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Clinton got it right on China's and Russia's 'despicable' Syria vetoes

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By Richard Cohen

I'm trying to remember why I was so critical of Hillary Clinton during the last presidential campaign. She got on my nerves somehow, and I came down hard on her, but now, as secretary of state, she's become my hero. The other day, she called Russia and China "despicable." It was precisely the right word.

Clinton was referring to Russia's and China's vetoes of a U.N. Security Council resolution that threatened sanctions against the Assad regime in Syria if the regime did not immediately halt its military crackdown against civilians, which has led to more than 6,000 dead and who knows how many wounded. This is what Middle East hands call Hama Rules — Hama being the Syrian city that Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafaz, leveled in 1982 at a cost of at least 10,000 lives. Syrians know how to kill Syrians.

"Despicable" is not your standard diplomatic word. Usually, diplomats condemn. They express regret. They employ language to obfuscate and never — well, almost never — to morally condemn. They note and sometimes they note with interest. Words are never personal, always a step back, a message from the balcony — and then it's time for lunch and the usual communique, a blah, blah, blah of words meaning very little.

But "despicable" breaks the mold. It is, though, the perfect word, and I can't imagine it being uttered by anyone else, especially a male secretary of state. The word oozes feminine contempt, the kind of thing a seething wife says to a straying husband, a spouse to her drunken mate, a woman at the end of her wits trying to understand male perfidy. The Chinese have shot back. They are offended. But the truth is that both they and the Russians lack moral fiber. They think only of self-interest or, in the case of Russia's Vladimir Putin, restoring Peter the Great's Empire. (Peter built Putin's hometown of St. Petersburg.) Syria is Russia's last remaining ally in the Middle East. Once Russia (then doing business as the Soviet Union) vied to be the equal of America in the region and even provided funding for the Aswan High Dam for Egypt and pined to establish a beachhead in that country. All of that is gone. Moscow is down to the thug-ocracy in Damascus, a clique of Alawites. It cannot survive.

As for China, it behaves like an abused child. It once was picked over and plucked by the Western powers, and so it confuses humanitarianism with imperialism. The Chinese also fear a precedent. If other nations come to the aide of brutalized dissidents, what would that mean to China? Doesn't a nation have a right to abuse its people as it seems fit? One cannot be critical of Syria for doing, after all, what China would do under similar conditions.

Hillary Clinton said it just right. China and Russia have given moral support to a regime that is murdering its own people — making war on civilians and killing journalists for reporting the story. There is just one word for that and Clinton said it: Despicable.