As the United States and Russia try to broker a conference that can bring the various sides in the Syrian conflict to the negotiating table, potential Western participants, at least, should be thinking about the larger implications of the Syrian conflict for dictators and democracies around the world. Here are the lessons thus far:

**Bad guys help their friends.** The Russians and Iranians are willing to do whatever it takes to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power. Hezbollah, supplied by Iran, has now moved openly onto the battlefield in support of the Assad regime. Russia and Iran have kept the Syrian government supplied with heavy weapons and other military assistance, including a Russian shipment of sophisticated anti-ship missiles with advanced radar systems. These will help Assad hunker down and fend off all comers in an Alawite mini-state that will include the Russian-leased port facility at Tartus.

**Diplomacy without a credible threat of force is empty talk.** “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” Theodore Roosevelt counseled. President Barack Obama rightly wants to lead in global affairs through civilian more than military power; he understands that military solutions to foreign-policy problems are hugely expensive and often counter-productive in terms of advancing US security and prosperity over the long term.

But Obama’s strategy in Syria seems to be “speak loudly and throw away your stick.” Obama has made it clear over and over (as has NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen) that he has no interest in intervening militarily in Syria. And the US response to the latest Russian missile shipment? Secretary of State John Kerry said: “I think we’ve made it crystal clear we would prefer that Russia was not supplying assistance.”

The US has cast aside one of its most important foreign policy tools, creating an incentive for the Syrian government and its supporters to keep fighting until they are in the most advantageous position possible to negotiate a settlement – that is, if they have any incentive to negotiate at all.

**If you are a dictator facing sustained political protests, be as brutal as possible and incite sectarian killing.** Part of Syria’s agony is the self-fulfilling nature of the conflict. From March to December 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians marched every Friday, seeking the same political liberalization that Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis, Bahrainis, Jordanians, and others across the Middle East and North Africa sought in what was optimistically called “the Arab Spring.” Unarmed, they were shot in the streets by riot police and government snipers, until they finally started forming small local militias for self-protection – militias that gradually grew into the loose federation of forces now known as the Free Syrian Army.

All the while, Assad was describing the violence as the product of terrorists and Sunni extremists seeking dominion over minority Alawites, Druze, Kurds, Christians, and other groups. He
worked assiduously to fan the flames of sectarian civil war, succeeding to the extent that now the chief reason for not intervening to stop the killing is the impossibility of doing so effectively in an environment of sectarian violence.

Regional organizations are still unable to solve regional problems without great-power leadership. Turkey has been threatening and calling for military action for 18 months, but US officials say that the Turks are not in fact ready to do anything beyond providing support for refugees and opposition fighters. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are also sending arms to Syrian opposition groups, but the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council are paralyzed. Without a great power that is willing both to share the lead and to push from behind, regional organizations cannot take charge in their own neighborhood.

Human suffering, even on a massive and destabilizing scale, will not move the world to action. In a recent conversation about Syria with a couple of well-known foreign policy experts, one participant suggested that the Middle East’s current borders, drawn in colonial times, cannot last and must be redrawn. I pointed out the possibility of a Middle East conflagration equivalent to the Thirty Years War in Europe, which is estimated to have killed between half and three-quarters of the population of some of the participating states. One of my interlocutors agreed, but said that we could do nothing to stop it, because “that’s the period of history we’re in.”

For all the world’s pious proclamations about “never again,” a mantra arising from the Holocaust, mass murder almost never motivates foreign intervention. It is astounding to think that the world mobilized immediately to push Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991, but has dithered for more than two years as tens of thousands of Syrians have been killed, and their country, a cradle of civilization, laid waste.

“Humanitarian” intervention – action that is motivated by our concern for the fate of fellow human beings – is often described as reflecting “moral concern.” But how many wars does it take for us to understand that killing always begets more killing? People who watch the butchering of their children and parents, the rape of their wives, daughters, and sisters, and the wanton destruction of their homes and livelihoods do not forget. They carry vengeance in their hearts from generation to generation, until a measure of justice is done, nursing their enmity in frozen conflicts that block economic growth, prevent the formation of social capital, and paralyze political institutions.

When no side in a war has a reason to stop fighting, a peace conference cannot succeed. In Syria, the moral, strategic, and political arguments all converge in favor of decisive action to stop the killing, if not forever, at least for now, to create a space for peace. But if the lessons of the past two years are any guide, the wheels of violence will keep on turning.