

Coercion And Assurance In Practice: Understanding The Outcome Of Western Efforts To Prevent Chemical Weapons Use In Syria And Drawing Lessons For NATO Author Name

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of coercion by the United States and other outside powers in response to the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons in that country's civil war. External actors have applied both deterrent and compellent modes of coercion in this case. Despite a common assumption that compellence is more difficult to achieve than deterrence, in Syria compellence enjoyed considerable though incomplete success in pressuring Syria to give up its chemical weapons, but deterrence has failed multiple times across two U.S. administrations.

We analyze this reversal of the expected pattern and the varying outcomes in this case more broadly as a way to explore common assumptions about how the credibility of threats relates to coercive outcomes. We conclude that credibility, while important, operates in ways that are more complex and less decisive than how it is commonly understood. Part of the problem lies in the familiarity to decision makers and outside commentators of a schema that implies credibility is established by demonstrating a willingness to impose costs using airpower – a script we call the “resolve plus bombs” formula. But seemingly credible threats can be ambiguous in the scope of what they cover, and even highly credible threats can fail. The Syria case shows the need to also take into account two additional factors.

The first is the domestic political motivations of the target of coercion, in this case Syrian President Assad's overwhelming concern with regime survival. The second is the associated need to pair coercive threats with appropriate assurances. This analysis suggests a viable path to effective coercion of the Assad regime, but the path involves intense tradeoffs that have largely prevented decision makers from embracing the requirements of effective coercion in this case. As a result, in line with the ‘resolve plus bombs’ approach, they have tended to fall back on the threat or limited use of air strikes, an approach that has mostly not been sufficient to change Syria's calculations regarding chemical arms. Based on this detailed case study of the western response to chemical use in Syria, the paper will draw pertinent lessons for NATO regarding the complex interplay of deterrence, compellence and assurance.

INTRODUCTION

The circumstances that led to chemical weapons (CW) use in Syria emerged from the Arab Spring. This wave of popular protest reached Damascus in spring 2011 and sporadic peaceful protests against the regime morphed into a nationwide uprising. The Assad regime responded with a harsh crackdown in which security forces killed large numbers of civilians. This triggered a dramatic escalation, marked by the shift from non-

violent to violent protest. Jihadist groups joined the fray, and by early 2012 Syria had descended into a multisided civil war.

While Syria was not party to the CWC in 2012, it had acceded in 1968 to the Geneva Protocol (1925) prohibiting signatories from using CW in warfare. Nevertheless, from early in the conflict, the government's response included CW use. Even though chemical strikes account for only a small part of the suffering inflicted on the Syrian people, there has been an understandable desire to find ways to halt a mode of attack the world has long rejected and to reinforce the norm against CW use. In August 2012, President Obama responded to a reporter's question on the safety of Syria's chemical stockpiles by stating that, "a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus."¹ The red line was widely interpreted as a deterrent commitment, yet it failed in at least one of its objectives.²

Low-level chemical use by the Assad regime occurred across 2012 and 2013, and almost exactly one year after Obama's press conference the Syrian regime launched its major chemical attack on Ghouta killing an estimated 1,400 people.³ Despite the red line, the United States did not respond militarily, a factor that should have reduced the credibility of subsequent American threats. Nevertheless, soon afterward Washington partnered with Moscow on a deal that successfully compelled Syria to sign the CWC. Consequently, Syria allowed almost 1,300 metric tons of chemical agents to be removed from its territory and destroyed.⁴ Subsequent events show that coercive diplomacy was not completely successful but this should not diminish our recognition that Syria joining the CWC, and agreeing to eliminate most of its chemical arsenal, was a major achievement.⁵

Even after the disarmament deal, chemical attacks continued and represented additional deterrence failures. Two attacks stand out. In April 2017, regime forces used sarin in Khan Sheikhoun, a rebel-controlled town in the northern Idlib province, killing upwards of 90 people. This deterrence failure is all the more puzzling because there had been a change of administration in Washington. President Trump went to considerable lengths to project an image of being tougher and more willing to use force than his predecessor. On the face of it, U.S. adversaries might be expected to interpret deterrent threats from Donald Trump as more credible than those of Barack Obama, yet the Assad regime still used CW. This time, the United States responded by launching 59 cruise missiles against the airfield from which the planes involved in the attack were believed to have flown. Yet, even after the U.S. bombing, almost exactly one year later deterrence failed again. Reports suggested a chemical attack on the town of Douma, in the Eastern Ghouta region, possibly involving a mixture of chlorine and nerve gas. This attack allegedly killed over 40 people. This time Washington

1 Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps, 20 August 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps> (accessed 2 August 2017).

2 Importantly, the red line was bifurcated and sought to deter two things – the loss of control of the chemical arsenal and its use. While deterrence of use clearly failed, it appears that the Assad regime has not lost control of its chemical assets since summer 2012. An argument can therefore be made that this strand of deterrence may well have worked.

3 Anthony Deutsch, "Exclusive: Tests link Syrian government stockpile to largest sarin attack – sources," Reuters, 30 January 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-chemicalweapons-exclusiv/exclusive-tests-link-syrian-government-stockpile-to-largest-sarin-attack-sources-idU.S.KBN1FJ0MG>.

4 Anthony Deutsch, "Syria hands over remaining chemical weapons for destruction," Reuters, June 23, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-chemicalweapons-idUSKBN0EY18T20140623>.

5 Both a former Obama administration official and a book-length study by two academic specialists in deterrence theory rebut those who suggest that because Obama did not ultimately carry out air strikes against Syria his coercive efforts should be considered as an across-the-board failure. They argue that the agreement with Syria represents a success for coercive diplomacy, a position that our own analysis below mostly supports. See Derek Chollet, "Obama's Red Line, Revisited," Politico, July 19, 2016; Frank P. Harvey and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

partnered with Paris and London launching air strikes against three sites in Syria believed to be involved in its CW program.⁶

Overall, the Syria case involves an application of compellence that was substantially though not entirely successful, combined with multiple examples of deterrence failure. How can we account for these varied outcomes? Was the issue one of credibility or were other factors at play? To address these questions the paper evolves as follows. First, we examine President Obama's warning that CW use would cross a "red line" and the eventual failure of this deterrent message in August 2013 with Syria's large-scale sarin gas attack on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. Second, we analyze the process following Ghouta that led Syria to sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the destruction of a sizable portion of its chemical munitions and production infrastructure. Although Syria retained some of its chemical stockpile, in relative terms was clearly the most successful phase of coercive efforts. Third, we consider the experience of the Trump administration to date, in which a substantial new attack led Washington to strike Syria with cruise missiles. This deterrence effort also failed, leading to a larger round of air strikes – this time with France and the UK – about one year later. Fourth, the paper concludes by highlighting pertinent lessons for NATO from the application of external coercion – both deterrence and compellence – in the Syria CW context.

THE RED LINE, DETERRENCE FAILURE AND GHOUTA

By early 2012, a full-scale civil war was raging in Syria. The chaotic situation provided an opportunity for jihadist groups, such as Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, to gain a more substantial foothold in Syria.⁷ IS also expanded its operations from its original base in Iraq. The group began to seize and hold territory including, by March 2013, the Syrian city of Raqqa.

In this context, President Obama's red line comment was influenced first, and foremost, by the prospect that Syrian CW would fall into the hands of non-state actors. Two possible scenarios dominated thinking. First, there were concerns that the security of the stockpile might be compromised if the regime lost territory, resulting in jihadists taking possession of CW. Second, it was feared the Assad regime might willingly proliferate CW capabilities to external actors such as Hezbollah. U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel later captured this element in U.S. thinking: "This risk of chemical weapons proliferation poses a direct threat to our friends and partners, and to U.S. personnel in the region. We cannot afford for Hezbollah or any terrorist group determined to strike the United States to have incentives to acquire or use these chemical weapons."⁸

In addition, administration officials quickly came to recognize the potential for internal CW use by the Syrian government. In this respect the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011 had a direct influence on the President's thinking because in that civil war the US, France and the UK had to contemplate the potential use of residual chemical agent stocks by the embattled Qadhafi regime against local opposition forces, as well as the potential loss of control of CW.⁹ This had resulted in very close monitoring of Libya's residual chemical

⁶ There are several good chronologies available that summarize CW attacks in Syria and international responses. For a shorter version, see AP, "Timeline of Chemical Weapons Attacks in Syria," April 10, 2018, <https://apnews.com/74085b6b92c446678cfe704ee352c5ba>. For more details, see Arms Control Association, "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2018," updated June 2018, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

⁷ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge for IISS, 2013), p. 98.

⁸ Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration's Response, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, p. 16, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 4 September 2013 (Washington, DC: U.S.GPO, 2014), <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-syria-weighing-the-obama-administrations-response/>

⁹ Thomas Harding and James Kirkup, 'Libya: Gaddafi regime could unleash chemical weapons stockpile', *Telegraph*, 23 August 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8718827/Libya-Gaddafi-regime-could-unleash-chemical-weapons-stockpile.html> (accessed 26 January 2018).

stocks by Washington and its allies, as well as contingency planning to secure the stocks if it was deemed necessary to prevent use or loss of control.¹⁰

It was in July 2012 that the US “received reports that the regime was preparing to use them against the opposition or transfer them to the terrorist organization Hizbollah”. Then Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough responded by convening “a task force that developed a plan to issue private warnings to Russia, Iran, and the Syrian government”.¹¹ These private warnings appear to have prompted a direct and public response from Damascus. During a televised press conference in the morning of 23 July, Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi, stated that, “Any stocks of WMD or any unconventional weapon that the Syrian Arab Republic possesses would never, would never be used against civilians or against the Syrian people during this crisis at any circumstances, no matter how the crisis would evolve, no matter how”. He added that, “These weapons are meant to be used only and strictly in the event of external aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic”.¹² Several hours later President Obama issued a short, carefully worded statement as part of a much wider ranging speech to a veterans conference, which clearly demonstrated that his administration had already begun moving toward a deterrent effort. He stated, “we will continue to make it clear to Assad and those around him that the world is watching, and that they will be held accountable by the international community and the United States, should they make the tragic mistake of using those weapons.”¹³

But Obama’s ‘red line’ press conference in August gained much greater attention. This phrasing was a spontaneous, “unscripted” reaction to a reporter’s question.¹⁴ Once the president made the comment, however, other administration spokespeople repeated it, and it became interpreted as a clear deterrent commitment.¹⁵ The red line comment created certain expectations when allegations regarding the Assad regime’s use of CW emerged in the public sphere. Indeed, in his answer to a follow-up question during August press conference, Obama threatened “enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons.” The “enormous consequences” phrasing implied a significant military strike if the warning was not heeded.¹⁶

THE CREDIBILITY OF ASSURANCE AND DETERRENCE

Western powers seeking to influence the Syrian conflict found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, Assad’s actions against his own people were increasingly viewed as war crimes. Thus, for the most part, Western policy favored the regime’s downfall and a democratic transition of power. As early as August 2011, President Obama stated publicly that, “For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for

10 Barbara Starr, ‘Plans are being made to secure Libyan mustard gas’, CNN, 25 August 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/08/24/libya.mustard.gas/index.html> (accessed 26 January 2018).

11 Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018), p.223.

12 For a video of Jihad Makdissi’s press conference and additional reporting see: ‘Syrian regime makes chemical warfare threat’, *The Guardian*, 23 July 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/23/syria-chemical-warfare-threat-assad>.

13 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by the President to the 113th National Convention of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, July 23, 2012, VFW Convention Hall, Reno, Nevada, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/23/remarks-president-113th-national-convention-veterans-foreign-wars>

14 Baker, et al., “Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put U.S. in Bind on Syria.”

15 Glenn Kessler, “President Obama and the ‘red line’ on Syria’s chemical weapons,” *Washington Post*, Sept. 6, 2013.

16 See “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” August 20, 2012, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps, accessed 1 Aug. 2018.

President Assad to step aside.”¹⁷ This position would make it difficult to provide the assurance element of coercion.

On the other hand, there was concern that support for rebel forces in Syria, whatever its form, could be hijacked by jihadist groups.¹⁸ Perhaps for this reason, the Obama administration always left quite vague what its response might be if Assad did not heed the red line warning. The administration wanted to apply coercive pressure on Syria to maintain control of its CW arsenal, and not to deploy it in the civil war, but was unwilling to issue threats explicitly holding regime survival at risk. In fall 2012, CIA director David Petraeus floated a proposal to provide military aid to the opposition and framed as a way to build ties to forces that might become the future government. It was not presented as an action to threaten, as a way to deter CW use. The idea gained little traction and was not adopted.¹⁹

Because of how the case turned out, much of the commentary that emerged after Ghouta reduced the failure of the U.S. red line to a simple lack of credibility.²⁰ However, this view takes advantage of hindsight to make an assessment that was not nearly so obvious beforehand. It also frames the projection of credibility in all or nothing terms that do not account for a more nuanced reality involving competing factors that contributed to and detracted from the deterrent message’s believability.

On the one hand, based on the indicators most often discussed in the literature, there was much about the threat that lent it weight. Analysts have long argued that, in order to succeed, a coercive threat must be credible.²¹ But what establishes credibility? Building on earlier work, Ned Lebow established a checklist widely used in deterrence research.²² In Lebow’s formulation, an actor must do four things to establish a credible threat:

- Formulate a commitment
- Communicate that commitment to the other side
- Have the capability to back up that commitment
- Have the will (or resolve) to back up that commitment.

The administration appeared to satisfy all four credibility criteria identified by Lebow for example. First, President Obama made a clear commitment that CW use, transfer or loss of control were lines he did not want crossed. Second, the administration repeatedly communicated this commitment, both publicly through the “red line” comments, which were repeated on several occasions by various officials, as well as via private channels. On the latter, as U.S. Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford noted, this included, “regular discussions with other countries that have interests in Syria, who have influence with the Syrians to (a) urge that the Syrian regime not use these weapons and, instead, maintain tight control over them. And (b) to pass

17 President Barack Obama, “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way,” 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad> (accessed 28 December 2017)

18 C.J. Chivers, “Brutality of Syrian Rebels Posing Dilemma in West,” *New York Times*, 5 September 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/05/world/middleeast/brutality-of-syrian-rebels-pose-dilemma-in-west.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed 28 December 2013)

19 Rhodes, *World as It Is*, p. 197.

20 See, for example, David Blair, “Obama’s ‘red line’ is not so much being tested as ignored completely,” *The Telegraph*, 21 August 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10258132/Obamas-red-line-is-not-so-much-being-tested-as-ignored-completely.html>; and Eric Alterman, “Obama and the Cult of Credibility,” *The Nation*, 24 March 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/obama-and-the-cult-of-credibility/>

21 William W. Kaufmann, “The Requirements of Deterrence,” Memorandum No. 7, Center of International Studies, Princeton University, Nov. 15, 1954, p. 7.

22 Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

the warning that there would be consequences, and there would be accountability for those members of the regime that would ever think of using these things and would deploy them.”²³

Third, the United States clearly had the capabilities to project military force to the region and possessed overwhelming superiority over the Syrian military. Crucially, the U.S. had adequate assets – destroyers and warplanes – in the eastern Mediterranean to rapidly and effectively respond to orders for any military engagement from Washington.

On the fourth key ingredient, resolve, the administration’s track record should have conveyed the image of a government willing to take action. President Obama had ordered a troop surge in Afghanistan in 2009 and significantly expanded the use of drone strikes against suspected terrorists across multiple countries. Obama also agreed to join NATO allies in the Libya intervention in 2011, and shortly after approved the raid to target Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. All of this constituted a clear track record of willingness to take military action. President Obama also undertook one of the prime commitment tactics identified in the deterrence literature by making his red line declaration in public. In doing so, the president created potential domestic audience costs. Raising the political stakes like this should have enhanced the sense of resolve the administration communicated to Assad.²⁴

On the other hand, some factors weighed against credibility. Washington was not seeking to prevent an attack on its own territory. And the United States was not even seeking to extend deterrent protection to an allied country, but to civilians inside another country. Efforts to extend deterrence to like this were bound to be less credible than efforts to deter attacks on one’s own country or an ally.

The disincentives to U.S. action were also plain for all to see because the administration was open about not wanting to create a power vacuum in Syria in which forces allied with Al Qaeda or IS could take control. During a media interview in January 2013, for example, President Obama mused openly: “In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact?... What would be the aftermath of our involvement on the ground?”²⁵ More broadly, Obama had campaigned for the White House on a promise to end the war in Iraq, creating an initial image of a president reluctant to launch military interventions. And the messy aftermath of the Libya intervention further reduced the administration’s appetite for taking military action.²⁶ In general terms, Obama favored diplomacy as a means of addressing difficult issues with both allies and adversaries, a point illustrated by his efforts to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program.²⁷ Efforts to deter specific actions by the Assad regime in Syria, then, would have been interpreted, at least in part, against these broader tenets of Obama’s approach to foreign policy which favored restraint and dialogue.

The President also recognized domestic political constraints including a Congress and public opinion with little stomach for direct military involvement in another Middle Eastern war. Polls conducted around this period suggested, “as many as two thirds of Americans oppose military action in Syria, even when questions that specify the aid come in the form of ‘weapons’ rather than more direct military intervention.”²⁸ Taken

²³ Testimony of U.S. Ambassador Robert Ford, “Crisis in Syria: The U.S. Response,” Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Sessions, 20 March 2013, Serial No. 113–10 (Washington, DC: U.S.GPO), p. 32.

²⁴ On the concept of domestic audience costs, see Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes.”

²⁵ Franklin Foer and Chris Hughes, “Barack Obama is Not Pleased,” *New Republic*, 27 January 2013, <https://newrepublic.com/article/112190/obama-interview-2013-sit-down-president> (accessed 2 February 2018).

²⁶ Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine.”

²⁷ See for example: Hal Brands, ‘Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy’, *The Washington Quarterly* 39:4; Fawaz Gerges, ‘The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America’s moment?’ *International Affairs* 89:2

²⁸ Mark Blumenthal and Ariel Edwards-Levy, “POLLSTER UPDATE: Polls Show Opposition to U.S. Military Involvement in Syria,” *HuffPost Politics*, 14 June 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/14/syria-polls_n_3443741.html.

together, these factors suggest the intrinsic interests at stake in Syria for the United States were not ranked as particularly high by the Obama team.²⁹

Perhaps most damaging to the deterrent effort, however, was that the precise terms of the red line were vague and open to interpretation. The level of CW use that would prompt consequences – “a whole bunch” – were not made clear. This point was not lost on Damascus, and Syrian government forces persistently probed the limits of U.S. tolerance with low-level CW use. On 25 April 2013, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel briefed the media that the U.S. intelligence community had assessed “with some degree of varying confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specifically the chemical agent sarin”.³⁰ But even as U.S. intelligence was moving toward a firm assessment confirming Assad’s use of CW, President Obama placed a further caveat on his original red line. On 26 April, during a meeting with King Abdullah of Jordan, he said: “I think all of us, not just in the United States but around the world, recognize how we cannot stand by and permit *the systematic use* of weapons like chemical weapons on civilian populations” [emphasis added].³¹ This phrasing further blurred the question of what level of use, and which targets of CW aggression, would trigger direct U.S. action.

It was not until mid-June that the administration took action. In a statement delivered on 13 June, Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes revealed that, “our intelligence community assesses that the Assad regime has used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.” While the statement confirmed the regime had used CW on multiple occasions – arguably meeting the president’s “systematic use” caveat – the administration’s response was not to launch a punitive military strike. Rather, said Rhodes, President Obama had “augmented the provision of non-lethal assistance to the civilian opposition.”³² Off the record, an administration official added at the time that the U.S. would also make unspecified arms available to rebels.³³ Prior U.S. assistance to the Syrian opposition had been non-lethal, so the announcement that aid would now also include arms (though the types and numbers not specified) suggested a willingness to take steps that would increase the risk to the Assad regime’s survival, a move toward imposing costs relevant to Assad’s calculus. But the fact this change was not included in the official statement, and that the level and types of weapons were not described, limited the impact of this move.³⁴

AMBIGUITY PRIOR TO GHOUTA

The period through June 2013 shows how challenging it can be to establish an objective assessment of credibility. The Obama administration met many of the indicators used in the academic literature, suggesting a commitment that was plausibly credible. But contemporary observers largely reached the opposite conclusion as reports of CW use emerged. To many outside observers, including most likely the Assad regime, the U.S. threat lacked credibility.

The communication aspect was central here in that the U.S. commitment contained an essential ambiguity. Did the red line apply to any use of CW or only attacks above a certain, unclear threshold? The Assad

²⁹ See for example: Hal Brands, “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 39:4 (winter 2017); Fawaz Gerges, “The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America’s moment?” *International Affairs*, 89:2 (March 2013).

³⁰ ‘Chuck Hagel’s Statement on Syria’, *New York Times*, 25 April 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/26/us/chuck-hagels-statement-on-syria.html> (accessed 1 January 2017)

³¹ Colleen Curtis, “President Obama Meets with King Abdullah II,” *Obama White House*, 26 April 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/04/26/president-obama-meets-king-abdullah-ii> (accessed 2 January 2018).

³² The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, For Immediate Release, June 13, 2013, Statement by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syrian Chemical Weapons Use, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/statement-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-communications-ben-> (accessed 12 August 2017)

³³ Reuters, “U.S. to increase military support to Syria rebels,” June 13, 2013.

³⁴ Rhodes (*World as It Is*, p. 225) attributes the lack of a more explicit public statement to government lawyers who advised that an open declaration of direct military aid would not be legal.

regime clearly assumed the latter and sought to take advantage by keeping attacks below the U.S. threshold. There was also a tension between the Obama administration's official position that 'Assad must go' and its clear reluctance to directly intervene to bring this about.

In addition, the Assad government sought to make attribution more challenging by actively cultivating confusion through claims of opposition use and employing improvised CW. This effort was also pursued on the international diplomatic stage. For example, the Syrian government was the first party to write to the UN Secretary General to request an investigation of CW use – specifically the alleged chemical use on 19 March 2013 in Khan al Asal near Aleppo.³⁵ Moreover, Moscow sought to provide diplomatic cover for its Syrian client by denying the Assad regime had used CW and pointing the finger at the opposition.³⁶

Ultimately, these negative factors reduced the credibility of Obama's threat, but not to the point that it could be completely ignored. This produced a mixed deterrent outcome. The ambiguity surrounding the red line threshold both facilitated Assad's initial use of CW and placed limits on what the regime was prepared to risk. The vague nature of the threat, compounded by caveats added later, provided Assad with room for maneuver at the lower end of the spectrum of use. But government forces also avoided larger scale attacks in this early phase. It could be contended that the Assad regime's approach thus recognized the credibility of Obama's threat while seeking to subvert it by exploiting uncertainty around the threshold for U.S. action.

UNDERSTANDING THE GHOUTA ATTACK

This analysis holds up for the period prior to August 2013, but fails to explain the significantly larger attack on Ghouta in the pre-dawn hours of August 21. What prompted this step change in CW use? Was this simply due to the progressive erosion of U.S. credibility or were other factors at play?

The answer relates to regime survival motivations and the lesser weight accorded to external deterrent threats in a context where domestic conditions threaten the existence of the regime. By the time of Ghouta, the civil war had been raging for two years and exacted a heavy toll on government and opposition forces alike. In the early stages of the conflict, the movement to topple the Assad regime built considerable momentum. High-level defectors from the Syrian military spoke of an army on the verge of collapse,³⁷ and many observers believed "the government's days are numbered."³⁸

As the months progressed, however, Assad clung to power, bolstered by support from his Iranian and Russian patrons.³⁹ In April 2013, Hezbollah confirmed for the first time that its forces were directly supporting Assad on the ground and by July, the Syrian army had made notable gains around both Damascus

35 "Statement by the Director-General to the Executive Council at its Thirty-Second Meeting," OPCW Executive Council, 27 March 2013, https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/M-32/ecm32dg01_e_.pdf.

36 See for example: "Russia claims Syria rebels used sarin at Khan al-Assal," BBC News, 9 July 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23249104> (accessed 31 January 2018).

37 Richard Spencer, "Syria's most senior defector: Assad's army is close to collapse," The Telegraph, 5 February 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9061432/Syrias-most-senior-defector-Assads-army-is-close-to-collapse.html>.

38 Yezid Sayigh, "Hurting Stalemate in Syria," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 January 2012, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2012/01/31/hurting-stalemate-in-syria-pub-46908>.

39 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Syrian army being aided by Iranian forces," The Guardian, 28 May 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces>; Ruslan Pukhov, "Why Russia Supports Syria," New York Times, 6 July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/opinion/why-russia-supports-syria.html?mtref=www.bing.com&gwh=87FE5F40D3C25C0DA727DB3A9D374445&gwt=pay&assetType=opinion>.

and the central city of Homs.⁴⁰ The problem for the regime was that its forces were unable to tilt the balance decisively in its favor. The conflict thus remained in a destructive stalemate in which neither side had “the capacity to vanquish the other.”⁴¹

In the weeks preceding Ghouta, media coverage included reports of successful rebel-led offensives in Latakia province (an Alawite stronghold), Aleppo province, and the eastern city of Deir al-Zor.⁴² The volatile nature of the situation in Damascus was highlighted by reports, on 8 August, of an attack on a motorcade carrying Assad himself.⁴³ Faced with this domestic situation, the prospect of direct external intervention was a secondary concern. From Assad’s perspective, the consequences of external intervention were largely irrelevant if his regime could not manage to secure its position against pressing internal threats.

In this context CW represented an asset that could tilt the battle in favor of regime forces. Moreover, the Assad regime clearly did not feel bound by international norms related to the non-use of CW having developed and maintained a large and relatively sophisticated CW capability for many years. In the earlier, small-scale attacks, the value in using CW largely related to the psychological impact of using poison gas in order to terrorize and demoralize opposition forces. In testimony to Congress, then Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, postulated that, “initially it was a weapon intended to terrorize a small portion of a particular neighborhood, to send a message to the opposition.”⁴⁴ The larger scale of the Ghouta attack, however, indicated a shift to a more tactical approach.

Experiences of the Arab Spring showed how essential it would be for the government to maintain control of the capital. Hence, on 20 August, regime forces launched “Operation Capital Shield, their largest-ever Damascus offensive, aimed at decisively ending the deadlock in key contested terrain around the city.”⁴⁵ Rebel forces had held parts of the city for months and regaining full control would constitute a victory of strategic and symbolic importance for Assad’s depleted forces. After the Ghouta attack, General Dempsey described the situation thus: “...militarily his force has been at war now for 2 years. It is tired. They were having an extraordinary difficult time clearing neighborhoods because of apartment complexes and so forth. It consumes a military force to clear an urban setting. And so he took the decision to clear it using chemicals.”⁴⁶ Secretary of Defense Hagel made a similar assessment: “The scope of this, the intent of that scope has shifted significantly from the earlier chemical weapons attacks. This last one was to clear an entire area. He used that as a clear military tactic. He had not done that in past attacks.”⁴⁷

Clearly, the possibility of miscalculation cannot be discounted. The still air of the pre-dawn hours presented optimal conditions for deploying CW, and it is conceivable that regime forces never intended to produce

40 Ian Black and Dan Roberts, “Hezbollah is helping Assad fight Syria uprising, says Hassan Nasrallah,” *The Guardian*, 30 April 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/30/hezbollah-syria-uprising-nasrallah>.

41 Kenneth M. Pollack, “Breaking the Stalemate: The Military Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War and Options for Limited U.S. Intervention,” Saban Center Middle East Memo No.30, August 2013, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/08_Pollack_Syria.pdf.

42 “Syria rebels ‘capture key Aleppo airbase,’” *BBC News*, 6 August 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23585886>; Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Assad’s forces counter rebel gains in Syria’s Deir al-Zor,” *Reuters*, 20 August 2013, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-crisis-east/assads-forces-counter-rebel-gains-in-syrias-deir-al-zor-idUKBRE97J0PH20130820>.

43 Anne Barnard, “Syrian Rebels Claim Attack on Caravan With Assad,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/09/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

44 “Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response,” Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 4 September 2013 (Washington, DC: U.S.GPO, 2014), p. 47, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-syria-weighing-the-obama-administrations-response/>

45 Valerie Szybala, *Assad Strikes Damascus: The Battle for Syria’s Capital*, Middle East Security Report 16, Institute for the Study of War, January 2014, p 24.

46 General Martin Dempsey, “Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria,” Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 10 September 2013, HASC No. 113-55 (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2014).

47 Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, “Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria”, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 10 September 2013, HASC No. 113-55 (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2014), p.5.

casualties on the scale of Ghouta. Yet U.S. officials who worked on the issue generally believe that the attack's scale was intentional. It is our contention, therefore, that Ghouta was driven, for the most part, by domestic imperatives. Of course, the issue of diminished U.S. credibility was another factor influencing thinking here. By the time of Ghouta, the Syrian army had engaged in a series of CW attacks, none of which resulted in any real consequences. In our view, U.S. failure to deliver meaningful consequences for Syria's prior crossing of Obama's red line simply precipitated a process by which the U.S. threat became the lesser of two evils for an embattled regime struggling to strike a decisive blow against a powerful array of domestic forces.

Another reason why U.S. deterrent threats failed to prevent the Ghouta attack came on the assurance side. All coercive threats require assurance, but this is particularly important when regime survival is at stake. When the stakes do not involve regime survival, or alternatively national survival, then the state being targeted by a coercive strategy can afford a degree of risk with respect to the coercer's assurances. It knows it will survive even if the coercing state fails to keep its promises and still strikes the target state despite complying with demands. The situation changes, however, if the coercer starts talking about regime change as a policy goal. If the target state believes the coercer might try to engineer regime change no matter what it does, its incentives to comply with coercive threats, however narrowly or broadly focused, are effectively removed.

If the threat to impose punishment is credible, deterrence can still fail if the associated assurance is not credible. If the target does not believe the promise to withhold punishment should it refrain from taking action, then its cost-benefit calculus is unlikely to favor restraint as it will still suffer costs even if it complies. This point has been recognized in studies of coercive diplomacy,⁴⁸ including the earlier case of Libya in which Colonel Qadhafi's decision to give up the country's WMD programs required "an implicit assurance" that Washington would take regime change off the table once he renounced WMD.⁴⁹

In the Syria context, the president and other administration officials repeatedly stated in public their preference to see Assad step down. In December 2012, the United States followed France, the United Kingdom and several Gulf States in recognizing the main opposition coalition, the Syrian National Coalition, as "the legitimate representative" of the Syrian people.⁵⁰ This all suggested a larger U.S. goal of regime change. This made it hard for the administration to credibly promise it would not still pursue regime change as long as Assad refrained from using CW. Indeed, we find no evidence that the administration ever tried to convey such a message. This same factor, however, made possible a very different result in the aftermath of the attack.

THE SUCCESS OF COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

The Ghouta attack represented a clear failure of deterrence. If one attributes this solely to a lack of credibility for the U.S. red line, this immediately leads to a puzzle. Having escalated use significantly at Ghouta, what convinced Assad to reverse course so quickly and agree to a chemical disarmament proposal?

The answer here lies largely with the involvement of Russia. Ghouta was seen as a direct challenge to U.S. credibility that Moscow believed Washington could not afford to ignore, and its perception of the risks to Russian interests associated with possible U.S. military action motivated Moscow to seek a diplomatic alternative. Russia's involvement provided a crucial assurance to Assad that he could forestall the actions

⁴⁸ Todd S. Sechser, "Goliath's Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power," *International Organization* 64, no. 4 (fall 2010): 627-60

⁴⁹ Robert S. Litwak, *Regime Change: U.S. Strategy through the Prism of 9/11* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 95.

⁵⁰ "U.S. recognises Syria opposition coalition says Obama", *BBC News*, 12 December 2012, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20690148>.

most likely to threaten his survival. Russia's calculations, in turn, were shaped in part by the steps taken by Washington in its efforts to restore deterrence after Ghouta.

RESTORING DETERRENCE

Although President Obama had balked at the prospect of military intervention in response to previous, low-level CW attacks, the scale of Ghouta fundamentally changed things. From a U.S. perspective, such a flagrant breach of the red line could not be tolerated as previous attacks had been and in the week or so after the attack statements made by senior officials signaled that a punitive U.S. military strike was imminent.⁵¹ Statements emphasizing the need to hold Assad accountable were supplemented by communication on U.S. military preparations. Defense Secretary Hagel said on 27 August that U.S. military assets had been moved into the vicinity and were "ready to go."⁵² Throughout this period President Obama communicated regularly with his British and French counterparts, and the three countries began planning coordinated air strikes.⁵³ The stage seemed firmly set for U.S. military action. On 30 August, Secretary of State John Kerry laid out a clear rationale for taking military action in a speech widely seen as the prelude to imminent air strikes: "The President has been clear: Any action that he might decide to take will be a limited and tailored response to ensure that a despot's brutal and flagrant use of chemical weapons is held accountable".⁵⁴ Yet the political situation in Washington was to change radically by the following day. On 31 August, when President Obama himself announced a decision that the United States should take military action, he also announced "a second decision: I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress."⁵⁵ This move arguably undermined the sense of resolve communicated in the U.S. response, but as it turned out Russia continued to take seriously the possibility that Obama would ultimately feel compelled to take military action.

The decision to seek Congressional authorization reflected several factors, including pressure from a Republican-controlled Congress⁵⁶ as well as administration concerns that, in the absence of its endorsement, any military action would lack a clear domestic and international legal basis.⁵⁷ As Obama's Deputy National Security Advisor later noted, "There was no firm international legal basis for bombing Syria—no argument of self-defense, which justified our actions against al Qaeda; no UN resolution such as we had in Libya. Nor was there any domestic legal basis beyond the assertion that the president had the inherent power to take military action that did not constitute a "war" under the Constitution, which the Republicans were

⁵¹ See, for example, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, For Immediate Release, August 27, 2013, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 8/27/2013, James S. Brady Press Briefing Room, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/27/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-8272013> (accessed 12 August 2013)

⁵² Khaled Yacoub Oweis, William Maclean, "U.S., allies preparing for probable strike on Syria," Reuters, 27 August 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis/u-s-allies-preparing-for-probable-strike-on-syria-idU.S.BRE97K0EL20130827> (accessed 4 January 2018)

⁵³ Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, "The Thick Red Line: Implications of the 2013 Chemical-Weapons Crisis for Deterrence and Transatlantic Relations," *Survival* 59, no. 6 (Dec. 2017 – Jan. 2018)

⁵⁴ Statement on Syria, Remarks, John Kerry, Secretary of State, Treaty Room, Washington, DC, August 30, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/213668.htm> (accessed 7 August 2017)

⁵⁵ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, For Immediate Release, August 31, 2013, Statement by the President on Syria, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/31/statement-president-syria> (accessed 14 August 2017)

⁵⁶ Mark Mazzetti, Robert F. Worth and Michael R. Gordon, "Obama's Uncertain Path Amid Syria Bloodshed," *New York Times*, 22 October 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html> (accessed 14 August 2017)

⁵⁷ Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: The Relentless Rise of Presidential Authority and Secrecy* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015).

disputing”.⁵⁸ The tipping point came, however, when Prime Minister David Cameron lost a vote in the House of Commons on 29 August on Britain joining military action against the Assad regime. Cameron had publicly announced he would seek Parliamentary approval without giving Washington prior notice and, according to Secretary of State John Kerry, the vote against action “sent shock waves through our politics at home. It revived overnight memories of the Iraq War.”⁵⁹ The loss of a major ally in the planned operation convinced the administration the issue needed to be taken to Congress.

Senior administration officials went to considerable lengths to justify the need for military intervention. Beyond seeking to convince Congress, the administration also sought to communicate its resolve to take action to decision-makers in Damascus, Moscow and Tehran. Indeed, the decision to seek Congressional support presented an opportunity for the administration. If various domestic actors in the United States feared that any intervention could easily extend beyond the CW context and drag the U.S. into the broader conflict, so too did Assad and his main sponsors, Russia and Iran. The administration sought to directly exploit this, suggesting that while U.S. objectives and the associated military commitment would be limited, the effect on Assad’s chemical capability would have a direct bearing on the balance between the regime and the opposition in the civil war. General Dempsey provided some insights into the planned targets of U.S. action, telling a hearing these would include “targets directly linked to the control of chemical weapons, but without exposing those chemical weapons to a loss of security. Secondly, the means of delivery. And third, those things that the regime uses, for example air defense, long-range missiles and rockets, in order to protect those chemical weapons or in some cases deliver them.”⁶⁰ On 4 September, Hagel argued that, “Limiting Assad’s ability to threaten the opposition with chemical weapons would weaken his hand and strengthen theirs.”⁶¹ Similarly, Secretary of State John Kerry argued, “the consequence of degrading his chemical capacity inevitably will also have downstream impact on his military capacity.”⁶²

Above all else, the administration sought to convey to Assad and his sponsors a sense of growing momentum in favor of military action. Administration officials hoped the application of force would have a coercive effect on Damascus. Dempsey stated as much on 4 September: “We believe that Assad may respond to the pressure of limited strikes with a greater interest in a diplomatic solution.”⁶³ Ultimately, Washington did not have to follow through with air strikes. While the looming threat of military action proved sufficient to prompt a disarmament deal, however, the flow of coercive influence was not a straightforward one between Washington and Damascus. Moscow played a crucial role in shaping events.

THE DISARMAMENT DEAL

On his first visit to Moscow as Secretary of State in May 2013, John Kerry had been asked by President Obama “to make clear to President Putin that we knew definitively what Assad was doing” in the chemical sphere. According to Kerry, he also “warned the Russians” that the U.S. “would take action in response to the regime’s chemical weapons misdeeds, however isolated.” This resounded with President Putin, who

⁵⁸ Rhodes, *The World as it is*, p.pp.232-23.

⁵⁹ John Kerry, *Every Day is Extra* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), p.531.

⁶⁰ Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 4 September 2013 (Washington, DC: U.S.GPO, 2014), p. 43, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-syria-weighing-the-obama-administrations-response/>

⁶¹ Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 4 September 2013 (Washington, DC: U.S.GPO, 2014), p.104, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-syria-weighing-the-obama-administrations-response/>

⁶² Full Transcript: Kerry, Hagel and Dempsey testify at Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria. Washington Post, 3 September 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2013/09/03/35ae1048-14ca-11e3-b182-1b3bb2eb474c_story.html?utm_term=.b50094ee28d1 (accessed 11 August 2017)

⁶³ Syria: Weighing the Obama Administration’s Response, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 4 September 2013 (Washington, DC: U.S.GPO, 2014), <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/hearing-syria-weighing-the-obama-administrations-response/>

“made clear that if there was a dangerous moment--institutions of the state collapsing and stockpiles of the world’s worse weapons unsecured—we might work together to seek their safe removal.”⁶⁴

Some four months later, and following the Ghouta attack of 20 August, Russia publicly announced on 9 September an idea for a disarmament initiative that would see Syria give up its chemical arsenal, dismantle production facilities and accede to the CWC. The idea put plans for U.S. military action on hold and offered the prospect of a last-minute diplomatic solution to the crisis. Having ramped up its rhetoric over military action, it is unsurprising that the Obama administration sought to take the credit for this late diplomatic intervention. Kerry, for example, was emphatic in his view that, “the credible threat of force that has been on the table for these last weeks” was the reason “why this idea has any potential legs at all, and why it is that the Russians have reached out to the Syrians, and why the Syrians have initially suggested they might be interested.”⁶⁵

The specific origins of the Russian proposal can be traced to the margins of the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg on 5-6 September where Presidents Obama and Putin held a private discussion. During their conversation, “Putin broached the possibility of having the international community step in to secure the chemical weapons stockpile in Syria and transport it out of the country to be destroyed”. While Obama “wasn’t optimistic” about this idea, he instructed Kerry to continue discussing it with Russian Minister Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “particularly since it seemed increasingly unlikely we would succeed in Congress”.⁶⁶ Dmitri Trenin has written that Putin specifically “offered Obama a deal to rid Syria of chemical weapons in exchange for the United States abstaining from attacking it.”⁶⁷ Subsequently, on 9 September, in an off-the-cuff response to a media question about what Assad could do to avoid military action, Kerry replied, “Sure. He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it without delay, and allow the full and total accounting. But he isn’t about to do it and it can’t be done, obviously.”⁶⁸

Within hours, and having conferred with President Putin, Lavrov got in touch with Kerry to say “they were prepared to make a statement” taking up the “offer to press Assad to get the chemical weapons out of Syria”.⁶⁹ By coincidence or otherwise, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem was in Moscow for talks at the time, and so Lavrov conveyed the proposal directly to his diplomatic counterpart.⁷⁰ On 10 September, Moallem announced Syria would stop making CW, disclose its existing CW capabilities and sign the CWC.⁷¹ Moscow and Washington then concluded a framework deal on 14 September, after three days of talks in Geneva. Under the deal, the Assad regime would give up its CW for destruction and sign the CWC, in return for U.S. military intervention being taken off the table.⁷²

64 Kerry, *Every Day is Extra*, pp.525-526

65 Proposed Authorization to Use Military Force in Syria, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, 113th Congress, 1st Session, 10 September 2013, HASC No. 113-55 (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2014), p. 7.

66 Kerry, *Every Day is Extra*, p.537.

67 Dmitri Trenin, *What is Russia Up to in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), p.51.

68 Kerry, *Every Day is Extra*, p.537.

69 Kerry, *Every Day is Extra*, p.537.

70 Julian Borger and Patrick Wintour, ‘Russia calls on Syria to hand over chemical weapons’, *Guardian*, 9 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/russia-syria-hand-over-chemical-weapons> (accessed 11 January 2018).

71 Julian Borger, Dan Roberts, Spencer Ackerman and Nicholas Watt, ‘Syria pledges to sign chemical weapons treaty and reveal scale of stockpile’, *Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/10/russia-un-syrian-chemical-weapons> (accessed 14 January 2018).

72 Julian Borger, Dan Roberts, Spencer Ackerman and Nicholas Watt, ‘Syria pledges to sign chemical weapons treaty and reveal scale of stockpile’, *The Guardian*, 10 September 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/10/russia-un-syrian-chemical-weapons>. Reaching the agreement was facilitated by several months of prior secret bilateral talks on what would be required technically if an opportunity arose to remove Syria’s CW. See Philipp C. Bleek and Nicholas J. Kramer, “Eliminating Syria’s Chemical Weapons: Implications for Addressing Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Threats,” *Nonproliferation Review* 23, nos. 1-2 (Feb.-Mar. 2016).

THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW: ORIGINS OF AN IMPORTANT ASSURANCE

Russia's diplomatic role was pivotal and demonstrates the centrality of assurance to the coercive effort that moved the Assad regime to agree to CW disarmament. In regards to Syria, its most important ally in the Middle East, Moscow had from the outset been determined to avoid any form of American intervention, however limited. Previous western interventions in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya had taught Russia much about the dangers of US/western mission creep. In each of those cases, the scope of the intervention became more significant as events progressed, and Russia feared that following a military response to CW use in Syria the United States would be drawn more deeply into the broader conflict.

The disarmament deal primarily arose therefore from a Russian desire to prevent the Americans from taking military action. While Moscow continued to deny that Assad was responsible for using CW, the use of nerve agent to such devastating effect at Ghouta, and the international outrage this prompted, was seen by Moscow to have significantly raised the stakes for the Obama administration because its red line had been so publicly and obviously crossed. Securing the deal with Syria on the CWC also boosted Russia's credibility as an actor on the international stage, one that "could deal with Americans as equals."⁷³

While Moscow saw the disarmament initiative as central to removing U.S. intervention from the equation, it still had to convince Damascus to go along. The regime was being asked to give up a capability that had formed the bedrock of its strategic deterrent against external, primarily Israeli, intervention. Moreover, it was being asked to give up a seemingly useful military capability in the midst of a civil war. Syria would not have given up this capability lightly, but the rulers in Damascus understood that Moscow's continued support for Assad was essential to his government's survival and so this took priority in his risk calculus. In short, Russia's patronage and involvement added necessary assurance against regime change. This made it palatable and even desirable for Syria to comply with the coercive demands to give up its CW arsenal. It is not clear what specific incentives Moscow gave Syria at the time, but Russia's subsequent military intervention to prop up the regime in 2015 hints at some additional form of security assurance for Damascus, beyond the immediate assurance of taking U.S. intervention off the table.

In sum, compellence after Ghouta was characterized by a more credible threat of American action. The president and other administration officials repeatedly stated in public their intention to act, and the U.S. made specific military preparations to move on short order. The decision to seek congressional approval worked against the effort to convey resolve, but Russia believed Obama might ultimately act even without congressional authorization, and Moscow's perception of U.S. credibility was the key driver. By hinting that military strikes would target much of Syria's capabilities for using CW,⁷⁴ the coercive threat would degrade a capability the regime had relied upon to help break a stalemate in the civil war and thereby increase the risk to the regime. That the U.S. threat had the potential to increase the risks to Assad's survival was certainly perceived to be the case in Moscow. The Russians were unwilling to take the risk of Washington launching even a limited operation against CW-related targets because of the potential for limited interventions to escalate. Moscow's persuasion of Assad to trade his CW program to remove the threat of western intervention was a logical outcome in this regard and Russia's involvement provided the assurance component required to achieve compellence success.

After Ghouta the U.S. and its allies clearly planned to conduct air strikes, but they did not do so simply to impose punishment. They were not aiming to maximize costs in terms of the rubble created, but rather to hold at risk something the Assad regime valued in relation to its regime survival motivations. And by creating fear in Moscow about the longer term consequences, coercion also brought about Russian diplomatic involvement, which indirectly took care of the assurance component of coercion. It must be

⁷³ Trenin, *What is Russia Up To In the Middle East*, p.51

⁷⁴ France also planned to participate and had its own set of targets related to Syria's ability to employ CW. Lewis and Tertrais, "The Thick Red Line," 85-86.

recognized of course that, “it was harder for the administration to claim this as a strategic success because of the improvised way it arrived.”⁷⁵

PRESIDENT TRUMP AND SYRIA’S RETURN TO CHEMICAL WEAPONS USE

The framework agreement negotiated by the U.S. and Russia in September 2013 initiated a complex effort to remove and dismantle Assad’s chemical arsenal on an ambitious timeline. In late June 2014, the OPCW confirmed Syria had handed over all of its declared chemical stockpile for destruction. This was a significant achievement, but not a complete success.

The promise of this diplomatic solution was soon shown to be incomplete when there were fresh allegations of CW use by the Assad regime in April 2014. Attacks on three villages in northern Syria involving improvised chlorine bombs dropped from helicopters suggested the regime had resorted once again to low-level CW use.⁷⁶ Further confirmed chlorine attacks occurred in May 2015 and September 2016.⁷⁷ Similar to previous incidents, the attacks came during periods when the rebels had gained momentum. Indeed, the beleaguered state of Assad’s forces by the time of the 2015 attack was one of the factors that prompted Moscow to formally intervene in the war on Assad’s side.⁷⁸ Whether or not this fulfilled on an assurance given to Assad in September 2013 remains to be seen.

This was the situation inherited by President Trump in January 2017. For the Assad regime, the indicators seemed largely positive. While Donald Trump sought to cultivate an aura of unpredictability, he was clearly keen to avoid becoming entangled in the messy Syrian conflict, particularly having made “America First” the central pillar of his electoral campaign.⁷⁹ In March 2017, soon after the president took office, senior administration officials signaled that President Trump had abandoned Obama’s “Assad must go” policy. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley remarked that, “Our priority is no longer to sit there and focus on getting Assad out,”⁸⁰ while White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer claimed that, “With respect to Assad, there is a political reality that we have to accept in terms of where we are right now.”⁸¹ Thus, at the outset of his presidency, there was little in Trump’s emerging Syria policy to trouble Damascus on questions of CW use or regime change. If anything, President Trump’s initial anti-interventionist stance, combined with a strong desire to forge closer relations with Moscow, provided too much assurance. Assad may now have assumed that his position in power was secure from action by external players no matter what he did. But this situation would change dramatically with the events of Khan Sheikhoun.

TESTING TRUMP: THE ATTACK AT KHAN SHEIKHOUN

On 4 April 2017, a large-scale CW attack was reported in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in the Idlib governate in northwestern Syria. Details quickly emerged of a sarin attack carried out by government forces - attribution was subsequently confirmed by the independent U.N.-OPCW Joint Investigative Mechanism

75 Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America’s Role in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), p.23

76 “Second Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria: Key Findings,” S/1212/2014, Technical Secretariat, Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, 10 September 2014, https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/Fact_Finding_Mission/s-1212-2014_e_.pdf, p. 8.

77 Yonette Joseph and Christina Caron, “Burning Eyes, Foaming Mouths: Years of Suspected Chemical Attacks in Syria,” *New York Times*, 8 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/08/world/middleeast/syria-chemical-attacks-assad.html>

78 “A game-changer in Latakia?” *The Economist*, 26 September 2015, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/09/26/a-game-changer-in-latakia>

79 International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The future of U.S. Syria policy,” *Strategic Comments* (2017), Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. ix-xi.

80 Michelle Nichols, “U.S. priority on Syria no longer focused on ‘getting Assad out’: Haley,” *Reuters*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-haley/u-s-priority-on-syria-no-longer-focused-on-getting-assad-out-haley-idU.S.KBN1712QL>

81 “White House says U.S. must accept ‘political reality’ in Syria”, *Reuters*, 31 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-whitehouse/white-house-says-u-s-must-accept-political-reality-in-syria-idU.S.KBN1722LV>

(JIM) - that left approximately 100 dead and at least 200 more suffering from acute exposure.⁸² The attack represented a new escalation in CW use on the part of Damascus and revealed the limitations of the agreement that had rolled back much of Assad's chemical arsenal.

President Trump's response was direct and forceful. Two days after the attack, U.S. destroyers in the eastern Mediterranean struck a Syrian airbase in Homs province with 59 cruise missiles. In justifying the attack, Trump claimed, "[The chemical weapons attack] crossed a lot of lines for me. When you kill innocent children, innocent babies - babies, little babies - with a chemical gas that is so lethal - people were shocked to hear what gas it was - that crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line. Many, many lines."⁸³ The president also indicated a shift in his thinking on Assad: "It's very, very possible - and I will tell you, it's already happened that my attitude toward Syria and Assad has changed very much."⁸⁴ The journalist Bob Woodward later reported that after the chemical attack Trump told his Defense Secretary Jim Mattis that he wanted to have Assad killed, but Mattis ignored this request and pushed for a more limited air strike option instead. Both Trump and Mattis have denied this report.⁸⁵

According to Woodward, the NSC prepared three options for the president: a large, medium, and very small air strike. The more extensive strike would have used 200 cruise missiles to take out much of the regime's airpower, an option that might have hinted at a willingness to hold regime survival at risk. Trump however selected the middle option of using 60 missiles (one of which fell short of the target after launch). Trump initially wanted to consider follow-up attacks, but Secretary Mattis pushed back out of fear of triggering escalation with Russia, and the president eventually lost interest.⁸⁶

In attacking Khan Sheikhoun, Assad again crossed a threshold of tolerance, this time aggravating a U.S. administration that had viewed his regime with more ambivalence than the preceding one. What, then, explains Assad's chemical escalation on this occasion? The answer lies in a combination of domestic drivers related to the civil war and a sense of impunity conferred by the earlier diplomatic initiative, fueled by the change in U.S. administration.

To understand Khan Sheikhoun we must first consider developments in the civil war, particularly major rebel offensives launched in northeastern Damascus and northern Hama Governorate in the weeks preceding the CW attack. The offensive in Damascus began on 19 March with the rebels advancing to the Abbasid Square area.⁸⁷ Although repelled by government forces, the offensive was significant as it represented the first time in two years that the opposition had come so close to the capital's center. This attack was followed two days later by another offensive launched from rebel-controlled Khan Sheikhoun that captured several villages and brought opposition forces to the outskirts of Hama.⁸⁸ The combined attacks marked the largest

82 "Seventh report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," S/2017/904, United Nations Security Council, 26 October 2017, p. 30, <http://undocs.org/S/2017/904>.

83 "Remarks by President Trump and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan in Joint Press Conference," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 5 April 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-jordan-joint-press-conference/>.

84 Ibid.

85 BBC News, "Donald Trump denies discussing assassination of Syria's Assad," 5 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-45425413>, accessed 8 Nov. 2018.

86 Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), pp. 146-54.

87 See Ellen Francis and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian forces and rebels fight fierce clashes in northeast Damascus", Reuters, 19 March 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-jobar/syrian-forces-and-rebels-fight-fierce-clashes-in-northeast-damascus-idUKKBN16Q09Q>; and "'Intense' strikes pound east Damascus after rebel assault", AL-Monitor, 20 March 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/03/syria-conflict-syrie-conflict-syrie-conflict.html>.

88 "Seventh report of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism," S/2017/904, United Nations Security Council, 26 October 2017, p.21, <http://undocs.org/S/2017/904>.

offensive by rebel forces in months and highlighted the challenge still confronting Assad despite Russia's intervention in 2015.

Repelling the advance on Hama required air support from Russia, so it is unsurprising the Assad regime felt pressed to also exploit its own chemical capabilities.⁸⁹ Not only did the use of sarin complement the effects of conventional attacks on a significant rebel position, it sent a strong and highly visible message that, despite international scrutiny, the regime remained capable and willing to subject its adversaries to a horrific, chemical death. On a larger scale, the sarin use speaks to the sense of impunity that framed Assad's behavior during this period. Ironically, the diplomatic initiative that led to Syria signing the CWC had, as far as Assad was concerned, provided strong assurances against hostile external intervention by taking the bite out of Washington's threats. Russia's direct involvement provided additional cover for Assad. The sense of assurance was bolstered by clear evidence that President Trump did not share Obama's view that Assad should step down. Low-level use from 2014 through 2017 had elicited criticism but no tangible response and, on the whole, the Assad regime perceived the advantages of escalating its CW use as outweighing the risks.

Beyond this, there is also a question regarding whether Assad and his advisors miscalculated on how President Trump might respond. Two aspects are relevant including Trump's tendency to behave impulsively, at times driven by immediate emotional responses. By his own admission, the images of children killed with CW directly influenced his decision on air strikes.⁹⁰ Second, one of the few constants in Trump's policymaking is his desire to dismantle his predecessor's legacy.⁹¹ Obama's record on Syria has been a clear target in this regard. In the immediate aftermath of Khan Sheikhoun, President Trump made much of Obama's failed red line: "I think the Obama administration had a great opportunity to solve this crisis a long time ago when he said the red line in the sand. And when he didn't cross that line after making the threat, I think that set us back a long ways, not only in Syria, but in many other parts of the world, because it was a blank threat."⁹² Trump's decision to strike Syria, then, was heavily shaped by a desire to contrast his decisive approach with his predecessor's uncertainty and inaction.⁹³ This was despite Donald Trump advising Obama in August and September 2013 not to use military force in response to the Ghouta attack. On 29 August 2013, for example, he Tweeted, "What will we get for bombing Syria besides more debt and a possible long term conflict? Obama needs Congressional approval."⁹⁴

To what extent did the potential unpredictability of Trump's approach figure into Assad's thinking? Three scenarios are possible here. First, Assad and his advisors may have been blinkered by seemingly favorable indicators and failed to grasp the factors that would provoke Trump into a forceful backlash. Second, the Assad regime may well have accounted for Trump's volatility but decided that, on balance, any action by Washington would likely be limited in scope and something the regime could weather. This interpretation would have been bolstered by Russia's heavy military investment in Syria. Third, and most likely, is that it

⁸⁹ "Russians bombing Syrian rebels near Hama, Syrian military source says," Reuters, 24 March 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria/russians-bombing-syrian-rebels-near-hama-syrian-military-source-says-idUKKBN16V14A>.

⁹⁰ "Remarks by President Trump and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan in Joint Press Conference," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 5 April 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-jordan-joint-press-conference/>.

⁹¹ David Smith, "The anti-Obama: Trump's drive to destroy his predecessor's legacy," *The Guardian*, 11 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/may/11/donald-trump-barack-obama-legacy>.

⁹² "Remarks by President Trump and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan in Joint Press Conference", Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 5 April 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-jordan-joint-press-conference/>.

⁹³ See, for example, "Statement by President Trump on Syria," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 6 April 2017, <https://uk.usembassy.gov/statement-president-trump-syria/>.

⁹⁴ @realDonaldTrump, 29 August 2013, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/373146637184401408?lang=en>

was a combination of these scenarios, where the regime did not fully anticipate Trump's response but had, in any case, decided that any retaliation would be limited and its impact manageable.

FROM KHAN SHEIKHOUN TO DOUMA

Khan Sheikhoun marked an important milestone as it prompted the first punitive military strike by another state directly in response to Assad's use of CW. Unlike Obama, Trump acted without seeking congressional approval. This was followed, in June 2017, by a strong warning against further CW use. In a public statement, the White House Press Secretary noted, "The United States has identified potential preparations for another chemical weapons attack by the Assad regime that would likely result in the mass murder of civilians, including innocent children." The statement went on to say, "As we have previously stated, the United States is in Syria to eliminate the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. If, however, Mr. Assad conducts another mass murder attack using chemical weapons, he and his military will pay a heavy price."⁹⁵ Any hint that the administration might be willing to put regime survival at risk was quickly undercut however. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres that the top U.S. priority remained defeating IS and not weakening Assad's hold on power, and that the Washington would allow Moscow to determine the ultimate fate of the Syrian government.⁹⁶

The president and his supporters expected the demonstration of U.S. resolve through air strikes would restore deterrence against CW use. This did not prove to be the case, in part because the air strikes were launched in the absence of a broader strategy regarding Syria and the on-going civil war. Despite President Trump having established his willingness to take action, Assad's forces resumed low-level chlorine attacks the following month. In March 2018, following intelligence indicating preparations for another chlorine attack, Defense Secretary Mattis again publicly warned Syria that another gas attack would be "very unwise."⁹⁷ Despite all these efforts to restore deterrence, on 7 April 2018, Syria carried out a major CW attack in the Damascus suburb of Douma. This resulted in "casualty levels ranging from 40 to 70 deaths, including large numbers of children, and hundreds of chemical-related injuries."⁹⁸

Once again, President Trump responded forcefully. But this time the military response involved NATO allies France and the United Kingdom. From the outset of his presidency, Emmanuel Macron had set his own "red line" and promised retribution for further CW use in Syria, and the Douma incident saw this promise take concrete form.⁹⁹ In London, Theresa May ignored the precedent set by her predecessor on intervention in Syria and committed UK forces to action without seeking parliamentary approval.¹⁰⁰ All of this meant that on 14 April, one week after the CW attack, the three nations launched coordinated "precision strikes on targets associated with the chemical weapon capabilities of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad."¹⁰¹

This time, the U.S. and its partners launched 105 missiles against three sites. This seemed to reflect an assumption that dropping more bombs on more targets would strengthen the future deterrent message. The targets were all related to Syria's CW efforts, making them at least somewhat relevant to the task of degrading Syrian capabilities. But it was also clear that leaders in Washington, London, and Paris did not

95 "Statement from the Press Secretary," Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, 26 June 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-8/>.

96 Colum Lynch, Robbie Gramer, "Tillerson Ready to Let Russia Decide Assad's Fate," *Foreign Policy*, July 3, 2017.

97 Associated Press, "Mattis Warns Syrian Forces on Chemical Weapons Use," March 12, 2018.

98 "Interim Report of the OPCW Fact-finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of Alleged use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018," S/1645/2018, OPCW Technical Secretariat, 6 July 2018, p. 3, https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf.

99 "For France's Macron, Syria red lines were credibility test," *Reuters*, 14 April 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-macron/for-frances-macron-syria-red-lines-were-credibility-test-idU.S.KBN1HL0ZN>.

100 "Syria air strikes: Theresa May says action 'moral and legal,'" *BBC News*, 17 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-43775728>.

101 Andrew Adonis, "Theresa May's essential argument for Syria strikes is nonsensical", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/14/theresa-may-essential-argument-for-syria-strikes-nonsensical>

want to take any steps that might suggest a goal of regime change. There were good reasons for this – including the presence of Russian troops and Assad’s progress in the civil war – but the restraint likely weakened the coercive leverage of the April 2018 air strikes.

At the time of the attack, Syrian government forces were ascendant and the regime’s continuity seemed assured. In testimony shortly before the Douma attack, the Commander of U.S. Central Command General Joseph Votel assessed that the regime was winning the war and there was little likelihood that Assad would be toppled in the near future.¹⁰² So why did the Assad regime defy the U.S. warning and likelihood of further U.S. strikes and again escalate its use of CW? As before, the explanation combines Assad’s domestic imperatives with broader considerations of how the Syrian regime, strongly supported by Russia and Iran, perceived the likelihood and, more importantly, the potential costs of any international response.

Despite their superior position in the overall civil war, government forces still faced deeply entrenched pockets of resistance in Idlib and Ghouta.¹⁰³ Reclaiming and securing territory around the capital was the first priority and so, in February 2018, the regime launched a major offensive in eastern Ghouta. A French government assessment covering this period noted that, “the tactic adopted by pro-regime forces involved separating the various groups” that held sway in Ghouta, and in the lead-up to the Douma attack the regime had succeeded in splitting the rebel enclave into three distinct areas, each controlled by a different rebel faction.¹⁰⁴ Heavy air strikes and ground assaults took their toll and by the latter part of March, rebel leaders in two of these areas negotiated an evacuation to northern Syria.¹⁰⁵ In Douma, however, part of the dominant faction Jaysh al-Islam rejected the prospect of a negotiated evacuation and continued to resist regime forces. Assad, supported by his allies, responded with renewed air strikes and, on 7 April, Syrian forces launched a major CW attack.¹⁰⁶

With regard to domestic imperatives, the CW attack held important tactical and psychological value for the regime. Tactically, the continued resistance in Douma left Assad’s forces facing the prospect of a prolonged and draining conflict in a debilitating urban environment. In this context, CW served to “flush out enemy fighters sheltering in homes” forcing them to “engage in urban combat in conditions that are more favorable to the regime.”¹⁰⁷ The remaining rebels in Douma surrendered the day after this CW attack.¹⁰⁸ The regime’s continued use of chemicals also served an important psychological function, cultivating fear amongst the civilian population and undermining resistance to regime control.

The domestic imperatives are clear, but why did Trump’s willingness to take military action after Khan Sheikhoun fail to alter Assad’s calculations? The answer again reflects the limited costs Western powers were willing to impose relative to the regime’s motivations to use CW, and the strength of the assurance

¹⁰² “Hearing to Receive Testimony on United States Central Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2019 and the Future Years Defense Program,” U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, Washington, DC, 13 March 2018, pp. 39-40, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/18-24_03-13-18.pdf.

¹⁰³ Lisa Barrington, “Air strikes pound Syria’s last rebel strongholds, gas chokes civilians,” Reuters, 5 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/air-strikes-pound-syrias-last-rebel-strongholds-gas-chokes-civilians-idU.S.KBN1FP23M>.

¹⁰⁴ “National Assessment: Chemical Attack of 7 April 2018 (Douma, Eastern Ghouta, Syria). Syria’s Clandestine Chemical Weapon’s Programme,” French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 April 2018, p. 3, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/180414_-_syria_-fr_national_assessment_-_english-version_cle0c76b5.pdf; See also Aron Lund, “Assad’s Divide and Conquer Strategy is Working,” Foreign Policy 28 March 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/28/assads-divide-and-conquer-strategy-is-working/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ “Syrian forces kill 40 people in air strikes on Douma,” Middle East Eye, 6 April 2018, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-forces-resume-douma-air-attacks-claiming-rebel-shelling-1444347108>.

¹⁰⁷ “National Assessment: Chemical Attack of 7 April 2018 (Douma, Eastern Ghouta, Syria). Syria’s Clandestine Chemical Weapon’s Programme,” French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 14 April 2018, p. 3, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/180414_-_syria_-fr_national_assessment_-_english-version_cle0c76b5.pdf.

¹⁰⁸ Kareem Shaheen, “Douma inhabitants prepare to leave after deadly chemical attack,” 9 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/09/douma-inhabitants-prepare-leave-deadly-syria-chemical-attack>.

against external intervention perceived by Assad. First, the strikes ordered by President Trump in April 2017 did not impose any significant costs on the Assad regime. The 59 Tomahawk missiles that struck the Shayrat airbase did little to degrade broader Syrian CW capabilities, demonstrated by the fact that the regime was in a position to resume low-level attacks soon after the event. In July 2017, for example, the regime conducted a number of chlorine attacks on rebel held areas near Damascus.¹⁰⁹ Certainly, the U.S. intervention did not pose an existential threat to the regime – indeed it signaled an unwillingness to threaten that which Assad valued most.

Closely linked to the question of costs, was Washington’s desire to avoid unintended escalation that would place the U.S. in direct conflict with Russia. In the days leading up to the coalition strikes, the Defense Secretary Mattis made clear that one of his priorities was to stop any military response from “escalating out of control.”¹¹⁰ In her remarks justifying Britain’s military involvement, Prime Minister May similarly stated, “This was not about interfering in a civil war. And it was not about regime change [...] it was a limited, targeted and effective strike with clear boundaries that expressly sought to avoid escalation.”¹¹¹ The clear restraint in Western targeting made it clear that Russia’s stake in the conflict provided Assad with a strong measure of assurance and little incentive for his regime to show restraint. In addition, because President Trump so clearly lacked his predecessor’s commitment to the liberal world order and a U.S. leadership role in maintaining it, this paradoxically left Assad’s Russian patron with less reason to be concerned that an initially limited U.S. military action might escalate into something more. Hence, they had less motivation to pressure Assad to avoid actions that might provoke U.S. military retaliation.

In late summer 2018, as Syria and its Russian ally prepared for a possibly final offensive against one of the last opposition strongholds in Idlib province, the Trump administration issued new deterrent warnings. These included broad messages about not inflicting mass civilian casualties and renewed warnings specifically not to use CW. The messaging came from national security advisor John Bolton, UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, the State Department, the White House press secretary, and the president’s own tweets.¹¹² As of this writing, Syria has not launched any new major chemical attacks, but it is hard to determine if this reflects an eventual success for deterrence. After two prior rounds of air strikes, Assad’s regime might calculate that the United States and its allies would feel pressure to escalate their response after another CW use. But the constraints on earlier strikes, intended to avoid any possible confrontation with Russia, and the frequent messages that the Trump administration’s involvement in Syria is solely to defeat IS and limit Iranian troop activities, suggest that the U.S. message still provides too much assurance, which would tend to undercut the coercive part of the message. More important, the Assad regime is so close to achieving victory in the civil war that the military incentives to use CW have diminished considerably. Non-use of CW in the most recent Idlib campaign thus far most likely reflects a lack of military necessity rather than a success of deterrence. If the situation on the ground in Syria were to change in ways that convince Assad that CW use is once again desirable to ensure regime survival, we predict the regime would again resort to this approach and deterrence would fail once more.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah Almukhtar, “Most Chemical Attacks in Syria Get Little Attention. Here Are 34 Confirmed Cases,” *New York Times*, 13 April 2018.

¹¹⁰ Mattis cited in Julian Borger, Angelique Chrisafis and Andrew Roth, “Syria crisis: U.S. concerned military strike would ‘escalate out of control,’” *The Guardian*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/12/syria-deconfliction-hotline-in-use-by-russia-and-us-says-kremlin>.

¹¹¹ “PM’s press conference statement on Syria: 14 April 2018,” Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, HM Government, 14 April 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-press-conference-statement-on-syria-14-april-2018>

¹¹² Sommer Brokaw, “Bolton: U.S. will act ‘strongly’ if Syria uses chemical weapons again,” UPI, August 22, 2018; Conor Finnegan and Elizabeth McLaughlin, “US escalates warning to Assad regime, Russia not to use chemical weapons in Idlib,” ABC News, Sept. 4, 2018; Ben Evansky, “Haley warns Syria, Russia, Iran against using chemical weapons: Don’t bet against the US,” Fox News, Sept. 6, 2018.

DRAWING LESSONS FOR NATO

In this paper, we have examined external efforts to pressure the Assad regime over its use of chemical weapons. As the US, France and the UK are all NATO members, and they have been the main coercive partners in the Syria CW context, it is appropriate to consider what some of the lessons are from this case that hold relevance for the Alliance.

Before delving into lessons it is important to reiterate the US deterrence objectives set by the Obama administration in this context, which carried through into the Trump period, and were also shared by US allies. These were essentially threefold.

1. Prevent CW falling into the hands of non-state actors as a direct result of compromised security around Syria's CW stockpile
2. Prevent the regime purposefully proliferating CW to non-state actors
3. Prevent the regime from using CW against internal targets including the opposition and associated civilian populations

On the first two objectives, a case could arguably be made that deterrence worked because the regime did not lose control of its CW arsenal, and there does not appear to have been any willing transfers of CW, for example, to Hezbollah.

On the third objective, of course, deterrence failed multiple times both in the Obama and Trump periods. One of the challenges here of course is that Washington and its allies were not seeking to prevent CW attacks on their own territory or to extend deterrent protection to a formally allied country. Rather, this case effectively involved extending deterrence to civilians inside another country. This was always going to be more challenging than deterring direct threats to the coercing parties or to one of their allies.

CREDIBILITY IS IMPORTANT BUT UNDERSTANDING THE TARGET OF COERCION IS EQUALLY SO

The first lesson from Syria is that credibility is important to coercive outcomes but it is not alone decisive because multiple factors play a role in this respect. A state's, or alliance's, reputation based on past actions may well of course play an important role in convincing the target to comply or otherwise. But also of importance, as this case highlights, are domestic factors in the target state such as regime-survival motivations. While it is important for a coercing party to pay close attention to their own capability and political will to deliver on coercive threats, and to effectively communicate this along with what it is they wish to preserve or to change, it is also essential to understand the target's domestic drivers.

In the Syria context CW represented an asset that the Assad regime sought to use on multiple occasions against the opposition to tilt the civil war in its favor. The regime did not feel bound by international norms related to the non-use of CW and its CW tactics evolved during the conflict from small-scale attacks to designed to terrorise and demoralize, to much larger scale use designed to achieve important tactical objectives such as clearing the opposition from specific urban areas. When faced with such strong domestic imperatives to use CW –directly related to regime survival – and the apparent lack of moral constraints on the Assad regime, it was arguably always going to be a challenging task to deter use, particularly when the US and its allies' stomach for any significant level of military intervention in the civil war was small to say the least. This lack of stomach – for example, to credibly threaten regime survival -- was based primarily on a desire to avoid being dragged deep into another conflict in the Middle East, to avoid unintended escalation that would place them in direct conflict with Russia, and a wariness about toppling the regime as this would

come with the serious risk of opening a political vacuum in Syria for radical opposition groups to fill.

THE CENTRALITY OF ASSURANCE

All coercive threats require assurance and this becomes much more important when regime survival is in play. Even if a threat to impose punishment is credible, deterrence can still fail if the associated assurance is not credible. If the target does not believe the promise to withhold punishment should it refrain from taking action, then its cost-benefit calculus is unlikely to favor restraint as it will still suffer costs even if it complies. The Syria CW case provides us with strong lessons on the role that assurances do, could and should play alongside coercion. It provides examples of where assurances were limited or absent on one hand, and too strong on the other hand.

For example, prior to the Ghouta attack, senior US and allied government officials made it clear there was no political future in Syria in which President Assad could play a role. This public preference for regime change in Damascus complicated efforts to deter CW use. If a target state believes the coercer might try to engineer regime change no matter what it does, its incentives to comply with coercive threats, however narrowly or broadly focused, are effectively removed. We find no evidence in our research that the Obama administration sought to convey an assurance that it would not still pursue regime change as long as Assad refrained from using CW.

Another example involves the coercive diplomatic phase after Ghouta, which led to the US-Russia deal to get Syria to sign the CWC and give up its CW capability, Moscow's political intervention effectively provided an assurance to Damascus that took US intervention off the table. Moscow's 2015 military intervention in the civil war to support Assad also hints at an additional assurance Damascus may have been given. Russia's diplomatic role was pivotal and demonstrates the centrality of assurance to the coercive effort that moved the Assad regime to agree to CW disarmament. In regards to Syria, its most important ally in the Middle East, Moscow had from the outset been determined to avoid any form of American intervention, however limited. Previous western interventions in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya had taught Russia much about the dangers of US/western mission creep. In each of those cases, the scope of the intervention became more significant as events progressed, and Russia feared that following a military response to CW use in Syria the United States would be drawn more deeply into the broader conflict. Moscow's actions were underpinned of course by major Russian interests directly linked to Assad's survival.

COMMUNICATING RED LINES

Probably the most obvious lesson of the Syria case is that leaders should not publicly declare a red line if they are not prepared to back it up with military action, and if such a commitment is out of sync with the broader thrust of a government's, or an alliance's, broader policy preferences in any particular context. Obama's phrasing was a spontaneous, "unscripted" reaction to a reporter's question. Once the president made the comment, however, other administration spokespeople repeated it, and it became interpreted as a clear deterrent commitment. The red line comment created certain expectations when allegations regarding the Assad regime's use of CW emerged in the public sphere. Indeed, in his answer to a follow-up question during August press conference, Obama threatened "enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons." The "enormous consequences" phrasing implied a significant military strike if the warning was not heeded. If President Obama had not made the red line comment, his administration might have had more room to send private messages to the Assad regime that CW use would spur the United States to increase military assistance to non-Islamist rebel groups. But once the administration had committed publicly to the red line, expectations were created that meant most observers would perceive the option of assisting rebel groups as an insufficient response.

Perhaps most damaging to the deterrent effort was that the precise terms of the red line communicated to

Assad were vague and open to interpretation. The level of CW use that would prompt consequences – “a whole bunch” – were not made clear. Did the red line apply to any use of CW or only attacks above a certain, unclear threshold? The Assad regime clearly assumed the latter and sought to take advantage by keeping attacks below the U.S. threshold at least until Ghouta. There was also a tension between the Obama administration’s official position that ‘Assad must go’ and its clear reluctance to directly intervene to bring this about.

EXPLOITING AMBIGUITY, UNCERTAINTY AND CONFUSION

Finally, the Syria CW case provides lessons on how adversaries or non-allied external players can seek to exploit ambiguity and uncertainty to undermine coercive effects. Perhaps most notable was the Assad government’s effort to make the attribution of CW attribution more challenging by actively cultivating confusion through claims of opposition use and employing improvised CW. This effort was also pursued on the international diplomatic stage. For example, the Syrian government was the first party to write to the UN Secretary General to request an investigation of CW use – specifically the alleged chemical use on 19 March 2013 in Khan al Asal near Aleppo. Moreover, Moscow sought to provide diplomatic cover for its Syrian client by constantly denying that the Assad regime had used CW and pointing the finger at the opposition.

