

---

## EUROPEAN POWERS TO RAISE PRESSURE ON RUSSIA OVER SYRIA

- 10.04.2017

---

FT (09 April 2017)

European powers are raising pressure on Russia to drop its support for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad or push his regime towards a settlement with the opposition through the UN-backed peace process.

Sign up By signing up you confirm that you have read and agree to the terms and conditions, cookie policy and privacy policy.

Angelino Alfano, Italys foreign minister, said that last weeks US missile strike on the Assad regime had offered a window of opportunity for a political solution based on an institutional transition of power in Syria.

We are asking Russia to wield all of their influence on Assad so that he enacts this transition as soon as possible, so there can be regular elections, Mr Alfano said in an interview with the Financial Times in his office in Rome.

Mr Alfano hosts a meeting of G7 foreign ministers on Monday and Tuesday in the Tuscan city of Lucca at which the Syrian war will dominate. We are still working on the communique but the only place to restart is from the UN, Mr Alfano said. Its not just an Italian doctrine, its a widely shared view, and this is the central point.

There has been no sign of a breakthrough in the UN-backed peace process but Staffan de Mistura, the UN special envoy for Syria, has insisted that incremental progress is being made.

Despite mounting tensions with Moscow, diplomats in Brussels believe the US strike was potentially a game-changer in the six-year conflict. This has created a moment of leverage. Its got the Russians off balance, said a senior European diplomat.

The big question is can the Americans now turn this into a medium term strategy of getting through to the Russians that they have probably reached their peak in Syria . . . and should help in pushing the regime towards an accommodation, he added. A French diplomat said the aim now was to persuade Russia to drop its support for Mr Assad, which had tilted the conflict in his favour.

They have to want to get rid of Bashar and to do so they have to acknowledge that he is responsible for the use of chemical weapons and that this is not acceptable, the French diplomat said.

Still, Russias stance has only hardened since the US strike. There were sharp exchanges on Friday between the US and Russia at an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council and Dmitry Medvedev, Russias prime minister, said the US intervention had completely ruined relations. Mr

Medvedev also claimed the two countries were on the verge of a military clash as a result of the US strike.

Italy has been a big supporter of dialogue over the west's confrontation with Russia in recent years, and harboured strong hopes that Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump could usher in a new period of stability in the Middle East. But Mr Alfano acknowledged that that idea had suffered a blow. We all cultivated the notion of a grand bargain but we now need to verify if it still applies, even if on a different basis, he said. We are not among those who desire a further cooling of relations between East and West. It would be very serious if the antiterrorism coalition were divided, he added.

Angelino Alfano, Italy's foreign minister, said the US air strike in Syria had offered a 'window of opportunity' for a solution © Bloomberg

Mr Alfano has also placed the issue of Libya at the top of the G7 foreign ministers agenda, amid concern that the UN-backed government in Tripoli is growing increasingly fragile. Russia has stepped up its ties with renegade general Khalifa Haftar in the eastern part of the country and, while Moscow has grown increasingly active, the Trump administration has not yet developed a clear stance. Mr Alfano warned that any partition of the country would be dangerous.

A division of Libya endangers security in the Mediterranean, which is critical to our national interest. The Libyan people and state are one, he added. We imagine an important role for Haftar, but only under the umbrella of the UN-backed government. On the US side, Mr Alfano said: The US position on Libya is being defined, but it has also been very sensitive to Italy's opinion.

Italy has typically been among the doves in the EU on Russia sanctions □ but does not believe that there is much of a chance that they could be wound down any time soon. This was an optical illusion during the first weeks of the Trump administration but the first few words from top officials removed any doubt that they would remain, Mr Alfano said.

He also dismissed worries of Moscow's influence in Italian politics ahead of the next election, given that powerful populist opposition parties, including the Five Star Movement and the Northern League, are overwhelmingly sympathetic to Russia.

There is no existing proof that Russia has relationships that are outside the rules of the game with any European parties, he said.

---

Kaynak/Source: