

Lesson Plan: An Attack on Syria- What would you do?

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The simple case for (and against) limited U.S. strikes on Syria

By Max Fisher, Updated: August 26, 2013

There were some very strong signals over the weekend that the United States might have been seriously considering, or even imminently prepared to launch, a series of limited strikes against Syria, most likely cruise missiles. Such an attack would have been in response to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's strongly suspected use of chemical weapons in a recent attack that is thought to have killed hundreds of civilians. It also would have been the first direct U.S. military involvement in the Syrian civil war, which has killed more than 100,000 people over two-plus years of violence.

Here, laid out in very simple bullet points, are the cases for and against limited U.S. cruise missile or aircraft strikes against Syria, an issue that has been debated for more than a year now in Washington and apparently within the White House itself.

The case against limited U.S. strikes on Syria

1. It's almost certainly not going to change the overall course of the war. The Assad regime has a huge military advantage over the rebels, and the fighting is city-to-city, neighborhood-to-neighborhood. There is little reason to think that any number of cruise missiles or airstrikes will dramatically change the course of the war, much less force Assad to lose.
2. Remote strikes are imperfect and there's a high risk of civilian casualties. This is obviously more and less true for some potential targets than others, but regime forces are deeply embedded in Syrian cities and communities. There's a chance that strikes would have the opposite of the intended effect and lead to more civilian deaths rather than fewer.
3. Military intervention in a protracted foreign conflict can take on its own logic that makes escalation very difficult to stop. The Obama administration might have the intention of launching just one series of strikes and then backing off, but in practice that's rarely what happens. Domestic politics, international pressure and short-term military thinking can all lead a very limited campaign to snowball into a more open-ended one. That's particularly true if the goals of the initial strikes are vague or poorly defined.

The case for limited U.S. strikes on Syria

1. A "punishment" strike against Assad's forces for this month's suspected chemical weapons attack would make him think twice before doing it again. Yes, he's already killing huge numbers of civilians and often in terrible ways. But chemical weapons are an especially blunt instrument; using them against civilians undoubtedly increases Syria's death toll and its suffering. If some strikes can convince Assad to at least stop using large-scale chemical attacks, that would not end the war but it would make it a little bit less terrible.
2. The international norm against chemical weapons matters for more than just Syria. It matters for the rest of the world; upholding the norm now makes chemical weapons less likely to appear in the next war, or the war after that. When the next civilian or military leader locked in a difficult war looks back on what happened in Syria, we want him to conclude that using chemical weapons would not be worth the risk.
3. Even just the (apparently earnest) threat of U.S. strikes could change Assad's behavior. Not long after a fourth U.S. destroyer moved off the Syrian coast, Assad's government relented and finally said it would allow United Nations inspectors to visit the site of the suspected chemical weapons attack. That's not exactly a game-changing concession, particularly given that the U.N. team said it came under fire as it first approached the site, but it is something.