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Samantha Power faces tough UN debut in Syria mission

By Geoff Dyer in Washington



In her first key public address since becoming the new US ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power had some sharp words for what Washington sees as Russian and Chinese obstructionism over Syria.

“The Security Council the world needs to deal with in this urgent crisis is not the Security Council we have,” Ms Power told a Washington think-tank last week, as the Obama administration was making its case for air strikes on Syria.

A week later, Ms Power and the same UN Security Council are back at the centre of the Syrian crisis and the furore over the August 21 chemical weapons attack. Following several days of fast-moving

diplomacy and political calculations about weak congressional support for military action, the White House has fully embraced a Russian proposal for Syria to hand over its chemical weapons to international control.

Following a two-day summit in Geneva between John Kerry, US secretary of state, and Sergei Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, to discuss the proposal, the issue will move to the UN next week, where Ms Power's first task as a diplomat will be to negotiate with Russia on the fine detail.

If a resolution ever emerges from the Security Council, the text could go a long way to deciding whether the administration has salvaged a diplomatic victory from a weak position or whether it is being played by Russia, which has been one of the Syrian regime's main benefactors.

"Lavrov used to be at the UN and is a master at UN trench warfare," said Richard Gowan, a UN expert at New York University. "He knows how to drag things out and to weaken resolutions through cunning diplomacy."

Irish-born Ms Power, a former foreign correspondent in Bosnia and Harvard academic, has been a close adviser of President Barack Obama since his days as a senator. The transition from opinion to politics was not always easy. She stood down from his first presidential campaign after calling Hillary Clinton a "monster", but remained a senior White House adviser during the first Obama term.

Sometimes referred to as a "liberal hawk", she finds herself both intellectually and professionally at the sharp end of the dilemma the Obama administration has set itself over Syria.

She is the administration's most eloquent advocate of humanitarian intervention – the instinct that encouraged Mr Obama to say in a speech on Tuesday that "when with modest effort we can stop children from being gassed to death . . . I believe we should act."

In her 2003 Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Problem from Hell*, she presented a scathing portrait of US indifference to past genocides. In a section on the Rwanda massacre, she quoted Susan Rice – now Mr Obama's national security adviser – as saying: "I swore to myself that if I ever faced such a crisis again, I would come down on the side of dramatic action."

However, Ms Power is also firmly within the Democratic tradition that believes in international institutions such as the UN and disdains reckless US unilateralism. Her less well-known book, *Chasing the Flame*, is a portrait of the UN focusing approvingly on Sérgio Vieira de Mello, the Brazilian diplomat killed in Iraq in 2003.

Ms Power has been immersed in UN issues since her time in Bosnia. But in her first real engagement as a US diplomat she will be sparring with Vitaly Churkin, who has been Russian ambassador since 2006.

“Sometimes it can become a matter of personalities and in that case the Russians have an advantage in terms of experience,” said David Bosco, author of a book on the UN and a professor at American University in Washington.

In early UN debate, the US and its allies and Russia have laid out starkly different positions. An initial draft resolution written by France included the potential threat of military action if Syria did not hand over its weapons, while Russia suggested it did not even want a full resolution, but a less binding presidential statement.

On Friday, diplomats said an initial resolution could provide a timeframe to judge Syria’s seriousness, before the US, UK and France decided whether to push the issue of military force in a second resolution.

“There is an argument that the US should give Russia everything it asks for and say, ‘Now this is your problem,’” said Mr Gowan. “But Russia does not really work that way. They are prepared to take reputational damage in order for the crisis to play out the way they want.”

Power biography

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