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Russian Foreign Minister Is Nobody's Fool

By Benjamin Bidder

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Sergey Lavrov has reaped massive criticism for Moscow's veto of the UN Security Council resolution on Syria, but the Russian foreign minister remains unmoved. The top diplomat, who met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Damascus on Tuesday, has a track record of standing up to the West.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov knows how to deliver a "nyet" in all kinds of different ways. He can be taciturn and stubborn, as he was when Moscow expressed its opposition to the NATO missile shield in Europe, and he can be angry, as when he delivered the Kremlin's veto of the United Nations Security Council resolution on Syria at the weekend. (The West's comments, he said, were "bordering on hysteria"). But he is also capable of delivering a "nyet" with a wink, as he did when he, a chain smoker, resisted then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's proposal to ban smoking at United Nations Headquarters in New York.

Sometimes, however, Lavrov just can't say no. In early February, for example, after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had just made an unsuccessful telephone call to Lavrov over the Syria conflict, the Russian foreign minister paid a visit to the tiny island nation of Fiji in the South Pacific. The trip was prompted by Russia's desire to expand its influence in Asia and Oceania. Hence Lavrov did not complain when his hosts dressed him in a Hawaiian-style shirt

and placed a colorful garland around his neck. At his feet, they carried out traditional rituals that required bare torsos and loud shouting. For a man who is usually the personification of Russia's foreign policy self-confidence, his smile, framed by a face covered in sweat, was unusually timid.

On Tuesday, Moscow's top diplomat was on a significantly more sensitive mission to Syria. He was greeted by pro-government crowds on arrival in Damascus, who lined the streets of the capital and waved Russian flags as the foreign minister's motorcade passed.

During talks in Damascus with Bashar Assad, Lavrov called on the Syrian president to do what was needed to ensure peace in the country. "Every leader of every country must be aware of his share of responsibility." Lavrov told Assad at the meeting in Damascus, according to state-run news agency RIA. "You are aware of yours." The foreign minister added: "It's in our interests that the Arab peoples live in peace and harmony."

The talks took place as the Syrian army continued to bombard the [rebel stronghold of Homs](#), where at least 95 people were killed on Monday, according to activists.

Losing Credit

At the weekend, Moscow, together with China, once again protected its old ally Assad by [vetoing the Security Council resolution](#) condemning Syria's violent crackdown on anti-government protesters. Since then, the Russians have been the focus of international criticism, with top Western diplomats calling their veto a "scandal."

The secretary-general of the Arab League, Nabil Elaraby, said that Russia and China had lost diplomatic credit in the Arab world because of their veto. The rejection, he said, sent the wrong message to the Syrian government. Now, he said, Damascus might have the impression that it could do anything it wanted without the international community taking action.

Pressure is also coming from the United Nations. In a statement Monday, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was "appalled" by the Syrian government's attacks on opponents of the regime. The violence against civilians was "totally unacceptable before humanity," he said. "No government can commit such acts against its people without its legitimacy being eroded."

Now the world is watching Lavrov. Will Moscow make a serious proposal to mediate between the parties in the conflict -- or does it only want to lend its support to Assad?

'Free from Ideology'

The diplomat has already vehemently rejected international criticism of Russia's veto, saying that the UN Security Council was too hasty in voting on the draft resolution. The Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Moscow sought "the swiftest stabilization of the situation in Syria on the basis of the swiftest implementation of democratic reforms whose time has come." Lavrov himself declined to comment on the objectives of his mission to Syria, where he is being accompanied by the head of Russia's foreign intelligence service, Mikhail Fradkov.

Already at the beginning of the year, Lavrov had set out the direction of Russia's foreign policy in a major press conference. Foreign policy, he said, should be based on the "solid ground of national interest" and should be "free from ideology." The top diplomat knows what he is talking about; during the last three decades, he has been on the front lines of Moscow's foreign policy. In the 1980s, Lavrov worked for Moscow's mission to the UN in New York, later returning there to head the mission from 1994 to 2004. In 2002 and 2003, he deflected Washington's efforts to win Russian support for its war in Iraq. Vladimir Putin appointed him Russian foreign minister in 2004.

Within the Russian government, the supremely self-confident Lavrov is something of an exception. While most of his bland ministerial colleagues like to keep their contact with journalists to a minimum, the diplomat likes to invite Moscow correspondents to an annual New Year's reception, where he chats freely with guests and fields their questions.

The Force Is with Him

Lavrov's foreign counterparts have great respect for the Russian diplomat, and not only because of his considerable experience. Lavrov, who in his free time enjoys playing soccer with government colleagues and going rafting with old university friends, also has a talent as an entertainer. A graduate of Russia's respected diplomatic school MGIMO and an amateur poet, he wrote a eulogy to his alma mater, which reads: "Study until you fall over and drink until the end / Do not rush, pursue your goals stubbornly."

In 2005, he took to the stage at an ASEAN summit in Laos wearing a purple hooded robe and carrying a lightsaber, looking like a character out of "Star Wars." Lavrov's appearance in Jedi costume was the highlight of the evening.

Observers might argue, however, that Russia has gone over to the dark side by defending dictators and despots. But Lavrov defends Moscow's positions. He once said that he wished Russia's Western partners would "abandon the illusion" that their dominance was "eternal." In any case, Russia's foreign policy is dictated by the Kremlin, which sees its Security Council veto and status as a nuclear power almost entirely as tools in the struggle to advance its national interests.

During his time as Russian ambassador to the UN, Lavrov proved to be a passionate artist and ironic observer of his own profession. During long meetings, he would sometimes amuse himself by doodling. Ten years ago, he gave one of the drawings, which was probably made during a session on an Iraq resolution, to his German counterpart Hanns Schumacher. The word "diplomacy" was written there in squiggly letters, followed by the adjectives "deep," "low" and "messy."