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After the Hearings: Syrian Intervention Still a Bad Idea

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The Obama Administration has failed to articulate U.S. national interests in Syria or offer a clear plan that justifies America's direct involvement in the conflict. As Congress deliberates on the Administration's request for the use of force, it should consider what is in the best interest of the U.S., what precedents might be set, and what practical considerations it must address.

Not a Suitable Course of Action. Coercive military force should be employed only if it serves a vital national interest of the U.S. In this case, the Administration has failed to make the case that U.S. vital interests are at risk or that the American people would be gravely threatened by not acting.

In addition, the President's plan, as explained during congressional hearings, would not achieve a desirable outcome. The use of military power to send a "shot across the bow" of Damascus makes sense as a deterrent only if the Assad regime believes that the next shot could be a devastating blow. But the Obama Administration has gone out of its way to trumpet the limited scope and duration of the planned strike. The strike would not address the humanitarian crisis; the danger of spiraling war;

or the influence of al-Qaeda, Iran, or Hezbollah. Sending a signal through a pinprick strike without clearly tying it to U.S. national interests might have the unintended effect of emboldening Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Further, authorizing a strike would set a bad precedent. The Administration justifies military action to enforce "international norms." But there are many international norms being violated every day in Syria, and the Administration has not explained why violating the norms against chemical weapons rises to the level of a vital national interest.

Authorization to Use Military Force. On September 4, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved an authorization for use of military force (AUMF) in Syria by a vote of 10–7. The AUMF will now head to the full Senate for debate and a likely vote. The House has yet to act on its own version of an AUMF.

It is important to note that the language of the Senate AUMF does not limit the President's independent constitutional power to send American troops into Syria for combat or non-combat purposes. Rather, it essentially acknowledges that the President has independent constitutional authority to use force in Syria.

The Senate AUMF strikes the proper balance by providing congressional authorization for the limited and tailored use of U.S. armed forces and acknowledges that the President has additional inherent constitutional authority to carry out military actions that he deems are in the national security interests of the U.S.

However, even a properly constructed AUMF would not be a suitable check to the escalating use

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of force by the Administration. Since U.S. interests in Syria are not well defined, even a properly constructed AUMF could lead to more U.S. involvement. Congress's only options at that point would be to withdraw the AUMF or cut off funding—very difficult acts if the U.S. becomes decisively engaged in military operations.

The Russian Proposal. Recently, Russia proposed putting Syria's chemical weapons under international control. This proposal would not preclude the President from asking Congress for an authorization to use military force (AUMF). In fact, he could argue that it was the threat of force that pressured the regime to agree to such a proposal.

But Congress would still face the same problem: Even a properly constructed AUMF—which ought to give the White House flexibility and discretion in how to fulfill the duties of commander-in-chief—would not be a suitable check to the escalating use of force in Syria by the Administration.

War Funding Options. If the Administration proceeds with military operations, both Congress and the White House should consider the appropriate way to pay for them. The Administration should request supplemental defense appropriations as accurate assessments of the costs of the ongoing operations become available. It is essential that these supplemental appropriations cover the full cost of the operation, including the cost of replenishing the force after the operation is completed.

A requirement for supplemental appropriations for defense necessarily raises a question about sequestration. Reimbursing war costs should not become an excuse for abandoning much-needed limits on overall federal expenditures. The Obama Administration should provide—and Congress would have to approve—specific offsets in domestic spending.

This proposal should leave the overall limits on federal spending imposed by sequestration intact. Clearly, a portion of these defense expenditures would be for the supplemental appropriations to cover the cost of an operation against Syria.

Right Way to Move Forward. Giving Assad ample time to protect his most precious assets from U.S. attack while planning a half-hearted, symbolic slap on the wrist is not a smart way to advance U.S. national interests. Instead, the Administration should:

- **Focus on the real threat to vital U.S. national interests.** As bad as the chemical attacks by the Assad regime are, a much worse threat to the U.S. and its allies would be posed if Assad's chemical weapons fell into the hands of al-Qaeda or Hezbollah. The U.S. should work with friends and allies to prevent these terrorists from obtaining Assad's chemical weapons. Unlike Assad, they are likely to use the banned weapons in terrorist campaigns outside Syria against the U.S. or its allies.
- **Cultivate allies within the Syrian opposition.** Non-Islamist opposition forces would be valuable allies in helping to monitor the disposition of Assad's chemical weapons, track their movements, and destroy or seize them if necessary. Such allies could also help contain and combat al-Qaeda and its allies after the fall of Assad.
- **Work with regional allies to strengthen non-Islamist opposition forces and accelerate the fall of the Assad regime.** Turkey and Jordan have become key supporters of the opposition and conduits for arms, financial support, and humanitarian aid. Washington should work closely with them to boost the military strength, unity, and effectiveness of non-Islamist opposition forces. It should press Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Arab states to cut off aid to Salafist Islamist groups and crack down on Islamist networks that channel aid to al-Qaeda. It should also enlist them in providing greater humanitarian aid to the more than 2 million Syrian refugees outside the country, particularly those in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Real U.S. Interests. These steps would help the U.S. reduce the threat of a terrorist chemical attack on itself or its allies. They also would help expedite the fall of the Assad regime, reduce the threat posed by al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, and help to restore stability in Syria and the region.

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