

Two weeks ago, it appeared that the hawks had won the argument over Syria. There was to be a campaign of missile and airstrikes to punish the Assad government by degrading its military assets. But the wheels fell off the hawks' wagon. In London, the Tories lost Labour support, and a backbench revolt ended William Hague's long-cherished ambitions to have the UK lead the charge in toppling the Assad government. Then the US Congress began to listen to the views of the American people who are overwhelmingly opposed to John McCain's war-mongering. The pathetic "*moi aussi*" policy of the French government also became derailed by public opinion.

Obama's "red line" in the sands of the Middle East was being blown away in a sandstorm of public antagonism to military intervention without UN support.

Flailing around to save face, the US administration blundered its way back from total humiliation in the person of John Kerry.

Obviously mentally weary, Kerry appeared at a joint press conference with Hague. His face, apparently made round and un-expressive by Botox (Google this subject if you doubt me), concealed his tiredness. But his words gave the game away

His first, remarkable linguistic gaffe was to claim that the intended missile and air strikes would be "unbelievably small". This ridiculous attempt to consolidate wavering members of Congress instantly back-fired.

The hawks in Washington, including McCain, were aghast at this gaffe. So much aghast in fact that they failed to pick up on his second blunder – an accidental riff about the unlikely possibility that Assad would decommission his chemical arsenal.

But the Kremlin did pick up on it- and instantly.

Sergei Lavrov, like a rugby scrum half, pounced on this loose ball and darted in for a game-changing try. He immediately put together his strategy to force Assad to agree to decommission his chemical arsenal and pulled the rug from under the White House strategy of hitting Syria without UN sanction.

Further political Botox was then administered to save the US face; we were now told that the Russian initiative had its origins in discussions at the G20 Summit. I leave you to judge the truth of that well-guarded secret.

Putin's open letter to the people of America made very unpleasant reading in Washington. But the Russian initiative gave Obama a way out of the "red line" political corner he was in – and was eagerly, if not gratefully, accepted by Washington. Obama may have lost face but he stayed in the same place with overwhelming anti-war sentiment in America. And the Republican right is divided between warmongers and isolationists.

What of the poor, suffering people of Syria?

The Sunni armed rebellion against Assad is Islamist in character and is backed by the Saudis and the Qataris. These backers are not interested in exporting liberal democracy. They are interested in exporting Sunni power for strategic reasons.

The Saudis recently invaded Bahrain at the request of its undemocratic rulers to crush the democratic aspirations of its Shia people. The Qataris are playing footsie with the Afghan Taliban. Victory for the Syrian rebels would result in a Sunni Islamist state where the minorities who back Assad as the lesser of two evils and the Kurds would face the kind of savage repression that Assad and his father have used on the Sunni Islamists for decades.

The West has no strategic interest in a rebel victory. John McCain and the warmongers may see some temporary advantage for Israel in the overthrow of Assad. But they have obviously not learned the lessons of Egypt, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan.

When I was in Syria shortly before the outbreak of violence, I saw first-hand the complexity of the diverse, ethnic state which lies behind lines drawn by the French and the British in their infamous secret agreement of 1916, the Sykes-Picot pact.

I visited Maaloula, the Christian community invaded this week by bloodthirsty rebel Jihadists. There was no strategic or military justification for that invasion – except sectarian terrorism of the kind that you can see on Youtube, where horrible records of massacres, beheadings and eviscerations are available for the un-squeamish. Will the Christians ever return to Maaloula, where they have spoken Aramaic and lived for 2000 years, if the West arms the rebels who attempted to expel them this week?

Truly, blessed are the peacemakers, as was once said in Aramaic. Syria, as I wrote here recently, needs peace not war.

The Putin letter was telling. America's friends (among whom I count myself) are becoming very disillusioned by what Putin called US "exceptionalism".

The Security Council veto can be deployed by the US to prevent UN resolutions about the West Bank. But it can be ignored when US "vital national interests" are at stake, such as the transgression of Obama's "red line". They demand the right to spy on their allies but require their allies to agree to deport the whistle-blowers who reveal such espionage. Fox News may see no problem in all of this – but there is a big, yawning gap in world-wide credibility and respect for the US. Hawks see credibility issues in not using force – the rest of us see the issue very differently.

The younger, post-Cold War, Irish generation are asking themselves whether John McCain would be better employed trying to get health services for America's poor than posing as the man who will install democracy selectively and at the wrong end of cruise missiles and drones in parts of the Arab world chosen by him. The US stands to lose its friends and its goodwill.

For me, to see moral force in Putin's letter is worrying. He is no saint. But the irony is that Obama, whose instincts are good, may prove to have been saved by the serendipitous combination of Kerry's ineptitude and Lavrov's cleverality. **ENDS**