WHAT HAS SYRIA TAUGHT US ABOUT THE RIGHT TIME TO USE FORCE?

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Following 12 years of conflict in the Middle East, the Syrian civil war has presented the United States with a hard test of its appetite for military intervention. The Obama administration has faced public reluctance, political division, and a deep fiscal crisis as it has weighed whether and how to use force in Syria.

The use of force has been considered for three objectives: (1) ousting the Assad regime and putting in a government based on the moderate opposition; (2) deterring the use of chemical weapons (CW) by the Assad regime; and (3) persuading Syria (and Russia) to make good on their commitment to eliminate the Syrian stockpile of chemical weapons. The right time to engage militarily varies with the objective, as this essay will explore. This essay concludes with some observations on what leaders need to do if they want to use force to achieve their ends.

REGIME CHANGE IN SYRIA

If there was a right time for a U.S.-led military intervention to force regime change, it was shortly after Assad rolled out his tanks against peaceful protesters in May 2011. Action akin to that taken by NATO forces in Libya (such as a takedown of air defenses, an imposition of a no-fly zone, and selected attacks against armor and artillery units) but on a larger scale (since Syria is a more formidable opponent) might have worked. More than two years later, however, regime removal in Libya had lost its cachet, in large part because there had been no plans for dealing with the consequences of removing Qaddafi. There was little political support, either domestically or internationally, for taking on regime change in Syria and little evidence that President Obama, despite his “Assad must go” rhetoric, wanted to pursue this objective.

As developments in Syria—the spreading sectarian and ethnic conflict and the movement of al Qaeda–linked groups into the country, to name two—greatly increased the significance of Syria to U.S. national interests,
the costs and risks of forcible regime change increased exponentially. Syrian security forces were reinforced by Hezbollah, Iran and Russia, and the reliably moderate opposition ceased to be a lead actor in the fight to remove Assad.

**DETERRING SYRIAN USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

When deterrent threats fail, the right time to use force is right away. Forcefully carrying out retaliatory strikes is critical to restoring deterrence with the transgressor and maintaining credibility with others who are watching closely how well the United States backs up its red lines. In August 2012, President Obama said: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.” Obama repeated these red lines, and in April 2013 said that CW use would be a “game-changer” and “would change my calculus” on using force.

After the United Kingdom and France told the United Nations in mid-April 2013 that Syria had engaged in several small-scale CW attacks, it took Washington almost three months to confirm it with “high confidence.” A third-tier White House official announced that in response to “credible evidence” of Syrian CW use, the United States would increase nonlethal assistance and would begin “direct support” to the opposition’s military wing. U.S. deterrence failed when the Assad regime responded with a much larger CW attack that killed 1,400 people, including almost 400 children on August 21, 2013.

While focus has now turned to implementing the agreement for Syrian elimination of its chemical stockpile, it should not be overlooked that the right times to have responded to Syrian CW use were in late spring and late summer of 2013. While Syria might not employ chemical weapons again, it won’t be because the United States carried out its deterrent threats.

**ELIMINATING SYRIAN CHEMICAL WEAPONS**

The right time to use force in support of a chemical weapons elimination regime might be if the Syrian government fails to cooperate or cheats. In his September 10, 2013, address to the nation, President Obama explained how, “in part because of the credible threat of U.S. military action,” the Russian and Syrian initiative

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made two days earlier had the “potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force.” As a consequence, President Obama asked “the leaders of Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force while we pursue this diplomatic path” and “ordered the military to maintain their current posture to keep the pressure on Assad and to be in a position to respond if diplomacy fails.”

The process of eliminating Syria’s stockpile could take years and is unverifiable. It is an inconvenient but illustrative fact that chemical weapons were discovered in Libya after Qaddafi fell, even though he had supposedly given them up in December 2003. Identifying the right time to use military pressure to keep a messy diplomatic process on track is very difficult. Syria, much like Iraq between the two Gulf wars, will have many “cheat and retreat” opportunities, which will pose many “talk and retreat” challenges for the United States. Absent another incident of chemical weapons use or other atrocity by the Assad regime, it will be nearly impossible to garner sufficient domestic and international support for U.S. military action to coerce Syrian cooperation in the elimination process.

THE “RIGHT STUFF”?

Nations do not make decisions. It is the men and women occupying leadership positions who make decisions. As former secretary of defense Leon Panetta said in mid-September 2013, “When the president of the United States draws a red line, the credibility of this country is dependent on him backing up his word.”

Giving up red lines isn’t the answer, because that’s often the same as giving a green light for U.S. adversaries. So, how does a president establish credibility (or restore if it is lost) for his red lines?

- Mean what you say and say what you mean.
- Prepare both to carry out your threats and to deal with the consequences.
- Since actions always speak louder than words, use force from time to time to demonstrate your resolve.

Using force is not for the faint-hearted, indecisive, or inconsistent. Knowing when is the right time to use force is important, but having the “right stuff” is critical. ▶