President Obama's Asia Trip Takes a Syrian Detour

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America's Asian allies questioned the president about Syria not because it is a vitally important issue to them, but because of what it says about Washington's willingness to act.

It is telling that during his recent trip to Asia, President Obama took a rhetorical detour to Syria. In an impassioned defense of his foreign policy record, it was the first example he raised, before even the crisis of the day in Ukraine or the tensions in the East and South China Seas, which were presumably the focus of his travels.

The Syria crisis gnaws at the minds of policymakers not only because it has proven so intractable, but because it is seen by allies around the world as a sign of diminished American will to act in the post-Iraq era. Few of them question our capacity, but from Asia to Europe Syria is seen as the canary in the retrenchment coal mine.

In venting his frustrations, President Obama will have done little to allay these concerns, however. His policy in Syria is not working, even on its own terms. Years have passed since Mr. Obama said that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad must step aside, yet Assad has a stronger grip on power than ever. High-profile American efforts to broker a transition of power diplomatically have gone nowhere. Assad's chemical weapons may or may not be successfully removed, yet the terrorizing of civilians by Assad's forces continues. And the CW initiative afforded Assad time and space to regroup, which he has used to his advantage against opposition forces. Meanwhile, Iran and Russia's support for Assad has not abated.

Rather than acknowledge these setbacks, however, Mr. Obama suggested that the United States has no strategic interests -- only a desire to "help the Syrian people" -- and no options in Syria, and demeaned his critics as warmongers. His arguments are made all the more puzzling by the fact that he himself once championed military strikes in Syria, only to abandon the idea when faced with opposition from Congress.

One might sympathize with the president if criticism of his Syria policy were mere partisan carping. But many of Mr. Obama's smartest critics are former officials in his own administration, and they are responding not to a political

impulse but to the abominable conditions in Syria and the failure of American policy to achieve its goals. They are also responding to Mr. Obama's own suggestion that Washington needs to review its options in Syria -- a review that would be crippled by summarily ruling out the use of military tools.

The United States does have strategic interests in Syria, which converge with the humanitarian imperative to bring a halt to a conflict that has killed tens of thousands of civilians and made refugees of millions more. The conflict has sown instability in neighboring countries, exacerbated sectarian tensions in the region, drawn in foreign fighters who already threaten the West, and placed an economic and security strain on allies who can ill afford additional challenges.

Our inaction in the face of these threats has led countries inside and outside the Middle East to question our commitment to the region and value as an ally -- perceptions which will be more costly to rebuild than they would have been to maintain. President Obama faced questions in Asia about Syria -- and Ukraine, for that matter -- not because it is a vitally important issue to our allies there, but because of what our response says about us.

For all of this, President Obama's desire for a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis is not off-base; he has simply not done what is needed to enable diplomacy to succeed. Diplomacy is not merely a matter of convening conferences and summits; for parties to a conflict to accept a diplomatic compromise, it must appear better to them than the alternatives. If they think the alternatives are superior, two courses of action present themselves: improve the deal and worsen the alternatives.

The unique challenge in Syria is that the United States, supported by our allies, is insisting that Assad resign as an element of any diplomatic deal, which means that he personally is likely to always prefer the alternatives, however bleak they may appear to others. It also means that those who depend on Assad for their own power, if not survival, and those Syrians who believe that Assad's departure will mean a Sunni-dominated regime bent on revenge against ethnic minorities, are unlikely to abandon him.

Right now, Assad and his supporters believe that they can win militarily. Conditions on the ground support that view, as do statements such as President Obama's ruling out the use of force. There is little incentive for them to accept a deal, especially if they see it as leading to their own eradication. The opposition, on the other hand, views continuing to fight, and perhaps to control Syria's hinterlands, as preferable to what would await them under Assad.

This set of problems calls for a three-pronged U.S. strategy -- degrading Assad's military and economic strength; strengthening the opposition militarily, politically, and financially; and offering credible assurances to Assad's supporters and Syria's ethnic minorities that they will be protected. If we set ourselves to this -- using, as President Obama said, "all the tools in the toolkit" -- we can both help Syria and advance the interests of the American people and our partners in the region. If not, the questions about Syria and about the United States will continue to dog President Obama and his successors.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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