before we do that, particularly by the UN inspectors." Herman Van Rompuy, EU Council President, sent the same message by asking France and the US to act along the UN. He [declared](#) on September 5<sup>th</sup> that "While respecting the recent calls for action, we underscore the need to move forward with addressing the Syrian crisis through the UN process." Even President Barroso made a similar point during his [2013 State of the Union](#)

when declaring that “The international community, with the UN at its centre, carries a collective responsibility to sanction these acts and to put an end to this conflict.” Has the Union given up in being part of the solution by delegating the work to the UN?

### **What's next for the EU?**

During the EU meeting in Vilnius, US Secretary of State Kerry joined the 28 EU foreign ministers and discussed the Syrian issues among others. HR Ashton told the 28 ministers that Kerry’s participation “will be a valuable opportunity to exchange views with him on key issues.” With Britain out, Kerry may well try to work closely with his French counterpart in building a coalition of the willing. During his European tour, [US Secretary Kerry](#) met with his French counterpart, Laurent Fabius, and made a public stand trying to break the comparison between Iraq and Syria. Kerry underlined that Syria will not be an ‘Iraq 2,’ while Fabius added that “each time the cause is just [note Iraq was not from a French approach]... we stand together, France and the United States.”

Following the two-day meeting Vilnius, HR Ashton made a [public statement](#) underlining the position of 28 ministers on the Syrian crisis. The only sign of agreement among the 28 is illustrated in this following opening statement “That attack constituted a blatant violation of international law, a war crime, and a crime against humanity. We were unanimous in condemning in the strongest terms this horrific attack.” Aside from the careful wording of the document, it falls short, once again, from any type of actions. The Member States agreed on promoting a diplomatic approach by advocating in favor of a Geneva II peace conference, respecting the sanctity of the UN, and providing aid and assistance to the ones in need in Syria. During the 2013 State of the Union, President of the Commission, José Manuel Barosso, underlined that the EU leads the international aid response with 1.5 billion euros. Despite being one of the largest donors, the EU is not using this for increasing its aura at the international level. Donating money for aid does not translate into real influence; at the end of the day soft power cannot replace hard power.

Meaningful interaction did occur at the current G-20 summit in St Petersburg starting on September 5<sup>th</sup>, which was serving several issues on the menu such as [economic and trade policy and Syria](#). At the end of the day, the G-20 meeting came at a perfect moment for re-launching the use of diplomacy. In recent decades, members of the Euro-Atlantic community have misused diplomacy, as it is useless if it is solely employed for interacting with friends. Diplomacy is the best instrument that countries have in order to develop ties, or at least build some, with perceived and/or real enemies. The Cold War exemplifies the use in diplomacy for such purpose. Unfortunately, this has been a lost skill – as domestically in the West interacting with rogue states is seen as a weakness from the leadership – since the end of the Cold War. The G-20 platform played this needed and required interaction between world powers on addressing the Syrian tragedy. From what transpired in the press, the G-20 meeting over Syria was a [gladiatorial contest](#) between the two old Cold War foes. The US and Russia ruled on the issue clearly leaving on the sidelines European powers and the EU.

During the summit, President Obama and Putin met aside of the meeting at several occasion. President Putin has since the G-20 played the diplomatic game quite well in order to undermine the gap between the US and Russia on Syria by [saying](#) “we work, we argue about issues. We are human... But I repeat once again that global mutual interests form a good basis for finding a joint solution to our problem.” However, France did not appear to be a major actor in this G-20 meeting, even though President Hollande and Obama did interact aside. But the reality is that France, and this has been acknowledged by President Hollande, cannot launch a military strike alone. “Mr. Obama’s ploy has



exposed the deeply uncomfortable reality for Paris” argued [Hugh Carnegy](#), “that the US Congress, not the Elysée Palace, is now calling the shots on French policy.” This reality for France and domestic constraints for Britain and Germany are core variables in demonstrating the decline of these powers. In Europe, France’s exceptionalism is unique and symbolizes the reminiscence of a declining continent unwilling/unable to project Western influence, norms and power, as most EU Member States, among them Britain, refuse to participate in this punishing vendetta against the Assad regime. In [Philip Stephens’](#) words, “Europe is best described as a continent hiding under the bedcovers.” The Syrian lesson for the Big Three should be quite clear: if you can’t do it alone, why not empowering the EU and the CSDP?

When it comes to the EU, it will most likely hide behind the same motto: the need for international legitimacy through the UN Security Council. The message sent by Ashton and van Rompuy is identical: respect the sanctity of the UN and advance a political solution. [Van Rompuy](#) said “there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict. Only a political solution can end the terrible bloodshed.” Following the meeting in Vilnius, [HR Ashton](#) declared that “the EU urges the UN Security Council to unit in its efforts to prevent any further chemical attack. To that effect, it encourages the UNSC to fulfill its responsibilities and take all initiatives to achieve this goal.” Unfortunately this perpetual call for finding a solution through the UNSC does not take into consideration the reality in New York. Even the US Ambassador to the UN, [Samantha Power](#), said that there was “no viable path forward in this Security Council” considering the composition and position of two of the permanent members. Such statement was made prior the Putin alternative seeking for international supervision of the Syrian chemical arsenals.

Maybe it is time for the EU, especially for Ashton and Rompuy to reach out to their Russian and Chinese counterparts at the G-20 meeting and beyond, and try to incriminate the idea of a political solution in the West. Even Russian President, Vladimir Putin, recently admitted that he does not exclude backing a UN Security Council Resolution – to whatever it is worth – if Bashar al-Assad is proven to have used chemical weapons against Syrians. Without the inclusion of China and Russia, both permanent members of the UN Security Council, no viable political solution can be advanced. The latest option, backed by the Russians and Syrians, to put all the Syrian chemical arsenal will require considerable transparency and coordination. The French have expressed that they would be seeking for a UN resolution with teeth and have been working towards this goal.

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring the EU, especially the EEAS, has had no power in advancing a clear voice, but it can certainly play the game behind closed-doors and build some sort of global coalition towards a political solution. Barroso clearly demonstrated the limited contribution of the EU in solving the Syrian crisis. He [argued](#) that “In Europe, we believe that, ultimately, only a political solution stands a chance of delivering the lasting peace that the Syrian people deserve.” Unfortunately, it feels more like wishful thinking than strategic thinking. The Putin alternative demonstrates once again the limited influence of the EU on contributing to solving the Syrian crisis and enforcing core international norms and principles. In a recent [statement](#), HR Ashton “welcome the proposal for the Syrian regime to hand over its chemical weapons” and “hope that these developments will facilitate the resumption of efforts towards a political solution.” Apparently, the EU has been working through France in order to introduce and push for a Resolution in the UNSC in order to materialize the latest Russian proposal.

With the recent plan, launched apparently by a misstep by Secretary Kerry, calling for Syria to give up all its chemical arsenal, the game has been played solely between the two Cold War nemesis: the US and Russia. With apparent domestic opposition in the US for another war and strong Russian opposition to any military action, the talk of the town has now shifted to putting Syrian chemical weapons under international supervision. In this latest turn of events and despite leading international aid the EU and its Member States are only spectators and can only wait for Washington and Moscow to adjust their approach to the Syrian puzzle.