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## Why Our Syria Policy Is Still a Muddle

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Policy, Politics & Culture

Why Our Syria Policy Is Still a Muddle [Anna Simons \(http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/byline/anna-simons/\)](http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/byline/anna-simons/)

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As Congress continues to debate whether to support the President on Syria, numerous pundits have turned to the Powell Doctrine for guidance. The Powell Doctrine was a useful tool in its time, forcing its would-be adherents to meet a stringent set of conditions:

1. Is a vital national security interest threatened?
2. Do we have a clear attainable objective?
3. Have the risks and costs been fully and frankly analyzed?
4. Have all other nonviolent policy means been fully exhausted?
5. Is there a plausible exit strategy to avoid endless entanglement?
6. Have the consequences of our action been fully considered?

7. Is the action supported by the American people?
8. Do we have genuine broad international support?

As suitable as these questions were at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, it's not clear they still suit the situation the United States finds itself in today.

The sticking point is the fifth question. The idea of an “exit strategy” implies that force will not necessarily be used to defeat whoever we attack. Nor will we fight until we can dictate terms. Yet without inflicting beg-for-forgiveness defeat on an adversary, no principled exit strategy is possible.

To be clear, I am not advocating that the United States should have gone or—if no suitable deal can be arranged on chemical weapons—should still go to war against Syria. Just the opposite. I want to draw a contrast between what military force can accomplish and what we have learned it cannot. To be clear, too, the Obama Administration has not yet asked that the United States embark on a war against Bashar Assad. But therein lies the problem: What messages *has* the Administration been trying to send, and to whom? Has the President's primary objective been to ensure that Assad doesn't use chemical weapons again—or that no one in the world should? Or, has he been after something else altogether, such as the fall of the Assad regime as a shot across Iran's bow?

Perhaps the Administration thinks it can transmit all of these messages or, at a minimum, numerous messages to multiple audiences at once. It can't. No matter how parsimonious and even clever the President's advisers and supporters think their signaling might be, ensuring that all parties take away the messages you want them to take away, in a world rife with both willful and unwitting cross-cultural miscommunication, is impossible. To attempt to do so through limited military action is foolhardy.

Let's say that in the coming weeks the Russian-orchestrated deal to sideline Assad's chemical arsenal falls through, or that anti-regime/pro-rebel forces in the White House deem the deal insufficient. Then, unless Bashar Assad is specifically targeted, even a barrage of missiles won't make a true example of his regime; and without destroying his country's capacity for chemical warfare, the Obama Administration cannot make clear just how serious it is about its WMD redline.

Of course, to demonstrate unwavering resolve about anything requires a very grave commitment. This is why, without a Declaration of War, and then without waging war to defeat Assad in detail, American force would be wasted. Worse, it would make a mockery of what force should be used to achieve.

This is also why invoking the Powell Doctrine is increasingly problematic, since doing so suggests that it is possible to successfully pursue limited military objectives via limited involvement. Those who cite the doctrine also don't seem to realize that if its eight questions need to be posed, the cause must not be sufficiently obvious—in which case support of the American people will be difficult, if not

impossible, to retain.

Just think about it: If the American public has to be *persuaded* that the United States is (or will be) harmed if the President cannot respond to what was the third, fourth, or fifth breach of a chemical weapons taboo (depending on who's counting)—if, in other words, sufficient numbers of Americans don't already recognize the need to act—then whatever force will be applied will only be a compromise force. Let's say that in the coming weeks the President manages to make a stronger case for force and Congress grudgingly agrees to support him. Before the issue even comes up for a vote, simply by agreeing to limit the action, politicians will have pulled their punches—and that means they will have pulled the punches of the U.S. military as well. Already, voter recalcitrance accounts for the constraints the President has placed on what he might do (further underscored by Senator McCain's warning that the President should be impeached if ground troops are deployed).

This can only mean that decisive action (if it comes) will be taken indecisively, turning any action into a wasted asset.

Even more debilitating than the non-committal nature of the force to be used is the fact that lawmakers and the public would end up being blackmailed over a red line to which we have neither collectively nor formally agreed. The convention on chemical weapons is a convention to which countries voluntarily adhere; it says nothing about consequences if countries defy it. Clearly, by not signing on in the early 1990s, Syria revealed its intent to reserve the right to use WMD. Politicians and policymakers in Washington had *decades* to then get the American people to agree to actions the United States might take if a non-signatory country (such as Syria) employed WMD. Or, at least that's what politicians and policymakers should have worked toward if they were serious about maintaining this particular taboo. But Washington did not follow through. Nor did President Obama at any point after he made his pre-reelection red line remark.

Instead, for the past several weeks the President has asked us to agree to escalate—from covertly supplying weapons and aid to Syrian rebels—to targeting sites, if not elements, of a well-armed regime backed by others (Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and so on) who likewise don't play by our rules of warfare. Thankfully, the President's aim in poking this axis has not been to try to dictate terms. Regrettably he now seems prepared to cede the making of terms to one of its members—all in the name of deterrence. But wasn't deterrence one of the aims behind the Iraq War? In which case, the previous Administration's efforts to make an example of Saddam Hussein—by targeting him and his regime over possession of WMD—clearly didn't work to dissuade Damascus. So why does anyone in Washington now think that a shift of Assad's weapons will do more? To add insult to injury, Assad will now be able to continue his civil war—just without chemical weapons.

The White House may claim that it has cleverly used the threat of force to force Assad's hand, but the only definitive thing it has accomplished is to underscore just how inconsistent U.S. foreign policy is.

Unfortunately, as numerous people have pointed out, ever since Secretary of State Madeline Albright observed that we have a very fine military and therefore we should use it, Presidents have grown increasingly comfortable sanctioning the use of force in ways we would never tolerate force being used against us. This makes us hypocritical. Worse, it renders the United States unprincipled. We are also shamelessly inconstant. For instance, we call for regime change under some circumstances (Syria, Libya, Egypt), but not others (Zimbabwe, Sudan).

That we have now anointed ourselves a grand arbiter (rather than just a global policeman) should be troubling to all Americans. It should be especially disturbing because we are so recklessly unprincipled. This certainly bothers non-Americans, whose goodwill is the very thing we say we seek.

Meanwhile, an all-volunteer military force that takes tremendous pride in its professionalism and prowess has also made it all too easy for Presidents to use armed force as political capital. Deploying the military and threatening to use military force may be the Executive's prerogative. And as President Obama pointed out, his reelection earned him the right to do what he thinks is best. However, Congress is supposed to serve as a check, as is the Fourth Estate. As are "we the people."

Unfortunately, foreign policy rarely galvanizes "we the people" until we are in the lurch—as we are right now. Imagine how much better served we would have been if only we had been more principled, transparent and consistent all along—about when and for what (or against whom) we would use force. This is something the Powell Doctrine points toward but can't deliver. Let's say we were also much clearer and more up front about our commitments. Wouldn't that provide clarity in advance to our adversaries, clarity to those who might otherwise aid and abet them, clarity to "we the people", and clarity to the members of our military?

As for what might help produce such clarity, how about a rubric like the following:

1. If you are not prepared to wipe out the enemy, why fight?
2. If you won't or can't wipe out the enemy, death and destruction are the wrong foreign policy tools.
3. And if you aren't willing to either inflict or take large numbers of casualties, the cause must not be sufficiently existential. So again, why fight?

In other words, if a principle is so important it merits the use of force, husbanding force makes little sense. Indeed, committing only half-heartedly makes a mockery of the power that inheres in turning to force at all. There can't be two winners over a principle. The only principled approach thus becomes declaring war and fighting the enemy until you can dictate—not negotiate—terms. And you certainly should never let someone else negotiate the terms for you.

No doubt the idea of using force only under a Declaration of War, and declaring and pursuing war

until one side is in a position to *dictate* terms to the other, sounds extreme.<sup>1</sup> It may also sound too harsh. But harshness is exactly what is required. Otherwise, without making Washington *fully* commit, it is hard to see how “we the people” can ensure that this or any White House turns to the use of force less frequently—something that can also only be attained if force is applied more meaningfully when it is used.

One other advantage to using force much more sparingly but far more deliberately is that smashing others—and forcing them to sue for peace—leaves no room for cross-cultural miscommunication, spin or counter-spin. It also makes no allowance for third parties to insert themselves into our foreign policy, on their timetable or to their (and their allies’) advantage.

Of course, we should have also had a more vigorous debate years ago about the use of force for the purposes of reining in “crimes against humanity”, so that stand-off forces *would* be an option—but stand-off forces in the sense of a military quarantine.

What do I mean by quarantine? Not an ineffectual embargo or sanctions. Nor do I mean that the United States should isolate itself. Rather, the aim would be to sequester the spillover effects when states implode. This would achieve for us the antithesis of entanglement.

Among the many purposes a quarantine would serve: it would force rebels to be well-organized and well-prepared before they confronted those in power; it would compel local populations to carefully weigh the consequences of “innocently” lending insurgents support; and it would make despots think long and hard about the conditions that cause people to want to rebel in the first place. At a minimum, with the ever-present threat of quarantine, the flash-to-bang from demonstrations to riots to repression would be significantly slowed.

Of course, building a force structure that could establish and maintain a quarantine would require some re-tooling of our military, but this is something that should already be underway for another pressing set of reasons: the very real threat of 21<sup>st</sup>-century pandemics. In a sense, that is precisely what civil wars and rebellions already represent to the global body politic. Just look at the Arab Spring, or the destabilizing regional effects from refugees flowing out of, and fighters and funding flowing into, Syria.

Alternatively, for those who balk at the idea that Syrians should have been allowed to determine their own fate with no interference from any outsiders, a second principled option exists: We could have overtly backed one or another rebel faction at the onset of trouble in Syria. By openly choosing sides and throwing our full weight against Assad, we would have had a clear exit strategy: Either those whom we supported would prevail and dictate terms to Assad, or Assad would dictate terms to the rebels and to us.

Again, the only principled approach to letting adversaries and allies alike know where we stand is to

openly declare war against whatever individual or entity we target. Declaring war is also the only way to make taking a stand stick.

Unfortunately, the Administration has not only waffled on its red line but has also offered the rebels inchoate encouragement and promises of support. If the deal arranged by Russia to take chemical weapons out of the equation proceeds, the Administration will have sold the rebels down the river—again, without consulting “we the people” on whether it ought to have encouraged their attempts to remove Assad in the first place. This makes the President complicit in creating his own moral hazard—a moral hazard that is now his legacy to us. Tragically, it is too late in this crisis to point out that if only Washington had a reputation for being principled, the White House might have had a shot at seeing Assad successfully ostracized for breaking the “world’s” rules—without outsourcing U.S. foreign policy, and without sending hopelessly mixed, politically costly signals about the use of force.

In the wake of this phase of the crisis, it is now up to “we the people” and our elected representatives to offer a series of correctives. We will be derelict in our duties if we don’t demand a serious reappraisal of the uses to which any President can put military force. Of course, we will also be derelict should we allow talk about the use of force anywhere in the Middle East to become so incoherent again.

<sup>1</sup>Ironically, in *[The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security](http://www.amazon.com/The-Sovereignty-Solution-Approach-Security/dp/1612510507)* (<http://www.amazon.com/The-Sovereignty-Solution-Approach-Security/dp/1612510507>) we discuss the need for something we dub Standing Declarations of Preemption. We contend that, as with Declarations of War, Congress should have to debate red lines. Then, should a red line be crossed and American sovereignty threatened, the President would have very carefully stipulated approval to act. Weeks and months wouldn’t subsequently drag on between a violation and a U.S. response. And all politicization of the debate would occur before, not during, the crisis.

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