Mind the Neighbors

By Anne-Marie Slaughter, Project Syndicate, April 17, 2012

The conventional wisdom last week on whether Syria would comply with former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s ceasefire plan was that it was up to Russia. We were reverting to Cold War politics, in which the West was unwilling to use force and Russia was willing to keep arming and supporting its client. Thus, Russia held the trump card: the choice of how much pressure it was willing to put on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to comply with the plan.

If this view were correct, Iran would surely be holding an equally powerful hand. Annan, after all, traveled to Tehran as well. Traditional balance-of-power geopolitics, it seems, is alive and well.

But this is, at best, a partial view that obscures as much as it reveals. In particular, it misses the crucial and growing importance of regional politics and institutions.

A longer-term resolution of the Syrian crisis depends as much on Turkey and the Arab League as it does on the United States, Europe, and Russia. Consider what else happened last week: Turkey’s government made clear that it would turn to new measures if Annan’s plan does not produce results.

Turkish officials have been issuing similar proclamations for months, but now Syrian troops have fired into Turkey, chasing Free Syrian Army rebels who fled across the border, while the number of Syrian civilian refugees has increased sharply. Last week, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan raised the stakes dramatically with talk of having “many options,” and by adding: “Also, NATO has responsibilities to do with Turkey’s borders, according to Article 5.”

Article 5 of the NATO treaty stipulates that an attack on one NATO member is to be considered an attack on all, and that all will come to the member’s aid. Of course, other NATO members could disagree that Syria has in fact attacked Turkey, but if Turkey were to invoke Article 5, a refusal to offer assistance could have unpleasant consequences for the alliance as a whole. And Assad knows full well that it will be impossible to avoid further border incidents unless he is prepared to allow the Free Syrian Army to use Turkey as a safe zone.

The significance of Article 5 is that if a credible case can be made that Turkey and its allies are acting in self-defense, they do not need to seek the UN Security Council’s approval. That makes Erdoğan’s suggestion a game-changer, forcing Assad to reckon with the prospect of a de facto militarily-enforced safe zone for the civilian opposition.

The deeper point here is that regional organizations, including NATO, provide the first level of legality and legitimacy required for a successful use of force. The US would not have supported intervention in Libya if the Arab League had not supported a no-fly zone and been willing to go to the UN on that basis.

Indeed, assuming that Assad does not start bulldozing entire cities, I cannot imagine any circumstances under which the US would support even limited military intervention in Syria without public approval by the Arab League and Turkey. That is why we have seen a game of
“after you” with respect to Syria, with the Turks saying that they need Western support, the US saying that it needs regional support, and both saying that they need UN support.

Looking beyond the Middle East, Africa provides the best evidence for a geopolitics based as much on regional powers and institutions as on traditional great powers. While Annan has been trying his diplomatic best to resolve Syria’s crisis, upheavals in Senegal, Mali, Malawi, and Guinea-Bissau have been swiftly addressed by other regional powers. In particular, the African Union (AU) has acted repeatedly in the name of enforcing the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance.

In Senegal, simmering violence accompanied recent elections in which President Abdoulaye Wade was allowed to stand for an unprecedented third term. The first round forced Wade into a run-off with Macky Sall, at which point the AU promptly sent an Elections Observer Mission, drawn from 18 African countries, to assess whether the elections were legal and the results “reflected the will of the Senegalese people.” We cannot be sure what impact the mission had on Wade’s ultimate decision to concede defeat to Sall, but knowing that the region was watching must have focused his mind.

The situation in Mali is more complicated, for it involves an ongoing secessionist movement, as well as a coup on March 21. But, after the coup the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), backed by the UN, immediately suspended Mali’s membership in the AU, imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on the country, and placed travel restrictions on coup leaders. Just over two weeks later, ECOWAS announced that it had reached an agreement with the coup leaders to return the government to civilian rule in exchange for lifting the sanctions.

Likewise, AU President Jean Ping condemned a coup in Guinea-Bissau in early April immediately and in the strongest terms.

Those who interpret all moves on the international stage in terms of states’ eternal jockeying for power and prestige will never lack for evidence. The way in which the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is playing out in Syria is a prominent example. But countries’ desire to stop mass murder in their neighborhood, or to enforce regional norms, has its own force. Increasingly, when a regional institution will not act, powers from outside the region find it difficult to intervene. And, when a region does unite on a course of action, intervention by outside powers becomes either less necessary or more effective.