Soft Syria Response Worse Than Inaction

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A weak or irrelevant response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria may be even worse than inaction. As long as President Obama delays action—as he waits for all the intelligence he requires—Syrians and others can still assume that when he is finally moved to act, he will unleash a thunderbolt, striking a blow against the regime that will convince one and all not to cross red lines drawn by the United States. But if Obama again follows his proclivity to split the difference—to appease the critics, but not address the challenge—he will demonstrate weakness.

Among the suggestions that have been made are for Obama to arm the rebels, to introduce a no-fly zone or to create a safe haven for refugees. Calls for such actions have come from both sides of the aisle: Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, as well as Democratic senator Carl Levin and representative Eliot Engel. But these acts are not likely to turn the tide against the rush of fighters—many with combat experience—from Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon that are joining in the defense of Assad, or the elite cohort of “advisers” and many thousands of troops supplied by Iran. And if the intervention by the United States were to tip the scales, we would have a new Libya on our hands, with one very devastating difference: jihadists with chemical weapons.

The notion advanced by Senator Graham that if we only arm “our” rebels (the few pro-Western ones) they will fight against both Assad and the extremists, is wishful thinking. “Ours” are the weakest of the
lot. However, even if somehow “our” rebels prevailed, we should note that it did not take long for those who the United States armed in Afghanistan against the Soviets to turn on us, or for arms we supplied in Libya to flow into the hands of Al Qaeda in Mali.

Increasing humanitarian aid, especially helping Jordan and Turkey cope with the flood of refugees and providing more medical and food supplies to refugees in Syria, is both a very good idea and an irrelevant one. We should extend this aid whether or not Assad used chemical weapons, but such good deeds will not be, and will not be seen as, a response to the regime’s (or the rebels’) violation of Obama’s red line.

U.S. interests do not lie in helping one side to win. A ceasefire and political stalemate is what we are after. The focus our intervention should be on securing the chemical weapons. We seek a Syria without chemical weapons—whoever is at the helm.

There is no single way to deal with all of them. Some should be bombed. Some need to be removed from the region through raids by special-operations forces (like those we trained in Jordan). Some should be “traded”—by conditioning all future aid to the rebels (as well as the provision of select supplies such as body armor and night vision goggles) in exchange for whatever chemical weapons they can capture. The United States should reach agreements with other nations, especially France, and if possible Russia, to assist in neutralizing these agents once they are captured.

All of this is exceedingly difficult. However, a superpower that cannot undertake such missions reveals that it has given up on its role as a superpower.