Syria deal no utopia for international law

When my students challenge me by saying that the 2003 Iraq war shows how useless international law is, I agree that no one went to jail despite the illegality of the conflict. But I also ask them to consider the human and financial costs borne by the US, because others doubted the legitimacy of its actions. I point to the immense loss of credibility and moral authority that it suffered. And I suggest that this might help explain why, in recent months, the US found it so hard to persuade others of Syria's wrongdoing - even as the bodies with chemical burns continued to pile up.

The US has seen the need to act within the rules. Russia has brokered an international agreement with unanimous endorsement by the Security Council.

Syria is turning over its prohibited weapons for destruction by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

Utopia?

Not quite. Let's consider each country in turn.

America, Russia and Syria

THE US march to war was undone by an erosion of British support, a sceptical public at home, and a gaffe by the Secretary of State. Some have applauded this change of heart, but the view that an interventionist US is a major threat to international peace and security is misconceived. The far greater threat now is that the US, diminished by a decade of mismanaged foreign policy and distrusted by its dysfunctional domestic politics, will disengage completely.

Having threatened that the use of chemical weapons was a "red line", President Barack Obama had appeared to be trapped by his own rhetoric into a strike against Damascus.

War was, in the end, averted by accident. At a London conference on Sept 9, Secretary of State John Kerry made an apparently off-the-cuff remark that Syria could avoid a military strike only by turning over all of its chemical weapons to international control. As he said at the time, this seemed impossible, but Russia immediately leapt in and praised his "initiative."

This was part of a remarkable transformation in the former superpower. After months of stonewalling on Syria, President Vladimir Putin swiftly published an eloquent opinion piece in The New York Times. Modestly entitled "A plea for caution from Russia", Mr Putin sought to position himself as the statesman, lecturing Americans in general - and President Obama in particular - on the dangers of US foreign policy overreach.

We now know that the article was placed in...