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Bombing Syria: What's the Goal?

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As Washington considers military action in Syria, the temptation will be to pursue a limited punitive response to regime chemical-weapons use, rather than a campaign to achieve the administration's stated goal of Bashar al-Assad's removal. Giving in to that temptation would be a mistake.

For the second time this summer, events in the Middle East have afforded President Obama an opportunity to correct errant policies.

In Egypt, the administration eventually did the right thing – promoting the American national interest by holding its nose (to cite Les Gelb's appropriate metaphor) and maintaining links with the Egyptian military after the overthrow of President Muhammad Morsi. But Washington arrived at this policy only after coming dangerously close to identifying U.S. interests with the survival and well-being of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is about as counterproductive and self-defeating an approach as one could imagine.

The administration now faces a second test in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad's regime and its Iranian sponsors apparently believe they can put a stake through the heart of U.S. power and prestige in the region by testing the president's "red line" on the use of chemical weapons (CW). For Assad, large-scale use of CW serves multiple ends – it demoralizes the rebels, underscores the impotence of their external financiers and suppliers, and confirms to Assad's own patrons that he is committed to fight to the bitter end. For the Iranians, Assad's CW use makes Syria – not Iran's nuclear facilities – the battlefield to test American resolve.

Obama's deep reluctance to engage in Syria is clear to all. This hesitancy is of a piece with his policy to wind down U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and his championing of the idea of "nation building at home." It is not only understandable but, to the millions of Americans who see Syria as a heaven-sent contest between radical Shiites and radical Sunnis, it is wise and appropriate. Defining just how far Obama is willing to go not to act was most likely a key factor in the Syrian CW decision.

Assad probably miscalculated – there is a line beyond which even the most reluctant president cannot go. But that’s not the end of the story. The key issue is not whether the president authorizes the use of American force as a response to Syria’s large-scale use of CW. Rather, the key issue is the U.S. objective in the use of such force.

Is American military action designed to punish Assad for violating the international norm on CW? If so, it will merely have the effect of defining for Assad the acceptable tools for mass killing — perhaps only the acceptable quantities of CW to use at any given time — and will have little impact on the outcome of the Syrian conflict; in fact, it might just embolden Assad and his allies.

Is American military action designed to alter the balance of power between the various rebel groups and the Syrian/Iranian/Hezbollah alliance? If so, this is a long-term strategy that will require a wholesale change in U.S. on-the-ground strategy to supply and train well-vetted opposition militias.

Is American military action designed to bring about the president’s 2011 declaration that Assad should go? If so, this will require a major, ongoing commitment of U.S. air power, along the lines of NATO’s Bosnia campaign.

The allure of the first option is powerful. The televised Oval Office address explaining the dispatch of cruise missiles against a series of Syrian military installations writes itself. By large majorities, both houses of Congress would vote resolutions of support. The president would burnish his credentials as a progressive leader willing to use force, when necessary, to defend his principles. And then he – and the nation – could move on to other matters.

This would also be the wrong approach. Given the strategic stakes at play in Syria, which touches on every key American interest in the region, the wiser course of action is to take the opportunity of the Assad regime’s flagrant violation of global norms to take action that hastens the end of Assad’s regime. Contrary to the views of American military leaders, this will also enhance the credibility of the president’s commitment to prevent Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability, not erode America’s ability to enforce it.

Along the way, should Washington be worried about empowering radical Sunni groups? Absolutely. But Syria offers no good options, only bad and worse – and the worst of all is victory by the Assad/Iranian/Hezbollah axis, which a brief but fiery barrage of cruise missiles is liable to bring about. A global power thousands of miles away cannot calibrate stalemate to ensure that neither party wins; we have to prioritize the most negative outcomes and use our assets to prevent them.

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