

## US abrogates its leadership role

Editorial, The Australian, 12:00AM September 26, 2016

Amid the onslaught by Russian and Syrian forces on the city of Aleppo it is hard to argue with John Kerry that the escalation is “the greatest humanitarian tragedy since World War II”. While UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon describes the assaults as “sickening, savage and deliberate” war crimes and wonders what a Winston Churchill or a Dwight Eisenhower might have done, Barack Obama fails to act. In a response that was weakness personified, one of the president’s closest national security aides, Ben Rhodes said: “The question is whether or not we just walk away from the table completely ... or whether or not we do some more diplomacy and consultation to determine whether or not there is some path forward.”

From the administration that drew a “red line” over chemical weapons but failed to enforce it, the response was no surprise. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in his determination to ensure victory for his dauphin President Assad and their axis with Iran’s rulers, is running rings around Mr Obama.

Russia’s “excuse” for the collapse of the latest ceasefire is dubious. In London, The Times has revealed the US-led coalition air strike (which included our own RAAF aircraft) on what was believed to be an Islamic State stronghold in which, reportedly, 62 Syrian soldiers were mistakenly killed, was notified in advance to the Kremlin. No concern was raised. Only when it was under way did Russia indicate a problem. Its “revenge” attack on a clearly marked, pre-authorised UN aid convoy by Russian and Syrian warplanes killed dozens of UN aid workers. And Mr Putin’s deployment of the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov, with its firepower of MiG29K warplanes to the Eastern Mediterranean, is an ominous sign.

More than 500,000 people have been killed in Syria. Five million have fled and seven million are internally displaced. The escalation of warfare in Aleppo, once Syria’s financial capital, will add to the numbers. Mr Obama should move to enact Mr Kerry’s proposed ban on combat aircraft flying over key areas. But that would involve confronting Mr Putin. And Mr Obama is no Churchill or Eisenhower.