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EDITORIALS

## Scapegoat for Syria

*Can Russia be blamed for the failure to stop the bloodshed?*

IT WAS JUST a week ago that Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton cheerfully reported that Russia was ready to “lean” on the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad as part of a new United Nations plan for a transitional government. “They have told me that,” she assured one interviewer following a June 30 conference in Geneva. “They’ve decided to get on one horse, and it’s the horse that would back a transition plan that Kofi Annan would be empowered to implement,” she told another.

Oops. It immediately became clear that Moscow had no such intention. In the past week, the official Ms. Clinton cited as her source — Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov — has said repeatedly that his government will not pressure Mr. Assad to leave power. “This is either an unscrupulous attempt to mislead serious people who shape foreign policy or simply a misunderstanding of what is going on,” Mr. Lavrov said Thursday. Western policy, he added, “is most likely to exacerbate the situation, lead to further violence and ultimately a very big war.”

At yet another conference on Syria, in Paris on Friday, Ms. Clinton had changed her tune. Now she is accusing Russia and China of “blockading” progress on Syria, insisting that is “no longer tolerable” and warning that they “will pay a price.” She pleaded with participating governments to lobby Vladimir Putin to change course. This raises an interesting question: Was Ms. Clinton taken in by Mr. Lavrov? Or did she know all along that the new U.N. plan she has been promoting was stillborn?

Either way, the Obama administration’s Syria diplomacy is making it look foolish as

well as feckless. U.S. officials, apart perhaps from Ms. Clinton, appear to have no faith in their own policy. Conceding that the plan to appoint a transitional government is going nowhere, while Syrians die by the score every day, they resort to blaming Russia — as if they are shocked to discover that the Kremlin doesn’t want to support a pro-Western, pro-democracy agenda.

In fact Mr. Putin’s intransigence was entirely predictable. Apart from the fact that the Assad regime is a longtime Russian client and arms purchaser, the KGB-trained strongman seethes at the notion of Western intervention to support a popular revolution against a dictator. Blocking such action — and being seen to do so — is his overriding priority. The more Ms. Clinton blames him for “blockading,” the more Mr. Putin preens.

The administration does have reason to pretend that Russia is cooperating or can be induced to do so. Were it to acknowledge that that cause is hopeless — and that action at the United Nations is therefore impossible — it might come under pressure to consider other measures. One would be the protection of an rebel safe zone in northern Syria, which could help turn the military tide against the regime. The Turkish government reportedly proposed — again — at a NATO meeting last week that preparations for such a step be made. According to the *Hurriyet* newspaper, the idea was rejected by the United States, among others.

So which government is preventing effective action on Syria, and which will pay the price? Ms. Clinton’s attempt to pin the blame on Russia looks like a diversion.