

AUGUST 28, 2013

COMMENTARY

How Does This End?

By LTG David W. Barno, USA (Ret.)

President Obama is poised to launch a military strike designed to “deter and degrade” Syrian President Bashar al-Asad’s ability to deliver chemical weapons against his own people. The strike will reportedly be limited in scope, aimed at smashing elements of Asad’s rockets, artillery and headquarters capable of launching chemical attacks. It will ostensibly come without risk to American lives, launched from U.S. Navy guided missile ships in the eastern Mediterranean.

But before the first U.S. cruise missile leaves its launcher for a Syrian target, the American people deserve to know the answer to David Petraeus’ famous question from the Iraq war: “Tell me how this ends?”

If the United States chooses to launch a limited strike, the most optimistic result is that Asad is chastened by U.S. military power, and deterred from further use of his chemical weaponry. In this scenario, the U.S. then steps back out of the conflict and Asad’s forces and the Syrian rebels go back to killing each other with conventional weapons.

In the real world of unintended (and unwelcome) consequences, all manner of unpleasant alternative scenarios could rapidly materialize. A limited U.S. strike could just as easily provoke Asad. The narrow scope of most likely U.S. action would still leave the bulk of Syria’s large and potent military untouched. Asad could next decide to strike civilians and rebels even more ruthlessly – to include even wider use of chemicals – daring the U.S. to escalate further. In this scenario, Asad emerges even stronger, having successfully faced down U.S. military power.

Reactions to a U.S. strike could include problematic regional and international responses as well. The Iranians would likely ramp up deliveries of military supplies and weaponry to Damascus. Teheran could also up the ante and prompt its regional ally

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Hezbollah to undertake terrorist attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets in the region.

The Russians, a key Syrian supporter, are also unlikely to be intimidated by American military strikes. They are more likely to lash out, increasing both their public and covert support for the Asad regime. Russia could also be expected to make even more trouble at the United Nations, rousing an anti-western coalition of countries who are deeply opposed to foreign interventions in other nations' internal affairs.

The problem with limited military strikes is that they almost never remain limited. The most likely outcome of such a strike now in Syria is that the war goes on with the regime emboldened, the region further inflamed, and continuing pressure on Washington to do more as the bloodshed continues. Asad will not back down; his survival is at stake. There is no simply no good end in sight. The slope inevitably leads quickly downhill to deeper and deeper U.S. involvement. By initiating military strikes against Syria, the United States inevitably becomes a party to this vicious conflict. In doing so now, it will inextricably take on some responsibility for its resolution. Better to make a reasoned judgment to deliberately refrain from action than to enter a conflict from which an exit is impossible to fathom.

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