World powers divided over a resolution on Syria crisis

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United Nations: Some 20 foreign ministers gathered on Friday for the latest conference on Syria's civil war, hopeful about arranging a cease-fire and launching peace negotiations in the new year.

But the diplomats remained divided over a resolution that the UN Security Council was expected to adopt just after the talks endorsing the process. And Syria's main opposition group said a January 1 deadline for starting talks was "too ambitious."

The ministers were meeting for the third time to push forward an earlier agreement setting that deadline. "We need to make sure the political process is irreversible in the face of this severe threat posed by international terrorism," Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi said as he headed into the meeting at a New York hotel.

"We must realise the political process is going to go backward if we are not making progress," he said. Wang said the two most important issues are launching political negotiations and implementing the cease-fire. "Without peace talks, the cease-fire cannot be sustained.

Without a cease-fire, peace talks cannot continue to produce results," he said.

Serious differences remain between Russia and Iran, which support the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad, and backers of the Syrian opposition, including the United States, key European nations, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Russia and the West continue to be split on the central issue in any discussions on a political transition: the fate of Assad.

British Ambassador Matthew Rycroft said negotiations were still taking place on the Security Council resolution. UN diplomats said a key stumbling block was how to address the issue of the transitional government.

"We continue to look at this optimistically and are putting a lot of effort into getting an agreement," Rycroft said.

On Thursday, Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif told The Associated Press there "seems to be no agreement" on two other key issues: Syrian opposition groups that should be included in peace negotiations, and Syrian groups that should be considered terrorist organisations instead.

- AP