Intervention Escalation

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Alleged chemical weapons use by Syria is pushing the United States toward action, but Russia, China, and Iran might have something to say about that.

Ever more credible claims by France, Britain, and some Israeli officials that the Bashar al-Assad regime has used chemical weapons have upped the pressure on the Obama administration to respond more decisively to the situation in Syria, and specifically to act on the president's chemical weapons "red line" warning. And the administration appears to be reconsidering its previous hesitancy. During a recent hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary Chuck Hagel announced that the United States would be sending some 200 troops to Jordan from the 1st Armored Division at Fort Bliss, Texas, to work alongside Jordanian personnel to "improve readiness and prepare for a number of scenarios" relating to the conflict in neighboring Syria. The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the Pentagon has drawn up plans to possibly expand the force significantly.

And yet the chances are, in today's political environment, that U.S. involvement in the region will not be of the massive, long-term sort seen in Iraq. U.S. military assistance is more likely to entail moving equipment, distributing humanitarian supplies, enforcing no-fly zones, coordinating or executing attacks on terrorists, and punishing the regime (in some fashion) for its violation of the chemical weapon "red line."

When, as is increasingly likely, the United States plays a military role in the Syrian conflict, it will not just have to worry about inadvertently strengthening local Islamists or getting bogged down in another Middle East quagmire. Washington must also consider the significant geostrategic consequences to Iran, Russia, and China, particularly if our intervention brings about the demise of their ally in Damascus. In diplomacy, as in physics, every action generates a reaction. Any U.S. engagement in Syria will not be different, and the Obama administration must be prepared.

Iran, Russia, and China have deep stakes in the preservation of the Assad regime. Iran provides the Assad regime with financial and military assistance, and aids in organizing the Alawite militia. In return, Tehran gets a significant

forward operating base on the Mediterranean in which Iranian weapons can be modified, manufactured, and sent to their Hezbollah allies in Lebanon. But, equally important, the alliance with Syria strengthens Iran's claim as a leader in the resistance against Israel and a protector of the world's Shiites. Convinced that the West seeks their demise, Iran's ideologically driven leaders are unlikely to take Assad's downfall lightly and will likely become even more aggressive. Washington must anticipate even less progress in nuclear negotiations, greater destabilization in Iraq, increased Iranian asymmetrical adventures, new confrontations in the Gulf, and possibly even full-out nuclear weapons development.

China and Russia, too, have ideological and strategic interests in preserving Assad's rule. Russian President Vladimir Putin has hung much of his foreign policy on rejecting American-sponsored regime change, as his consistent rhetoric from Kosovo to Libya has made clear. Beijing, while less vocal, takes care to limit pressure on its own puppet states, as we have seen in North Korea. In addition, China tends to follow the Russian lead on many global issues, in part because it shares Russia's "you win we lose" attitude toward the United States. Furthermore, China and Russia appear to fear the United States and its partners eventually using successful interventions to set a precedent for more widespread meddling in their domestic affairs, be it in the north Caucasus, Tibet, or Xinjiang.

The power balance in Syria's immediate neighborhood is so tipped in favor of the United States and its friends that there is little China and Russia (or Iran) could do to counter the United States directly. But, drawing from classic great power traditions they know well, Russia and China could act to the detriment of both U.S. interests and a stable globe. First, by opening or intensifying current fronts at odds with the United States, they could make Washington pay a price for helping topple Assad. Russia could tinker with Europe's continuing dependency on Russian hydrocarbons, complicate NATO's plans related to Afghanistan, and, with China, stymie U.S. initiatives in various international forums. China's growing economic, political, and military weight is manifest, as is its ability to challenge the United States on the Korean peninsula, with its island disputes with Japan and ASEAN states, and on trade relations with U.S. allies like Australia.

Russia and China could also take another tack, allying more openly with Iran and facilitating Tehran's anti-American escapades. For example, China could expand its recent limited increase in oil purchases from Iran, challenging the U.S. sanctions regime. Russia could reconsider its decision to withhold high-performance air defense equipment to Tehran, and otherwise assist Iran in its military buildup or in evading sanctions.

Russia and China could most forcefully teach a lesson to the United States in the realm of Iran's nuclear research program, a central U.S. concern. With the region in flux, China and Russia could forgo their traditional opposition to Iranian nuclear proliferation and block U.S.-backed sanctions against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency and the U.N. Security Council, or erect obstacles in the P5+1 negotiations. By undermining these diplomatic efforts, Russia and China would prevent Washington from acquiring the international mandate it would need to take military action against Iran if necessary. Arguably, this could no more deter the United States in Iran than did international intransigence slow efforts to move against Iraq in 2003. But times are different. The United States has based its entire campaign against Iran on international solidarity; losing that backing could undercut support among the U.S. public, which remains wary of entering new battles a decade after "Shock and Awe." And let's be clear: Iran, China, and Russia have far more strategic, diplomatic, and economic clout to wield against the United States than Iraq did in 2003.

The potential for a Russian, Chinese, or Iranian backlash should not deter Washington from taking necessary military action in Syria. Middle Eastern stability is a key U.S. interest and helping Syria to the best possible soft landing is central to our security role, as is living up to our red line threat on chemical weapons use. Shrinking from that responsibility could, in fact, bolster our detractors' self-confidence and embolden them: If Assad somehow survives, the rise in Iranian prestige and loss of ours could even prompt Moscow and Beijing, smelling blood, to up

the ante against Washington. The Obama administration thus needs to think geostrategically in Syria; more Metternich than Wilson.

If the United States acts from a position of strength -- indicating our willingness to take military action -- we may induce Russia and China (perhaps even Iran) to be more cooperative today, as well as in the chaotic period after the regime's defeat. We need to share with Moscow and Beijing our thinking about Syrian day-after scenarios, including whether we could tolerate a de facto Alawite redoubt similar to Iraqi Kurdistan. Anything we can do to reassure them that we and our value system are not out to incorporate Syria after Assad would presumably help the two powers accommodate themselves to a U.S.-assisted new order in Damascus. But such reassurance would cut against the grain of all of our instincts with failed states -- to jump in until they can be made whole again. Similarly, proceeding from a position of military readiness, we can encourage Iranian cooperation in Syria by being more open about the economic sanctions we would be willing to trade for nuclear concessions.

The United States is already undoubtedly doing much of this talking to Moscow and Beijing, but the question remains open with what degree of clarity the administration has communicated its willingness to take risks, prioritize its needs, and deal with the devil when necessary. But above all, it must avoid the attitudes that still color much of Washington's foreign policy thinking: that we still live in a post-1989 world, that the triumph of the West is inevitable, and that the natural evolution of states is to become stable democracies. Alas, that time has passed.

Ambassador James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz distinguished visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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