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Editorial: Cease-fire and stability should be the goal in Syria

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What a difference a few days make. One of our previous editorials lamented that "it seemed the U.S. was walking intractably toward military intervention in Syria." Praise goes to Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama for seizing the opportunity that Russia's last-minute intervention in this crisis allowed. They could have dismissed Russian President Vladimir Putin's pledge to secure Syria's chemical weapons as mere political theater, which it might well have been. Kerry's meeting with Russia's foreign minister in Paris to develop a diplomatic plan of action not only deterred immediate military invention, it reinforced the importance of the international ban on chemical weapons and it may have opened a door to a fuller peaceful resolution of the conflict in Syria.

Of course, the crisis is very far from being solved and even the continued deterrence of Obama's threatened limited military strike is not totally assured. The plan to secure and destroy Syria's chemical weapons, a cache of what is believed to be some 1,000 tons, is daunting by itself. To do that under the eyes of a distrustful government inside a civil war only compounds the precariousness of the plan.

The world won't have to wait long to see possible results. The deadline for Syria to provide a "comprehensive listing" of its chemical weapons, including types and quantities, and to reveal its production and storage sites will come due not long after this editorial is printed. That will be the first major test of the various players' real intentions. To meet the next deadline, which is the end of November, Assad must have allowed "immediate and unfettered" access to international arms inspectors. The destruction of equipment must begin in November and all components of the arsenal must be eliminated within the first half of 2014.

A score of things could go wrong to derail this plan. The phrase "working for peace" comes to mind, because it will take hard work for this plan to be successful. It will require all the persuasion Russia can muster to ensure the cooperation of Syrian President Bashar Assad. The United States will have to set aside its distrust of Russia and its unwillingness to work with international organizations. This road to peace is replete with impediments but it is still far more preferable to the military alternative.

Our ardent hope is that the process of eliminating the chemical weapons will lay the groundwork for a cease-fire and lead to a stable political process in Syria. It is unspeakably awful that 1,400 Syrians died because of gas attacks, but we should not lose sight of the fact that some 100,000 other Syrians have died in the two-year conflict, victims of conventional weapons. Another 6 million have been forced from their homes. A cease-fire would give respite to these suffering millions. A stable political process would give them at least some hope for a future.

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