

Assad regime must be denied the skies

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Redressing the imbalance in arms in Syria is an essential step to ending the war – but it would not be enough

As the war in Syria enters its third year, it is hard to avoid a sense of déjà vu at the sight of the European Union's display of division and risk aversion couched as prudence. Two decades ago, ineffectual machinations and declarations characterised the EU's response to the war in Bosnia. In that war, as in Syria, an arms embargo favoured the side that started hostilities with a near monopoly on weapons. Redressing that imbalance was essential to ending the war.

The EU should be better equipped to respond now than then: the EU now has a common foreign and security policy – a policy motivated partly by the failures of the 1990s. The EU's main military and foreign-policy powers – France and the UK – are also willing to act. Twenty years ago, France and the UK had dreadful policies aimed at forestalling American-led intervention; now they are prodding the US to act and are arguing for the EU to arm the Free Syrian Army. There is an urgent need. By year's end, the death toll in Syria will be greater than Bosnia's: 70,000 have died already in Syria and the death rate is accelerating toward the figure of 100,000 killed in Bosnia.

But the Anglo-French call for the arms embargo to be lifted is being torpedoed by people who propose no solutions.

"Would (lifting the embargo) stop people being killed, or would it kill people faster?", the EU's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, has asked. She has also warned of an arms race – the implication being that Russia and Iran would send even more weaponry to the regime of Bashar Assad. Sweden's foreign minister and one-time peace envoy to the former Yugoslavia, Carl Bildt, argues that "if we focus on the military side, it could bring about a collapse of the political track".

A decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan has fatigued the West. In addition, there are fears that arms would fuel Islamist radicalisation, increase sectarianism, and destabilise the region.

But radicalisation, growing sectarianism and regional destabilisation are processes that are now well under way, facilitated in large measure by two years of Western reliance on the diplomatic track alone. These efforts have proven fruitless. As for an arms race, Assad already has or is being provided with all the arms he needs.

Providing the rebels with more arms would further tax the increasingly beleaguered Assad regime. But the pivotal question is whether supplying arms would shorten the war enough. The balance of power would tip only gradually in favour of the rebels, and in the meantime each day would add to the death toll.

A quicker way to end the war is available. The Assad regime's use of airpower and heavy artillery demonstrates not only its superior firepower, but also its weakness and desperation – weakness and desperation because Assad has only a few reliable ground units. He must move these conventional forces between fronts. This is a crucial vulnerability.

The key to changing the strategic balance rapidly is to deny the skies to Assad's planes, and the roads to his ground forces.

Supplying the rebels with anti-aircraft weapons could deny Assad the skies. But there are understandable concerns about providing such weaponry to Syria's rebels.

Instead, Western air forces (especially those of the UK, France, and the US) should intervene directly. This would have two advantages. First, this is a variable that the West could completely control. Second, the impact would be immediate. Without air superiority, Assad's mechanised forces would be immobilised.

This would strengthen the internationally recognised Syrian National Council vis-à-vis Islamists, and in any subsequent diplomatic effort.

Western air power tipped the scales in Libya. It would not win the backing of the UN Security Council. But, as the past three years have showed, the same is true of any meaningful policy.

The use of force carries dangers – but, as was the case in Bosnia, use of Western airpower is the avenue most likely to end the conflict.

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