

Syria will test the durability of Obama's grand strategy of foreign policy restraint

Only a few weeks ago, commentators expected a showdown between President Obama and Congress over military intervention in Syria. Now, after a chance proposal to disarm the regime of its chemical weapons, Obama faces accusations of incoherence over foreign policy.

Michael Lumbers reviews Obama's handling of the Syrian conflict, arguing that his foreign policy agenda is a subtle but unmistakable move away from America's post-war interventionist role. In this light, the agreement on Syria is the best possible outcome for Obama. However, given the current instability of the Middle East, it remains to be seen if this strategy is sustainable.



The last month will likely not be remembered as Barack Obama's shining hour. The almost surreal spectacle of an American president, in two closely timed nationally televised addresses, effectively balking at punishing Bashar al-Assad for gassing his own citizens, action that he had repeatedly insisted was needed for enforcing international norms prohibiting the use of weapons of mass destruction, was without parallel.

Obama's decidedly uneven performance, predictably, has provoked charges of a **rudderless** administration, one either unwilling or unable to formulate a **coherent strategy** for Syria's spiraling civil war and execute it. This impression was cemented when Obama, looking for a way out of the corner into which he had painted himself, was seemingly **outfoxed** by his sparring partner, Russian President Vladimir Putin, into embracing a **hole-ridden proposal** for disarming Syria of its chemical weapons that offers Assad plenty of scope for obfuscation and delay.

Yet while there is margin for censuring Obama's handling of the Syrian conflict, his critics have it wrong when they fault him for lack of consistency or of a distinct worldview. Aversion to foreign entanglements, particularly in the Middle East after an exhausting decade of fruitless war, has been a hallmark of this administration's strategic thinking. The two obvious outliers to this prevailing orthodoxy, Afghanistan and Libya, were both undertaken with considerable ambivalence. Having ordered a surge of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in the fall of 2009 after agonizing



President Barack Obama meets in the Situation Room with his national security advisors to discuss strategy in Syria (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

deliberation, Obama soon developed buyer's remorse and ordered a drawdown of troops at a rate faster than many of his military advisers thought prudent; he is now **flirting with the option** of withdrawing all of them after 2014. As for the 2011 intervention in Libya, Obama only acted when he was convinced U.S. objectives could be met at an acceptable cost: no boots on the ground, air strikes at the front end of the operation followed promptly by a transfer of responsibility to allies.

His meteoric political rise fueled by war-weary popular sentiment, Obama's priorities as he entered the

White House were largely determined by the financial crisis and strategic overstretch he inherited. His primary foreign policy task, as he sees it, is bringing America's commitments abroad into closer alignment with its finite resources. That means more self-restraint, less vigorous promotion of democracy and regime change, investing in renewal and reform at home, avoiding involvement in conflicts of dubious strategic value, encouraging other powers to play a more substantive role in managing global order and judiciously applying more attention towards the dynamic Asia-Pacific. Taken together, this agenda amounts to a subtle, yet unmistakable, renunciation of the expansive conception of American power harbored by all of Obama's post-war predecessors and of the received wisdom that U.S. security is inextricably linked to every corner of the globe. Embroilment in Syria represents the greatest threat to his strategic vision.

Small wonder, then, that Obama grasped Putin's lifeline as an alternative to a military strike that had always been more about upholding the credibility of an offhandedly declared red line than effecting change on the ground in Syria. Making a difference in a conflict as complex as Syria's, where it's difficult to distinguish friend from foe among opposition forces and Assad's regime has demonstrated a resiliency few observers initially thought possible, would require action far more robust than the president has been willing to contemplate.

Seen in this light, the recent announcement of a [framework agreement](#) to remove chemical weapons from Syria constituted the best possible outcome for Obama. Had he instead pressed for a military response, he likely would have failed to secure Congressional authorization, then leaving him in the unenviable position of either meekly acceding to the whims of Capitol Hill or defying the expressed will of Congress and the [anti-interventionist sentiment](#) of voters. Moreover, Assad could very well have [upped the ante](#) by replying to a limited missile strike with further chemical weapons attacks against his opponents, thereby compelling Obama to choose between a humiliating climb-down or further escalation. Punitive action against Damascus would also likely [undermine ascendant moderate factions in Tehran](#) by confirming the image of American hostility, potentially derailing the administration's efforts to resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear program –yet another Middle East imbroglio- peacefully.

The next few weeks will reveal much about Obama's intentions. Should an eventual Security Council resolution on the disarmament of Syria's chemical weapons not be accompanied by a firm, unambiguous statement from the White House promising swift retaliation for any delay or violation, it can be assumed that he will continue searching for ways of staying out of the fighting. Bets are this president is willing to acquiesce to a fudging on deadlines; once settled on a grand strategy, statesmen typically try to stay on course in spite of distractions.

A larger question is whether Obama's grand strategy, which calls for considerably more self-denial to which Americans are traditionally accustomed when thinking about the world, can be sustained. Events in Syria will be instrumental in determining its fate. If the conflict can be contained largely within Syria's borders, Assad's chemical weapons are efficiently brought under international control, an agreeable compromise on Iran's nuclear program is found and America's economy steadily recovers, Obama will be able to make the case to voters and the foreign policy establishment alike that a policy of restraint kept the peace and fostered prosperity, thereby creating momentum for its perpetuation after he leaves office.

Events, however, could take a dramatic turn for the worse: sectarian violence and refugee outflows might yield a regionalized war, developments on the ground may threaten or embolden Tehran to advance towards nuclear breakout capability or Islamist elements could consolidate control over large swaths of Syria or gain access to chemical weapons. Any one of these scenarios would be used as ammunition by Obama's many critics, already quick to denounce him as an apologist for U.S. power, for their contention that his strategy of retrenchment has endangered American security.

For a president so determined to avoid being bogged down in the Middle East, the irony that much of his foreign policy legacy will be defined there is striking.

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