It’s really pretty simple. The American people understandably don’t want to go to war with Syria — not to mention with Syria’s patron, Iran — and especially not for the goal of putting the Muslim Brotherhood and murderous Islamists into power there. Going to war is a serious matter, to say the least. There’s no assurance how long it will take, how many lives it will cost, and what turns it may take. And the Middle East has just had several examples of these wars.

Iraq and Afghanistan cost a lot of money and lives as they extended for a much longer time than had been expected. In addition, they derailed the Bush administration’s electoral fortunes and domestic programs.
With the main emphasis of the Obama administration being a fundamental transformation of America, such distractions are not desired.

There is one other important consideration: the Obama administration does not accept the traditional diplomatic and great power strategies. It believes that it can reconcile with Islamist states, it does not comprehend deterrents, it does not keep faith with allies, and it does not believe in credibility, the belief that only power exerted can convince a foe of seriousness. Of course, that wouldn’t rule out a one-time targeted attack. But even if that were to be done, is America going to fight a full-scale war on the ground with allies— including al-Qaeda— which will never be satisfied and will always be eager to stab them in the back?

The administration has trapped itself with two problems: the rebels who are being supported in Syria are extreme radicals who may set off bloodbaths and regional instability if they win; and a challenge has been given to the very reckless forces of Iran, Syria, and Hizballah. When the United States threatens these three players, the response is always: “Make my day!”

So this is the situation, and the Obama administration is bluffing. It does not want to exert force and probably won’t. Iran and Syria would be quite willing to fight a war, but the United States—people and government—do not have the will to do so.

What is the best option for the Obama administration? To try to negotiate — as unlikely as it is — a deal in which some kind of interim or coalition arrangement would be arranged with Russia and Iran to make a transition from the current regime. Mainly, this means a stalling tactic. This could work, though, if the regime does not actually win the war. Aid to rebels and some gimmicks perhaps, but no decisive action. There is, however, still a problem — the two Syrian sides want to wipe each other out.

Why should the Russians and Iranians make a deal if they have a winning hand? No diplomatic arrangement is possible. In fact, the diplomatic option is fictional. To put it flatly, there is no alternative. It is not inconceivable that the White House would consider easing sanctions on the Iranian nuclear program to have a chance in Syria. What is likely then is stalling, with the probability that the civil war will settle into stagnation for several years and thus a de facto partition of Syria.

The United States simply can’t win given what it is willing to do. And in a great power standoff, that’s a very dangerous situation. Remember, though: Iran cannot be said to have won as long as the civil war is continuing. The administration can simply depend on denial, which should be sufficient for domestic purposes. Finally, ask yourself one question: will the United States under Obama dare a confrontation with Iran, Syria, and Russia to keep up American credibility, deterrence, and the confidence of allies who it is already opposing on Egypt? Of course not. This is a president who could barely decide to kill Osama bin Laden.

**Contents**

**SYRIA RESOLUTION DIES AT U.N., AND BRITISH LAWMAKERS BALK**

*Paul Richter and Henry Chu*

*LA Times*, Aug. 28, 2013

The Obama administration's move to punish Syria's government for allegedly using chemical weapons in a deadly attack last week appeared to suffer a setback Wednesday when the U.S. failed to get United Nations approval for use of force and British support was thrown into question. The collapse of diplomatic efforts aimed at securing a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Syria was expected. The British impediment was not.

The developments came as President Obama warned in a TV interview that chemical weapons "that can have devastating effects could be directed at us" and made clear he is considering limited military action against Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces. "I have no interest in any kind of open-ended conflict in Syria," Obama said on "PBS NewsHour." "But we do have to make sure that when countries break international norms on weapons like chemical weapons that could threaten us, that they are held accountable."
How soon such strikes might occur remained unclear after British Prime Minister David Cameron, who has repeatedly called for strong action on Syria, was unable to muster enough support from lawmakers to push ahead with a vote to approve military intervention. Members of Parliament from both his Conservative Party and the opposition Labor Party insisted that a vote be delayed until U.N. chemical experts now in Syria issue a report.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the team needed four days to complete its work. "It is essential to establish the facts," he said. "The team needs time to do its job." On Wednesday, the team visited the eastern Ghouta region northeast of Damascus, the zone that apparently was hit hardest by poison gas before dawn on Aug. 21. Assad's government is suspected of carrying out the attack, which killed hundreds.

In London, Parliament will consider a weaker-than-expected motion Thursday that deplores the use of chemical weapons and says that a humanitarian response might require "military action that is legal, proportionate and focused on saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria's chemical weapons." It will also say that "every effort" should be made to win a U.N. blessing for any military response. Russia, which is Assad's primary international supporter, made it clear Wednesday that it would not support any Security Council move to censure Syria or sanction military action.

At the U.N., in a meeting of the five permanent members of the Security Council, British representatives had proposed a resolution condemning Syria's use of banned chemical agents and called for "all necessary measures" to respond to it. But Russia killed the proposal and foreclosed any further discussion, diplomats said. Harf said U.S. officials would consult other countries about possible military action as well as other options, and "will take appropriate actions to respond in the days ahead."

The White House got a vote of support from the 28-member North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the key Western military alliance. After a meeting of the group's policymaking arm, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said in Brussels that the suspected use of poison gas "cannot go unanswered. Those responsible must be held accountable." His statement didn't commit NATO to joining a military operation but gave its blessing if one is launched, said Jorge Benitez, an analyst with the Atlantic Council of the United States and editor of the NATOsource blog. "They're saying, 'We support what you're going to do.'"

NATO members signalled fewer misgivings than before other recent U.S.-led interventions. Germany and Poland, which did not support the NATO-led air campaign against Moammar Kadaifi's forces in Libya in 2011, supported the NATO statement on Syria, for example. The United States appears likely to have support from France, Britain, Turkey and at least four Persian Gulf states. The Arab League voted Tuesday to condemn Syria's apparent poison gas use but stopped short of supporting military action.

The U.N. special envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, told reporters in Geneva that an armed response without U.N. approval would be illegal under international law. He also said the Obama administration had not shared its evidence on the Assad government's alleged role in the attack. "We will be very, very, very interested to hear from them what this evidence they have is," Brahimi said. U.S. officials are expected to release an intelligence report as early as Thursday that they believe shows Syrian commanders ordered the use of chemical weapons.

On Capitol Hill, House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) said the White House's outreach to Congress "has, to date, not reached the level of substantive consultation." His office sent the administration a list of questions about potential U.S. entanglement in Syria, including whether Congress would be asked to appropriate more money should a military operation drag on. Boehner urged Obama to "personally make the case to the American people and Congress for how potential military action will secure American national security interests, preserve America's credibility, deter the future use of chemical weapons and, critically, be a part of our broader policy and strategy." Assad's government has denied responsibility for the attack, blaming rebels who have fought to oust him from power since early 2011.
According to Vladimir Putin, the world faces a “terrible precedent” and a development that could “shake the entire foundations of the international system,” should it come to pass. Putin was not speaking about an impending military strike against the Syrian regime, but rather the possibility – back in 2000 – that countries would dare to support the independence of the Kosovo region. Needless to say, the international order did not collapse. In the post-Soviet era, Moscow has sought to protect allies that it inherited from the USSR, such as Yugoslavia (in the form of Serbia), Iraq and Libya. Now it’s Syria’s turn, and Russian officials are busy sending out confusing signals in a policy that appears to be a case of hoping for the best.

Russia has signalled that it will veto any resolution at the United Nations Security Council authorizing punishment of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. However, Russian officials have also made it clear that their country doesn’t intend to act militarily if the West launches a military strike at Syrian regime targets.

Meanwhile, the Russians have taken the regime’s side on the issue of last week’s chemical weapons strikes. Moscow insisted that the attacks were the work of anti-government rebels, who apparently only have the technical ability to launch such projectiles into areas under their control, but not in the direction of military airports under the control of the regime. Russia’s stance of nearly unconditional support for Assad isn’t surprising, but the lack of forward thinking and leadership continue to puzzle some people.

Is Russia hugely confident that Assad’s forces will defeat the rebels and oversee a stable Syria in the wake of this victory? Moscow has begun evacuating Russian nationals, which doesn’t help its standing with Syrians who support the regime, after it alienated those Syrians who support the opposition. In the end, Russian officials are fond of showing how keen they are to protect their national interests, but their track record has been one of stubbornly hanging on, in the face of inevitable change.

For more than two years, Russia never managed to convince its Syrian ally that it should engage in meaningful change. Instead, it followed the regime mindset of reducing everything to a foreign-led conspiracy. Throughout all of the horrific carnage in Syria, Russia has declined to push forcefully in the direction of a political settlement, and is now faced with the prospect of international military action against its ally. And now, as Syrian officials make fiery statements of defiance, Russia is again following instead of leading, telling the world that it favors a diplomatic solution after doing nothing to see such a scenario come to pass.
All the while, Israeli commentators strive to outdo each other with educated guesses about whether we are vulnerable, whether it would serve Bashar Assad’s interests to fire at us, whether we should retaliate and how. Much of the babble is superfluous. Regardless of what eventually happens, all Israelis should be deeply troubled by the profound indifference abroad to our lot – blameless as we are in the Syrian strife. The very fact that a neighboring state could be presumed to be held to ransom for events entirely outside control should shock world opinion. But it does not.

Israelis might be forgiven for suspecting the reaction would be radically different had any other country been similarly threatened for no fault of its own. Sadly we must come to terms with the likelihood that different criteria are applied to the Jewish state. This is disconcertingly reminiscent of our traumatic experience during the First Gulf War. Events then were also played out beyond the Israeli context. Nonetheless, Israel suffered repeated heavy missile attacks, including 40 Scud hits. The Iraqi warheads were aimed directly and unmistakably at civilian population centers.

Saddam Hussein’s raison d’être was that by targeting Israel he was hurting the US. In the view of all too many Middle Eastern despots and potentates, Israel is nothing but an American underling. At the time there was no audible international indignation. The only American response was to advocate Israeli restraint. Indeed Israel refrained from retaliating, thereby compromising its deterrence and underscoring its vulnerabilities for the sake of American interests. But there was no gratitude for Israel’s sacrifices.

Washington only pressured Israel for territorial concessions, never counted Saddam’s anti-Israel aggression among his sins and treated Israel largely as a mistress whose favors are required but must never be publicly acknowledged. The Obama administration might well want Israel to reprise this role. It is precisely this behavior that Israel must under no circumstances repeat. This time Israel has made it clear – through pronouncements by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon and IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz – that this country and its people will not be pawns in the wars that others wage.

Notice has been duly served to friend and foe alike and to all shades in between that Israel will not again consent to being a whipping boy. If anything can daunt the Shi’ite axis that buttresses Assad, along with his invasion of Iraq, and they, too, sounded eminently reasonable... to us.

The experts are right – in rational terms. We, however, heard precisely such learned estimations immediately before the first American invasion of Iraq, and they, too, sounded eminently reasonable... to us. The problem is that this region does not operate according to our logic.

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**WHAT WILL THE SYRIA STRIKES ACCOMPLISH?**

*Max Boot*  
*Commentary, Aug. 28, 2013*

Yesterday I wrote about President Obama’s three options on Syria–light bombing designed to “send a message,” medium bombing combined to eliminate Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal, and heavy, sustained bombing in combination with ground action by rebel forces to topple Bashar Assad. All of the news coverage since yesterday morning makes clear that–unless the administration is engaging in strategic deception on a gigantic scale–only the lightest of light options is likely to be implemented.

News accounts suggest that the likeliest scenario is a few days of strikes employing cruise missiles fired from warships in the Mediterranean safely out of the range of Syrian retaliation. Their target list would not include the actual depots where chemical weapons are stored but “would instead be aimed at military units
that have carried out chemical attacks, the headquarters overseeing the effort and the rockets and artillery that have launched the attacks.”

The amount of damage that will be done, if only Tomahawk cruise missiles are used, will be strictly limited since they carry relatively small warheads of 260-370 pounds, compared with 500-pound, 1,000-pound, 2,000-pound, and even 15,000-pound bombs (the BLU-82 “Daisy Cutter”) that can be carried by aircraft. The use of airdropped munitions can make it possible to penetrate bunkers and incinerate chemical weapons stockpiles without risking the dispersion of the deadly weapons. And even if aircraft were to be employed, they would have to bomb for considerable periods to achieve any strategic effects—witness the 78 days of bombing of Kosovo in 1999 or the even longer bombing of Libya in 2011.

A few days of attacks with cruise missiles is a pinprick strike reminiscent of Bill Clinton’s attacks on al-Qaeda and Iraq in 1998. What did those strikes achieve? Precisely nothing beyond blowing up a poor pharmaceutical plant in Sudan wrongly suspected of manufacturing, ironically, chemical weapons. Actually, worse than nothing: those strikes, which Osama bin Laden survived easily, convinced him that the U.S. was a “weak horse” that could be defied with impunity.

Similar strikes would likely have a similar effect in Syria: It would convince Bashar Assad, and a lot of other people in the region, that he successfully defied the superpower. It could have, in other words, the effect of enhancing Assad’s aura of power—precisely the opposite of what Obama intends.

The U.S. goal in Syria, as enunciated by no less than the president himself, is to topple Assad and to end the suffering created by the Syrian civil war. That will not be achieved with cruise missiles. It will require months of bombing, combined with the arming, training, and coordination of rebel forces. Even a lesser goal of destroying Assad’s chemical weapons stockpiles—a reasonable objective given the strategic threat posed by WMD—would require weeks of bombing combined with commando raids. A few days of cruise missile strikes, by contrast, will only make the U.S. appear to be a weak, posturing giant.

**On Topic**

**Israeli Compassion Amidst Syrian Atrocities:** Dave Sharma, *Times of Israel*, Aug. 28, 2013—Some 72 Syrian patients have been admitted to Ziv Medical Center in Safed in northern Israel since February. If they had remained in Syria, most would have died or been left permanently incapacitated.

**Obama: I Have not yet Made Decision on Syria Strike:** Michael Wilner, Maya Schwayder, *Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 29, 2013—US President Barack Obama said Wednesday that he had not yet made a decision on intervention in Syria, acknowledging that military engagement in the country would not stop the killing of innocent civilians, but stressing the need to deter the use of chemical weapons.

**Hezbollah Will Attack Israel if Strike Aims to Topple Assad:** Hussein Dakroub, *The Daily Star*, Aug. 28, 2013—A massive military strike by the United States and its Western allies on Syria aimed at changing the balance of power in the country will likely trigger a swift intervention by Hezbollah, political analysts and sources close to the group said Tuesday.

**If Bombs Hit Damascus, Israel Looks to Tehran:** David Makovsky, *Tablet Magazine*, Aug. 28, 2013—Amid the killing in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt—three of Israel’s four borders—one senior security official recently likened Israel to a “coffee shop in the middle of a slaughterhouse.” The US has widely advertised its pending missile strikes on Syria.

**Obama is Talking America into a War:** George F. Will, *National Post*, Aug. 29, 2013—Barack Obama’s foreign policy dream—cordial relations with a Middle East tranquilized by “smart diplomacy”—is in a death grapple with reality. His rhetorical writhings illustrate the perils of loquacity. He has a glutton’s rather than a gourmet’s appetite for his own rhetorical cuisine, and has talked America to the precipice of a fourth military intervention in the crescent that extends from Libya to Afghanistan.

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