

COMMENTARY

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The Danger of Strategic Distraction

By Shawn Brimley

The United States will respond to the horrifying use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. It is in America's interests to be seen as leading the charge against such an abomination, and in the process help accelerate a dictator's departure. We should be under no illusions however that any use of force opens the door to a brighter future for Syria's oppressed and vulnerable population. Assad's departure will not end the civil war – it may even make things worse.

If President Obama feels he must employ U.S. military forces against aspects of the Syrian regime – so be it. I am confident that his advisors are seeking a way to maximize the pain on the regime without being drawn into a prolonged war. That will be a tough challenge but those are the likely contours of decision-making around the conference table in the Situation Room.

The larger danger of the United States being drawn into yet another war in the Middle East is that it consumes any possibility of seriously advancing an affirmative foreign policy agenda for the president's second term. Right now the basic foreign policy accomplishments of this administration are three: ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; killing Bin Laden; and rebalancing to Asia. The first two are major accomplishments but they essentially involved navigating through inherited challenges. Rebalancing to Asia is really the only affirmative foreign policy accomplishment that is likely to resonate beyond the daily headlines into the history books.

In the blink of an eye the first year of the second term will be over. Three years is not a lot of time to create new affirmative opportunities in foreign policy, reorient U.S. tools of statecraft in a meaningful way, and lock-in lasting accomplishments. Therefore any decision to use force in the Middle East needs to be considered as possibly

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obviating any chance to make substantial further forward progress in rebalancing to Asia.

As pressing as the challenge in Syria seems to be, it is not the long game. The story of the first fifty years of the 21st century will be the rise of China and India as major global players – superpowers even – affecting the very fiber of the international system in substantial ways simply by their rates of growth coupled with newly outward-looking foreign policies and national security interests. Closely intertwined with this fifty-year story will be whether or not President Obama and his successors husbanded and nurtured U.S. sources of economic, diplomatic and military power in ways that helped secure American security and prosperity in a very competitive international environment.

The pain and suffering of the Syrian people affects the dynamics of the Middle East in powerful ways, and the United States shouldn't turn a blind eye to them or the broader region. But no one should be under the illusion that war in Syria will position the United States for the real geopolitical challenges to come. The danger of strategic distraction is real.

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