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**US Military Intervention in Syria:  
The Broad Strategic Purpose, Beyond Punitive Action**

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Until the publication of reports that Bashar Assad's army carried out a large attack using chemical weapons in an eastern suburb of Damascus, Washington had not seriously considered military intervention in Syria. In light of the conclusion by Western intelligence agencies – reflected in the statement by US Secretary of State John Kerry – that the Assad regime is responsible for using chemical weapons, the US government is considering a military response. A military response, however, does not stand on its own; it obligates the United States to define its strategic purpose in using military force in Syria.

The declared US objective is to punish Assad for the use of chemical weapons and to deter him from further use of these weapons. Undeclared but no less important American goals would be to damage the Syrian president's sense of security; bring about an end to the slaughter, including the "conventional" slaughter; and bring about an end to the civil war.

In order to promote these goals, President Obama should restore the deterrent power of the United States. The President, who announced a red line that if crossed would generate a response, has avoided acting until now. American restraint has strengthened Assad's sense of security and encouraged him to expand the scope of his operations against the rebels and his attacks against innocent civilians. This restraint has also strengthened the assessment in Moscow that supporting Assad demonstrates to the world Russia's loyalty to its allies and its principles, in contrast to the United States, which allegedly abandons its allies and hesitates to stand up for its principles.

A very important American interest is to weaken the radical axis – Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah – which negates American values and interests. The American aversion to an operation encouraged Hizbollah to intervene in Syria, and this intervention succeeded in changing the momentum in the Syrian civil war in Assad's favor. Western vacillation has strengthened both Russia, which continues to support the Assad regime, and the jihadi organizations, which have grown stronger while the United States has failed to act. The

organizations that have remained the weakest are actually the pro-Western secular organizations, which are vital to Syria's ability to establish a liberal, democratic regime the day after Assad falls. It is an American interest to attempt to change the momentum in favor of these organizations.

Weakening the Tehran-Damascus-Beirut axis and the jihadi organizations would also reduce the fear of undermining stability along Syria's borders with Turkey, Jordan, and Israel, all US allies in the region. Indeed, the continued current trend toward instability could lead to an expansion of the cycle of violence in other states in the region.

Tension sometimes exists between a state's moral obligation and its interests, but for the United States there is no such tension regarding Syria. From a moral perspective, the fact that Assad's army's carried out a large scale attack with chemical weapons clearly cannot be ignored. This is not an isolated case, but merely continuation of a policy that does not shy away from slaughtering civilians through the massive use of inaccurate and destructive weapons, including chemical weapons. This policy has cost the lives of over 100,000 people thus far and has turned millions of Syrian citizens into refugees. American vacillation in response to the massacres has only increased Assad's brazenness. Rebel organizations have also become more daring as Assad has expanded his acts of slaughter.

At this time, there is no military option that could immediately stop the slaughter in Syria, force Assad to leave, and ensure a moderate, democratic regime. Therefore, all the existing options, including continuation of American restraint, are less than optimal, if not poor. Yet given the understanding that a lack of action is a very bad strategy – it is not moral and it harms American interests – what constitutes the best of the bad strategies?

Intervention in the Syrian civil war is contrary to the American aspiration to put an end to the wars of the past decade in the Middle East. It damages the Obama legacy, which advocates “bringing our soldiers home,” and it raises concerns about another war in a Muslim country, similar to those Obama ended in Iraq and Afghanistan. The main fear is that American action in Syria could have “unexpected consequences” that would expand the scope and duration of a military operation. For example, a military operation against Assad could strengthen the jihadi organizations. Military intervention might also lead Washington into a direct conflict with Moscow and elicit a response from Assad's Iranian patron and open an additional front against Iran and Hizbollah, which is already involved in the fighting in Syria.

However, it is likely that none of the actors involved has an interest in escalating the crisis; their interest is in containing the event and maintaining the momentum gained by Assad after his victory in al-Qusayr. In addition, since American public opinion is

vehemently opposed to a large scale ground attack, the possibility of a broad military operation that includes an invasion by ground forces is likely not under discussion at the White House at this time.

Nevertheless, there are six strategies other than an all-out attack a la Iraq in 2003. General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, discussed these options in a letter to Congressman Eliot Engel on August 19, 2013, two days before the chemical attack in Damascus. It is these alternatives that are being analyzed for their ability to achieve the strategic aim and for their risks. What follows is a brief analysis of each of the options.

1. **“What was, is what will be,”** i.e., increased training and armaments for the rebels. This involves training for rebel forces outside of Syria, aid in establishing an effective chain of command, and transferring a significant amount of weaponry while incurring the risk that the advanced weaponry reaches terrorist organizations in Syria. President Obama has already declared that the United States will arm the rebels. While the United States has not yet fully implemented this policy, even full implementation will not at this stage be a convincing sign of change in American policy and the determination of the United States to change the balance of power in Syria. Although this strategy could have been appropriate until several weeks ago, it does not provide an appropriate response at this point, specifically, after the latest chemical attack.
2. **A pinpoint “punitive” attack.** The attack would be limited in scope, localized, and of short duration, targeting the units that took part in the recent chemical attack, military targets, or regime assets. This option would constitute a change in US policy and strengthen American credibility, but its chances of restoring US deterrent power are slim. This localized retribution would not change the reality in Syria in a significant way. It has the ability to prevent large scale use of chemical weapons, such as what took place on August 21, 2013, but it is doubtful that it would have an impact on Assad’s considerations regarding the continued massacre of his people.
3. **Declaring a no-fly zone, along with elements of a “no-move zone”** against Syrian artillery, tanks, and mortars. This option leaves the United States on the sidelines of the internal Syrian struggle and places the decision whether to test American determination in Assad’s court. A blow to Assad’s aerial freedom of action could be a stumbling block, because in this arena he has enjoyed total supremacy. A ban on artillery fire, tanks, and mortars in certain places could harm another level in which Assad has a significant advantage (firepower) and reduce the harm to Syria’s civilian population. No-fly zones and/or no-move

zones must be maintained and enforced militarily over time, which requires a relatively large investment of resources. The United States has the largest and most advanced military in the world. Even if it acted alone, it could carry out this task using only its forces, and if it cooperated with its allies, the main disadvantage of this option would be significantly reduced.

4. **Demilitarized zones** near the border with Turkey and Jordan and humanitarian corridors. The goal here is to create a haven for the civilian population and reduce the scope of the slaughter in Syria, with the possibility of creating humanitarian aid corridors for people already wounded. Like the previous alternative, this requires ongoing maintenance and requires the entry of ground forces. If this option is chosen, the forces maintaining the demilitarized zones and humanitarian corridors would not be American. Turkish soldiers would maintain the corridors near the border with Turkey and Jordanian soldiers would maintain the areas near the border with Jordan. Cooperation with moderate organizations associated with the rebels can also help maintain the areas within Syria.
5. **A prolonged aerial attack against critical regime assets** that allow Assad to conduct the fighting against the rebels, such as headquarters and weapons bases. In this type of large scale attack, it would be possible to attack ground, air, and naval forces as well as advanced weaponry. This is an option that would impact on the balance of power between Assad and the rebels and convey a message of American resolve that could undermine the regime's sense of security. This option, which involves direct American involvement in the Syrian civil war and places Assad in a new and difficult position, involves a relatively high risk of sucking the United States into the civil war.
6. **Gaining control and destroying chemical weapons** in Syria. This is the most direct option against the threat that Assad will use chemical weapons again or that the rebels will resort to this tactic. However, seizing and destroying the stores of chemical weapons in Syria's possession is an operation requiring the use of special forces in Syria for a prolonged period until all of the chemical material has been destroyed. In this scenario, there is a risk that a small quantity of chemical weapons would reach hostile elements. Therefore, before this option is used, there should be an examination of how possible it is to reduce the use of chemical weapons by strengthening US deterrent power through one of the other options, and it should be made clear that the United States is determined to act in the event of further use of chemical weapons.

**Policy Recommendations**

An analysis of the relevant options available to President Obama indicates the need for a strategy combining the third, fourth, and fifth alternatives toward direct, gradual US intervention. This strategy, beyond punishing Assad, would change the rules of the game in Syria and deter the regime from further use of chemical weapons. A strategy of combined, gradual intervention would include an attack on selected strategic targets as punishment for the chemical attack in the Damascus suburbs and declaration of a no-fly zone. In a second step, the United States could also declare demilitarized zones and humanitarian corridors and attack a number of regime assets if Assad escalates his response.

The Obama administration has designed a national security policy that initiates intervention only when the supreme national interest is at risk and there is as broad legitimacy as possible. It appears that Washington's assessment is that Assad's recent actions threaten the supreme American interest. The administration should promote a joint military action in the broadest possible framework in the Security Council. If vetoed by Russia, the United States should involve its own allies in the region – Turkey, which has already announced its support for a US action, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Israel, with the possibility of also involving Egypt in order to improve relations between the states. American planning should also include a diplomatic response to Russian opposition and readiness to deter Iran and Hizbollah from expanding the battlefield. Such a US military action would not resolve the Syrian conflict, but it is the least problematic of the bad options. Together with an initiative for a political settlement, it could very likely promote the strategic goals of replacing the Assad regime, inflicting defeat on the radical camp, restoring American deterrence and credibility toward Iran, and strengthening US alliances in the Middle East.

