

## Securitizing the revolution: How Assad managed to convince Russia not to use R2P in Syria

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The Syrian civil war reached a new climax with the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta on 21 August 2013. A number of Western countries have subsequently expressed their desire to act in order to prevent similar actions from happening in Syria or elsewhere. However, under international law the only way to intervene in Syria under the current circumstances is by invoking the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Russian and Chinese vetoes on this in the UN Security Council have frustrated Western leaders leading them to believe that it is impossible to pursue this strategy. By looking at the Syrian and Russian arguments in media and UN forums at three crucial points in 2011 and 2012, this paper argues that Russian support to the Syrian regime has fluctuated and that a securitization of the opposition has prevented Russia from supporting R2P resolutions in the Security Council.

An international outcry against the use of chemical weapons followed the sarin attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on 21 August 2013. This led to repeated statements from Western powers about the possibility of a military intervention in Syria. While traditional interpretations of international law allow states to use military power against other countries only in cases of self-defence, a 2005 vote in the UN General Assembly recognized the norm of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as a principle of state behaviour. The reason was to protect populations from “*genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity*” (UN General Assembly 2005: 31) committed by their own states. The mandate to decide whether this norm should be enforced lies with the UN Security Council in accordance to chapter VII in the UN Charter, which means that a majority of the 15-member Security Council needs to support a resolution and that neither of the permanent members vetoes the decision in order for it to pass. Accordingly, this article attempts to investigate the possibility of a R2P resolution today by looking at similar attempts in 2011 and 2012 that failed to be passed.

Resolution drafts regarding the possible use of the R2P in Syria were vetoed by China and Russia on three occasions in 2011 and 2012 which frustrated Western leaders to the extent that the strategy was likely not to be pursued further. However, the events in Ghouta changed the course once again as demonstrated by the resolution on Syria’s chemical weapons passed on 27 September 2013. The resolution is without references to the R2P but reports indicated that it was the initial desire of several Western leaders to make use of the principle. While Chinese motivations for vetoing the drafts are of research interest, the present analysis will focus solely on the Russian explanations for voting down the R2P proposals. Several analysts have tried to focus on objective strategic and political reasons for the Russian vetoes (see e.g. Janik 2013 and Charap 2013), yet very little has been written about the actual arguments used by the foreign policy actors in relation to this<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the point of departure for the present analysis will be the subjective interpretation of events in Syria as carried out in the Security Council by the Russian ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, in comparison with the arguments used by the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, at the same points in time. This allows us to see whether Syrian and Russian deliberations about the crisis in Syria and the consequences of a military intervention are in concordance or whether the Russian agenda is detached from Assad’s reasoning.

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<sup>1</sup> Other than the widely referred use of “red lines” by the US president Barack Obama.

While it will be difficult to establish whether there is an actual causation between the Syrian arguments and the Russian vetoes, I find it likely that a match between the arguments used will indicate that securitization has taken place due to the nature of events in Syria. Securitization theory focuses on the possibility for an actor to frame something as a security issue to a particular audience who in turn, if accepting the basic argument, can allow the actor access to extraordinary means that otherwise would not have been bestowed upon him or her (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde 1998). In this instance it would translate into a situation where Assad convinces Russia of the upheaval being a threat and hence is allowed to operate in ways that otherwise would have prompted a Security Council resolution calling for the R2P.

As mentioned earlier, three resolution proposals regarding the R2P were vetoed throughout 2011 and 2012. These will serve as junctures that will organize the present analysis. Interviews with the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in local and international media translated and published by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) will be compared with official Russian statements in the Security Council debates in order to establish the degree of convergence of the arguments used by the two actors at each of the three votes.

#### **The first vote, 4 October 2011 (S/2011/612)**

On 4 October 2011, a draft resolution put forward by France, Germany, Portugal and the UK was vetoed by China and Russia, while four countries (Brazil, India, Lebanon and South Africa) abstained from voting. Thus, the double vetoes were the decisive reason for the failed resolution proposal in the Security Council. Furthermore, the reluctant support indicates that several countries were unsure about the advantage of using the R2P at this point.

Leading up to the vote, Bashar al-Assad gave interviews in Syria TV and the Syrian magazine *People's Army*. In these interviews, he warned about the revolution as being a plot attempting to fragment Syria and the wider region. He referred to the fragmentation as vicious, dishonest and called for his opponents to be held accountable for their offences (SANA 2011a; SANA 2011c). The Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, explains the Russian reasons for vetoing the proposal with reference to sovereignty and non-interference using Libya as an example, the fear for regional stability, terrorist tactics used by the opposition, a divided population and the need for dialogue (UN Security Council 2011). While there are a number of differences in the arguments used by Churkin and Assad, the characterisation of the revolution as a regional problem and the illegality of the opposition's methods points to a successful securitization

attempt by the Syrian president. To use the regional consequences as an example, Churkin warns in the Security Council that the Western approach “could trigger a full-fledged conflict in Syria and destabilization in the region as a whole” (UN Security Council 2011: 4) reiterating Assad’s claim of how actions against Syria “will affect a large number of the countries in the region and will reflect on other countries as well” (SANA 2011a).

#### **The second vote, 4 February 2012 (S/2012/77)**

Another attempt at passing a resolution referring to the R2P was put forward by a group of 19 countries on 4 February 2012 once again being voted down due to vetoes from China and Russia, while all other countries in the Security Council were in favour.

In the four month period between the first and second votes, Bashar al-Assad gave interviews with the Russian TV station Rossiya 1 TV and the US channel ABC News. In these, he characterises the opposition as a potential earthquake to the region, a foreign interference, divided, terrorists, using Israeli weapons, an external plot, funded by foreign countries, armed, the Syrian National Council as someone the Syrian people doesn’t care about (SANA 2011b; SANA 2011d). In the debate on the resolution, Russia argues that the draft was unbalanced and a political solution was needed, while describing opposition as partly extremist and attacking state institutions (UN Security Council 2012a). On this occasion, Churkin only repeated Assad’s concerns about the extremist – moderate divide, while the Syrian regime’s considerations regarding regional stability, foreign interference and public support are not being reiterated. This finding indicates that Assad was less successful in securitizing the 4 February 2012 resolution vote than the previous one.

#### **The third vote, 19 July 2013 (S/2012/538)**

France, Germany, Portugal, the UK and the US once again proposed a resolution calling for the R2P on 19 July 2013 with the same outcome as the two previous votes: once again Russia and China vetoed the decision, while South Africa and Pakistan abstained from voting.

Talking to the Iranian Channel 4 and the Turkish newspaper Cumhuriyet, Assad substantiated his interpretation of the events significantly. He refers to the opposition as terrorist groups, mercenaries working against their own country, colonialist puppets and ignorant, unpatriotic affiliates of Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood who would kill anyone in order to shift the UN balance in their own favour (SANA 2012a;

SANA 2012b; SANA 2012c; SANA 2012d; SANA 2012e). Russia then defended its veto by calling the opposition Pharisees with geopolitical intentions, extremists and terrorist groups who have nothing in common with the legitimate interests of the Syrian people. Furthermore, Churkin reiterated his previous call for a political solution rather than an external military intervention (UN Security Council 2012b). Once again securitization theory can at least partly explain the Russian veto, due to the match between the ambassador's statements and the Syrian president's securitization moves with regard to terrorism, national sovereignty and the risk of a national divide.

### **What does the findings tell us?**

As described above, it is very likely that some kind of securitization of the revolution has taken place contributing to the Russian veto in the Security Council at the three votes in 2011 and 2012. This is not to imply that other strategic and political reasons are unimportant, but Russian arguments in the debates on these resolution proposals mostly circled around the same considerations as the Syrian president made public in his interviews with national and international media.

Another important finding is the fact that the degree of Russian support has fluctuated. While ambassador Churkin repeated a number of referent objects in connection with the first vote as an explanation for the veto, the second debate only involved one reiteration about the extremist nature of the opposition. During the third vote, a number of Russian arguments were once again in concordance with Assad's interpretation of events in Syria. Thus, it seems like a successful vote on the R2P was most likely at the 4 February 2012 vote, which is also consistent with the general voting pattern at the three occasions, where it was the only round where no country other than China and Russia abstained or opposed. Once again, there can be other objective reasons for the changing pattern, yet it seems to tally with a less successful securitization.

In relation to the current debate on the possible use of the R2P as a response to the civil war in general and the use of chemical weapons in particular, the present analysis points to a continued possibility of invoking the R2P in Syria. Russian support to the Syrian regime is not unchangeable as illustrated by difference in securitization arguments used at each of the votes. The analysis adds a further insight, as the securitization arguments used by Assad are some of the key points that Western powers will have to counter or disprove in order to successfully convince Russia of not vetoing a R2P solution in the case of Syria. The securitization issues include but are not limited to the character of the opposition, the regional consequences and national sovereignty. To conclude, the battle of invoking the R2P regarding Syria in the Security Council is not

necessarily over, but a strategy that refrains from de- or counter-securitizing the Russian considerations influenced by Assad's arguments makes a change of the status quo much less likely.

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### Key Words

Securitization; Russia; Syria; Responsibility to Protect

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