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How the United States Might Respond to the Syrian Strategic Quandary

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The ongoing war in Syria, which began as an internal uprising against the government of Bashar al-Assad, became a sectarian civil war, and developed into a regional conflict between Sunnis and Shiites, has confronted the United States with a strategic quandary. In the United States, the situation is described with poignant understatement as a very serious humanitarian crisis, with over 100,000 killed, most of them uninvolved civilians, more than 2 million refugees, and some 2.5 million civilians who were forced to evacuate their homes.

While the United States and its Western allies have limited tools to influence events in Syria without military force, neither the United States nor Europe is interested in further military involvement in the region following the experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the international system is incapable of taking substantive decisions on Syria due to the expected Russian and Chinese veto in the UN Security Council. The US assessment regarding military intervention in Syria through the use of airpower alone is that there is a high probability of deterioration and a loss of control, to the point of having to send in ground forces – which is what Washington fears most. Theoretically the decision about military intervention could be postponed, based on the mutual erosion among the extremist elements fighting each other in Syria – Iran and Hizbollah on one side, and Sunni Salafist jihadi elements (such as al-Qaeda proxy Jubhat al-Nusra) on the other, with neither side able to defeat the other. The problem facing President Obama, who prefers to keep his distance from Middle East problems or at most to lead from behind, is that he cannot remain removed while civilians are murdered, a Shiite-Sunni conflict develops, and extremist elements grow stronger, riding the wave of a would-be victory. Moreover, no suitable dominant actor is emerging that in the eyes of the United States could lead Syria in the future and maintain the country's unity and stability. Therefore, the more likely scenario is of chaos and increased sectarian dissolution, with negative consequences for Syria's neighbors. Indeed, these states deepen the quandary for Washington and Europe, lest certain measures lead to fingers being pointed at the West and assigning it responsibility for the chaos on the day after.

The impotence of the United States was made patently clear when President Obama chose not to respond to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, an act that crossed a red line set by Obama himself. The decision to train and equip Syrian opposition groups with anti-tank missiles and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles was made after much vacillation, and this alone is insufficient to change the balance of power within Syria. The flow of weapons actually has negative consequences: prolonging and escalating the struggle, and strengthening the rift among opposition forces and leading to a spillover of advanced weapons to jihadi extremists. These factors will spawn further chaos and instability, even if the Assad regime falls. There is no coherent US strategy to change the course of the war, and the negative consequences of a victory for the radicals or of extremist jihadi elements becoming entrenched in Syria have not been internalized. Even the US decision to attend the Geneva 2 conference with Russia, without serious consultation with its European allies, is another sign that the crisis is being managed from a position of weakness and without viable options for action.

The Strategic Significance of Failure to Intervene Militarily

The exposure of the internal debate in the US establishment between Secretary of State John Kerry, who supports aerial operations in Syria, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, who fears the consequences of a military operation and especially deeper military involvement, with heavy costs and an erosion of forces, has further damaged America's image as a superpower. The radicals understand that the US military option is not on the table, which increases their determination to continue the conflict. At the same time, the Russian position, which places tough starting conditions for the Geneva 2 political process to stop the war in Syria, is growing stronger.

In the context of Iran, supporters of a US attack in Syria contend that the American failure to demonstrate resolve in Syria in the face of the determination shown by Iran and Hizbollah strengthens Tehran's assessment that there is little likelihood of a United States military option against Iranian nuclear infrastructures, which diminishes United States leverage in its negotiations efforts with Iran. In contrast, opponents of an attack in Syria argue that the United States should preserve the option of a military strike for Iran, if the talks on the nuclear issue fail and Iran breaks out to a military nuclear capability. Opponents also cite the lack of international legitimacy for an attack in Syria. Yet even if the Security Council is paralyzed by a Russian and Chinese veto, the United States could act on the legal basis of a request for aid from the opposition, which is in control of more than half of Syrian territory. Another basis for intervention is the responsibility to protect (R2P) an uninvolved populace suffering from serious harm. Acting with a coalition, rather than through unilateral American action, would strengthen the recourse to the R2P doctrine.

A Reasonable Military Option

A military option with a likelihood of broad international and regional backing is the creation of a no-fly zone over Syria, in order both to prevent Bashar's forces from using planes and attack helicopters against opposition forces and civilians, and to reduce their ability to disperse chemical weapons. To achieve the purpose of a no-fly zone, the United States has two operational possibilities. One, General Dempsey's approach, is based on the idea of achieving air supremacy over Syria. To do this, hundreds of sorties would be required for a preemptive strike on the ground-to-air batteries and radar stations. Air supremacy would allow the United States to paralyze Syrian airports and maintain air patrols over Syria, shoot down any plane or helicopter belonging to the regime, and even prevent outside aid, especially Iranian, from reaching Assad's forces. The second approach is based on a standoff attack to paralyze the airports used by Syrian planes and helicopters without penetrating Syrian airspace, but by means of precision guided weapons launched from afar. In tandem, air patrols could be conducted over the Mediterranean with long range air-to-air missiles to intercept planes that penetrate no-fly zones. With neither approach would the United States need to operate from neighboring countries; instead, it would operate from an aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean or operate direct flights (with aerial refueling) from American bases in Europe. The aerial operation could be carried out while minimizing the threat to American planes.

The Strategic Asset: A US-Led No-Fly Zone Regional Coalition

The United States could develop the idea of a no-fly zone into a strategic approach of a regional coalition against the radical camp, based on the immediate context of events in Syria. The basis of the approach would be for the United States to form a coalition (even unofficial) with Syria's neighbors, those that fear that events in Syria will spill over into their territory and expect forceful American action against Assad's forces and supporters. The United States would lead a group of countries – Jordan, Turkey, and Israel (with an undeclared, low diplomatic profile) – that together would establish the no-fly zone. Each would create the zone near its border with Syria – if not in actual fact, then at least through diplomatic and operational support, as well as through deployment of Patriot batteries on its territory (which has actually been done). There is already evidence of coordination among the four countries in formulating a response to a scenario of chemical weapons use in Syria.

As an additional step, the humanitarian effort and cooperation in protecting the civilian population in Syria could be expanded by creating a buffer zone along Syria's border with Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and even Lebanon. Syrian citizens would be able to escape to these areas, and a humanitarian aid infrastructure could be established. The buffer zone would also serve to prevent spillover of extremist elements from both camps to

neighboring states, especially to Jordanian territory. This would create a common link among the countries in preventing a spillover of events to their territory, meanwhile upholding the responsibility to protect Syrian civilians. It is likely that this coalition would win the support of Saudi Arabia and the Sunni emirates, and in this way a coalition of the United States and the “moderate” Sunni camp would face the radical Shiite camp. The coalition infrastructure would allow involvement in diplomatic initiatives as well, and the potential would be created not only for a change in the balance of forces fighting within Syria, but also for a broader change that isolates Iran and Hizbollah, to the point of deterring Iran through formation of a similar coalition on the nuclear issue.

