The Military Option and Disarmament Diplomacy with Syria

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Brief Analysis

By limiting potential strike options, Washington risks undercutting diplomacy and being drawn into the kind of intensive, open-ended engagement in Syria that it wants to avoid.

If the threat of force persuaded Syria to agree to the destruction of its chemical weapons (CW) arsenal, as President Obama and his advisors claim, then clear signs that military planning and preparations continue could bolster the search for a diplomatic solution. This diplomatic "timeout" could also help the administration address concerns raised during the recent debate about the use of force, which focused on how a limited strike might deter further CW use by a determined and ruthless regime, avoid morphing into an open-ended conflict, and advance broader policy objectives in Syria.

AVOIDING POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Should the United States eventually decide to attack Syria -- whether to deter CW use or in response to Syrian obstruction of disarmament efforts -- limited strikes on tactical targets would likely yield only limited results. Bashar al-Assad's regime has become inured to hardship after more than two years of bloody, desperate fighting that has touched even its inner circle (e.g., the defense minister and his deputy -- Assad's brother-in-law -- were killed in a July 2012 bomb attack). Thus, a limited strike that focused on noncritical targets would probably not alter the cost-benefit calculus in Damascus; it might even assuage the regime's fears about U.S. military action, thereby emboldening Assad.

The Obama administration seems to believe that a smaller strike is the best way to limit the U.S. role in Syria, but the converse seems more likely: such a strike could invite further challenges from Damascus, creating an open-ended cycle of provocation and response. Israel's experience is instructive here. On four occasions this year, Israeli forces have carried out limited preemptive airstrikes to disrupt the transfer of "game-changing" weapons systems to Hezbollah, and although Damascus has not retaliated, it has not been deterred from trying again either.

The United States currently has four destroyers off the coast of Syria, and perhaps one or two submarines; together, these vessels could conceivably launch 150-400 Tomahawk cruise missiles. This relatively small arsenal would limit the operation's impact, since some targets would require multiple strikes, and Tomahawks are not very useful against hardened, buried, or mobile assets. Many important targets would not be hit in a cruise missile strike.

For this reason, if a strike is eventually ordered, it should include manned attack aircraft and bombers, which could hit targets that Tomahawks cannot, and whose pilots could confirm target information in realtime, reducing the likelihood of harming civilians (including human shields, which the regime has already reportedly employed). This would necessitate a more expansive strike, since elements of Syria's air defenses would need to be suppressed before manned aircraft could be sent in.

DEGRADING AND DETERRING

Several considerations should guide planning for a strike that could be ordered in the event that diplomacy fails. These considerations should also be quietly publicized in order to bolster CW disarmament efforts.

First, the United States should be prepared to strike repeatedly. Imposing limits that preclude follow-on strikes would diminish the deterrent value of U.S. threats and undermine the prospects for diplomacy.

Second, a U.S. strike should target personnel and assets that are critical to the regime's survival and its ability to prosecute the war, and that are not easily replaced. This would show the regime that its recalcitrance imposes heavy costs and could jeopardize its survival.

The template for such a strike is Operation Desert Fox, the December 1998 action that targeted Iraq's Special Republican Guard and its surviving missile production infrastructure. Because it came as a surprise, the four-day strike reportedly killed hundreds of Special Republican Guard personnel and struck a critical blow to its missile production capabilities, shaking the regime's confidence.

SELECTING TARGETS

U.S. planners should choose targets whose destruction would have a major psychological impact on the regime, altering its cost-benefit calculus. This means hitting the regime's most loyal and capable units, the Republican Guard and the 4th Armored Division, which have frequently spearheaded operations against the opposition and have been deeply implicated in CW use. Specifically, U.S. forces should target headquarters, command posts, barracks, and maintenance facilities associated with these units, as well as their field formations if possible.

The most important aim would be to inflict heavy personnel losses, since loyal, committed, and experienced soldiers are more difficult to replace than military equipment. (Because only about a third of its army is actively engaged in combat, the regime probably has large excess stocks of equipment, and Russia has pledged to replace any materiel destroyed in a U.S. strike.) Many members of the Republican Guard and 4th Armored Division are related by blood and marriage to the regime's leadership, so targeting these units would convey the message that CW use or obstruction of disarmament efforts threatens Assad's most stalwart supporters. As long as U.S. operations do not target the senior leadership in Damascus, they are unlikely to be mistaken for decapitation strikes, which could cause Syria to overreact or prompt Hezbollah and Iran to lash out against the United States in an effort to save their embattled ally.

The United States should also target the scores of helicopters and aircraft that have supported these units in combat by delivering conventional and chemical munitions, as well as the regime's arsenal of long-range rockets and missiles, which have killed thousands of Syrians and can deliver CW. Yet there are clear limits to how much this type of strike could degrade Syria's ability to deliver chemical munitions -- especially if Washington is unwilling to attack CW storage facilities that are close to populated areas. For this reason, these weapons systems should not be the

main target of a strike.

ENABLING ACTIVITIES

Hitting high-value targets could prove difficult under present circumstances. By telegraphing its intention to strike, Washington gave the regime time to evacuate headquarters and disperse and conceal its forces, though this posture could be difficult to sustain over time. One way to counter these tactics would be to encourage the opposition to launch a broad offensive on the eve of a U.S. strike should such a decision be taken. This might compel the regime to concentrate its forces to meet the offensive, creating lucrative targets for U.S. missiles and air power. Such coordination could also lay the foundation for an enhanced train-and-equip effort with moderate rebel factions.

In addition, military action would be more effective if accompanied by diplomatic efforts to strip away the regime's foreign enablers. Here, NATO's Operation Allied Force (March-June 1999) offers a precedent: Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic eventually accepted a ceasefire in large part because he lost the support of his Russian patron. Accordingly, Washington should explore whether the diplomatic process can be used to drive a wedge between Moscow and Damascus if the latter reneges on its commitment to destroy its CW. At the end of the day, the fear of losing his most important allies could have as great an impact on Assad's cost-benefit calculus as military action.

CONCLUSION

As Washington enters a new phase of its crisis with Damascus, the threat -- and, potentially, use -- of force will remain critical to the success of disarmament diplomacy, and to achieving whatever measure of policy success is possible in Syria. Failing to get this piece of the policy right could diminish the prospects for diplomacy and increase the chances that a limited strike will lead to the kind of intensive, open-ended engagement Washington has been trying to avoid. Either way, there seems to be no easy exit from the dilemmas that the United States now faces in Syria.

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