

COMMENTARY

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Futility of Military Options in Syria

Col. Rajeev Agarwal

IDSA, New Delhi

The despairing speech by President Barack Obama in Sweden a day before the G-20 Summit was not only revealing but also interesting. He said that he had not drawn the red lines and that it was not only his credibility but the credibility of the entire international community as well as the American people that were at stake in Syria. When was the last time we saw an American President looking so desperately for support?

There can only be three possible reasons for his lament. Firstly, he thinks he has been caught in a bind over his commitment to act if the red line on the use of chemical weapons is crossed in Syria. Secondly, it seems he lacks confidence and conviction that the proposed military plan has ample chances of achieving the desired objectives without sucking the US into a long drawn out military engagement. Thirdly, at a time when the US has been indicating of getting less direct involvement in any conflict, especially in the region, he fears that the opposite could happen if the military strikes do take place. The second and third reasons are the ones that would shape the Obama's final strategy on the likely use of military options and their effect.

Coming to the military options, any military plans have to answer some basic questions:

- What are the political and military objectives of the plan?
- What are the intended targets?
- What are the resources available and their potency or effectiveness?
- What are the likely enemy reactions and their effect on proposed military plans?
- How will success be measured or defined—will it be capture of territory or surrender by the enemy or a drastic reduction in enemy footprint after the military strikes?

Regarding the objectives, as per the official US statements, the aim of proposed military strikes would be to teach Syrian President Bashar al-Assad a lesson or to give him a message that any future use of chemical weapons could invite more punitive action.

In terms of military strategy, this is a confused objective. Does it entail taking out any future capability of launching chemical weapons strike? Ideally, the answer should be yes, but the US does not want any direct attack on chemical weapons sites or infrastructure and is rather preparing for strikes on conventional military targets like, Air Defence (AD) systems, air bases, command and control centres and political centres. How does it achieve the stated objective of preventing any future chemical weapons strike is very difficult to comprehend?

On the question of likely mode of military strikes and resources, three options are available namely, punitive strikes by missiles and air strikes, imposition of No Fly Zone like in Libya or the use of Special Forces to take out critical military and chemical weapon assets of Syria. Among the three, as stated by the Pentagon, the option of punitive missile strikes is the one being considered favourably.

Punitive strikes are likely to be launched by Tomahawk missiles launched from the missile destroyers in the Mediterranean Sea. Tomahawk Land Attack missiles have a range of 1,600 kilometres and carry a warhead of 1,000 pounds and travel at a speed of 850 kilometres per hour. These fly below radars, have great accuracy and are available in adequate numbers. Where then is the problem? While Tomahawk missiles can take out conventional military targets, they would prove woefully inadequate against hardened underground structures or chemical weapons because the warhead is made of pre-fragmented High Explosives. Destroying chemical weapons require a Crash Pad technology, which burns out the poisonous effects by generating very high temperatures. Both capabilities are non-existent in Tomahawk missiles. Furthermore, despite the advanced inertial guidance system and terrain and contour matching (TERCOM) technology to ensure accurate hits, the circular error of probability or CEP of these missiles is up to five to eight meters with a kill radius of 180 feet or about 50 meters. This raises fears of collateral damages. This gets compounded when we take into account the widely dispersed chemical weapons sites, especially the ones in close proximity of populated areas.

Next option is of air strikes by B-2 and B-52 bombers. They can carry the latest (tested this year in April-May for intended use against Iranian nuclear sites) bunker-busting bombs, namely, GBU-57B, which is a 30,000 pound bomb which can penetrate up to 200 feet of reinforced concrete. Bomber missions, however, project the danger of conflict escalation as they would fly physically over Syrian air space.

Another option is fighter-bomber missions by F-15 and F-16 and French Rafale multi role fighters flying parallel along Syrian border and firing their load off into Syria. The chances of one or two fighters taking a hit from Syrian AD system cannot be ruled out and that again could lead to escalation of conflict. The US could also use drone strikes, but that would have the same limitations as the Tomahawk missiles.

For its part, the Syrian regime is buoyant on the prospects of military strikes because it understands the limitations of a strike as enumerated above. Unlike Iraq, Afghanistan or Libya, it

has sufficient military strength to not only cause a small dent in the US military posture but also outlast it. It has sufficiently potent AD systems comprising of S-200 systems and possibly S-300 systems which were to be provided by Russia but were officially stopped. The chances of critical components of S-300 being already present in Syria and the possibility of their being assembled to take on US air strikes as a Russian “give-it-back” option cannot be ruled out. S-300 are amongst the most advanced AD systems which has integrated radars as well as missile launchers which can track up to 100 targets simultaneously and take them out before they hit intended targets. In addition, Syria has the P-800 anti ship missiles which have a range of 300 km and fly under the radar. In terms of conflict escalation, there is the additional danger of Russian warships in the Mediterranean getting directly or inadvertently dragged into the conflict. What would happen if it occurred or if some Russian troops assisting the Syrian army gets killed in a missile strike? What about asymmetric threats to the US and its allies, emanating from terrorist attacks on their assets or of allies like Israel or Turkey? It could dramatically enlarge the scope of the conflict.

There are some other questions which need to be addressed. How is killing of 1,400 people by chemical strike more brutal than killing of over 100,000 people over the past two years by the Syrian regime? Quotes like “best judgment” or “reasonably confident” cannot be evidence enough to say that the Syrian regime launched the chemical weapons strike.

What if the Syrian opposition had launched the chemical weapons strike? Will the proposed military strike prevent or embolden future use? There were reports in April 2013 of two rebel fighters being caught in Turkey with two cylinders of raw material which could be used for making chemical weapons. If the stockpiles of chemical weapons in Syria were known all along, why did an international effort not take place earlier to put them under safeguard, maybe even under Russian guarantees? And to top it all, the UK government released a statement on 8 September 2013 admitting that it could have supplied chemicals to the Syrian government which could have been used to make chemical weapons.

As we have seen in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq, a stand-off military option can only win an immediate tactical victory but it requires boots on the ground to hold on to the victories, drive out the enemy and thereafter throttle a country diplomatically and economically to bring it on its feet. Without a long term plan, a military strike over three or six days without any clear objectives and an end-game plan is like getting sucked into a quick-sand of prolonged military conflict. A brutal dictator cannot be taught a lesson through only a risk-averse plan of missile strikes nor can it achieve any political or military objectives.

Col. Rajeev Agarwal is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of any Institution or organization. Email: rajeevidsa@gmail.com

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