



BULLETIN

No. 90 (543), 30 August 2013 © PISM

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Military Operation in Syria and What Then?

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If the U.S. decides on a military strike against Syria, it should be limited in scale to avoid triggering a broader regional conflict. It is also necessary to include any military operation into a broader strategy that would lead to a political solution to the conflict.

The United States is ready to use force in response to a chemical attack in Damascus that claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians. In August 2012, President Barack Obama issued a warning that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a “red line” that could trigger a U.S. reaction. In December 2012, the Friends of Syria, a group formed by 130 states and international organisations, stated that any use of chemical weapons in Syria would draw a serious response from the international community. For the last year, the intelligence agencies of several countries, among them the United States, reported that the Syrian army had used chemical weapons a number of times but that the scale of the attacks was limited, and thus had not forced a U.S. reaction. However, the large attack on the suburbs of Damascus on 21 August has changed the calculations of President Obama, who has so far avoided overt U.S. involvement in the Syrian conflict. The U.S. administration has offered assurances that any possible reaction would be limited in scope and would not seek regime change as an outcome. The presence of American forces in the region indicate the possibility of targeted attacks conducted from outside Syrian territory. However, such attacks should be accommodated into a broader strategy aimed at bringing the regime and the rebels to the negotiating table and initiating a political transition process. This would help decrease the risk that even a limited military operation could get out of control and lead to a larger regional conflict encompassing Iran and Israel.

Syrian Stalemate. According to the UN, more than 100,000 Syrians have been killed since the rebellion erupted at the beginning of 2011, but the international community has been unable to stop the bloodshed. Russia, one of the closest allies of Bashar al Assad’s regime, and China have blocked any UN Security Council resolutions that would condemn the regime, over fears such actions could open the way for military intervention. Under those circumstances, the U.S. and the EU have tried to find other ways of exerting pressure on the regime to force it into negotiations with the opposition. On one hand, they have enacted sanctions, on the other, they have increased support for the anti-regime forces. Friends of Syria recognised the National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. However, the Coalition does not represent the entire Syrian opposition. A number of rebel groups act independently, and some of them include powerful Islamist extremists aligned with Al Qaeda. Hence, Western support for the opposition has been limited mainly to humanitarian support for selected groups of rebels. There have also been reports about military support for the rebels from regional powers, mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Despite the initial successes of the opposition forces, the Syrian army and pro-regime militias have managed to wage a successful counteroffensive in recent months, regaining control over the strategically important town of Qusayr and parts of Damascus and Homs. However, the regime does not control substantial areas of north-western, eastern, and southern Syria. It seems unlikely that even with the political and military support of Russia, Iran and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah, the Syrian army could defeat the 180,000 or so-strong rebel forces, reclaim the whole territory of the country and keep it under control. With no sign of a quick solution to the conflict, both sides have employed increasingly brutal tactics and have been accused of war crimes. According to the United Nations Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, the Syrian army and pro-regime militias are responsible for most of the violations. Gradually the Syrian conflict has been turning from a two-sided war towards an

ethnic and religious war among Sunnis, the pro-regime Alawis and Kurds, provoking the interest of neighbouring countries.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Despite a number of incidents in which the Syrian regime has been alleged to have used chemical weapons, President Obama's response has been limited to the promise of increased support, including non-lethal military support, for the selected opposition groups. It seems that the U.S. president, who built his political capital on opposition to the war in Iraq and implemented an exit strategy for Afghanistan, has been determined not to involve the U.S. into yet another conflict, especially one that shows little perspective for a political solution. He could also be calculating that with U.S. credibility undermined by the war in Iraq, it could be impossible to persuade the international community to take more decisive action.

However, the lack of a reaction to the use of chemical weapons could also seriously undermine the credibility of the U.S. president. It could have a negative influence as well on the U.S.'s ability to deter threats and could encourage not only the Syrian regime but also North Korea or Iran to seek, proliferate or even use weapons of mass destruction in the future.

It is likely that any sort of military operation in Syria could be legally justified on the grounds of the new doctrine of responsibility to protect (R2P), which states that the international community has a duty to react if a state is unable to protect its citizens against gross violation of human rights.

Before any military operation is ordered, the U.S. and its allies should demonstrate that they have exhausted all the possibilities of securing a UN Security Council resolution that would open the way for intervention. Given the expected veto by Russia or China of such a resolution, it is necessary to build as broad a coalition as possible to secure a political mandate for more decisive action outside the UN. It would be crucial to secure the support of the countries of the Arab League, as well as states that do not have a direct security interest in the Middle East, such as Japan, India, Australia or Canada.

The U.S. should present convincing evidence that the Syrian regime was behind the attack. But even without the support of key allies and likely scepticism in some countries towards the evidence it would present, the U.S. could resort to a military option. It would be a signal to countries that already possess or which are attempting to gain weapons of mass destruction that responsibility for the control of the arsenals lies solely with the governments holding them, and that such weapons do not guarantee protection for the regimes.

In case of an attack on Syria, it should remain a priority for the U.S. to limit the possibility of a broader regional war, maintain support for a political solution to the conflict, and to not allow arsenals of chemical weapons to fall into the hands of extremists. Hence, any operation should be limited in scale to avoid an uncontrolled collapse of the regime, which could help groups linked with Al Qaeda take over the country. At the same time, targeted attacks could limit the regime's ability to use chemical weapons or conduct air attacks against the opposition. The loss of such capabilities and the possibility the U.S. could further escalate the attacks could help break the stalemate, forcing the regime towards negotiations. For this to happen, the military operation should be supported by active diplomacy aimed at initiating negotiations on a political transition process.

Sending a clear signal that the operation is not intended to lead to regime change and that the U.S. and its allies would be determined to find a political solution could limit a negative reaction from Russia and Iran, the main supporters of the regime. This is especially true for Teheran, which has the capacity to destabilise the region, either indirectly through Hezbollah and the group's bases in Lebanon or directly using its own missile capabilities and the potential to block the Strait of Hormuz, through which 40% of the world's seaborne oil is transported.

Nevertheless, it is likely that even a small-scale military operation could trigger a Syrian response, which could be to increase attacks on civilians or to initiate another wave of refugees. It could also threaten to attack neighbouring countries or pass the chemical weapons to Hezbollah, increasing the threat to Israel and other countries in the region. Such a threat should be limited to some extent by the presence of Patriot missiles in Turkey and Jordan, and U.S. ships with anti-missile systems in the Mediterranean Sea.

However, it may be necessary to grant additional help to Israel and minimise the possibility of it responding militarily in case of a successful attack from Syrian territory. Such a reaction could seriously destabilise the situation and lead to a broader regional conflict. Despite the Patriots and other measures, an attack on Turkish territory also cannot be ruled out, which may encourage the country to invoke Article 5 and force NATO to help its ally.

Although Poland has ruled out any engagement in the Syrian conflict, it should prepare scenarios for possible NATO engagement, which could include the deployment of Polish Chemical Biological Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) units. It is also in the Polish interest to push forward with new diplomatic initiatives within the Friends of Syria group aimed at reaching a political agreement between the sides in the conflict.