

COMMENTARY

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Where is Asia?

By Patrick M. Cronin

American military action in Syria will not divert the United States from rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific region, but it will spotlight the need for Asian governments to step up their contribution to global security.

First, giving Assad a free pass to repeatedly use chemical weapons may embolden others, including North Korea's leadership, which has invested heavily in both chemical and nuclear weapon capabilities. Remember, too, that thanks to North Korea, Syria had its own clandestine nuclear program – at least until Israel took unilateral action to neutralize that program.

Second, the instability inside Syria has already affected neighboring countries, and wider instability in the Middle East could affect the energy resources upon which so much of Asia's economic growth depends. To argue that U.S. military action would only hasten broader regional conflict assumes that mass gassing of civilians is somehow more stabilizing than limited external intervention to rein in the atrocities of the Damascus regime.

Third, Syria matters for Asia because sovereignty is no shield against barbarity. Our global economy and transnational information age creates knowledge and builds connections that were unthinkable in past eras. The future course of the 21st century may be unknowable, but Asia and the rest of the world will be forced to pay more rather than less attention to stories about starvation, torture and public executions in North Korean prison camps, for example. The dead children of Syria command global, not just American, condemnation and action.

For America's allies and partners in Asia, the U.S. message should be not only that Syria matters for all nations, but that we will empower you to shoulder more burdens to buttress international peace and security. Some countries, such as Japan, should be applauded rather than castigated for trying to become greater security providers. Meanwhile other major countries, notably China and Russia, should recognize that impeding action in Syria weakens rather than

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preserves the United Nations Charter by demonstrating that even atrocious actions have no consequences.

While many in Asia may wish to use U.S. military engagement in Syria to launch a new debate about America's rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific, they should instead be mulling over an alternative glaring question: what is the purpose of growing Asian power? Is the rise of China and Asia's historical moment merely about self-aggrandizement, greed, and self-preservation?

The United States long ago realized that great power status brings great power responsibility. When a government flagrantly violates international norms with the use of chemical weapons against innocent civilians, it is unbecoming for other major powers to feign blindness and shirk responsibility. When you pass a mugging in the street, what does it say about you if keep on walking?

Many regional actors trumpet "the Asian century." But devoid of values backed by actions that advance the rule of law, the 21st century will be a throwback rather than an advancement for international peace and security. Actively impeding the actions of others or simply casting aspersions on those undertaking action push us all backwards. Self-aggrandizement fueled by global resources without global concern highlights the 'small Asian' problem – when a rising, dynamic region punches below its weight, thinks inwardly, and assumes that international security is as free and plentiful as oxygen.

Syria is not likely to affect the U.S. pivot. Great powers must be able to engage more than one region at a time. But the Syrian problem should stir debate about the Asian global responsibility deficit.

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