

Opinion: Collaboration needed regarding Syria

By Jimmy Carter

The only way to be assured that Syrian chemical weapons will not be used in the future is not through a military strike but through a successful international effort.

Regardless of the postponed congressional vote regarding the use of military force, other actions should be taken to address the situation in Syria, including an urgent effort to convene without conditions the long-delayed peace conference the United States and Russia announced in May. A resolution in the U.N. General Assembly to condemn any further use of chemical weapons, regardless of perpetrator, would be approved overwhelmingly, and the United States should support Russia's proposal that Syria's chemical weapons be placed under U.N. control. A military strike by the United States is undesirable and will become unnecessary if this alternative proposal is strongly supported by the U.N. Security Council.



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If fully implemented in dozens of sites throughout Syria, this effort to secure the chemical weapons would amount to a cease-fire, with a large U.N. peacekeeping force deployed. In the best of circumstances, this could lead to convening the Geneva peace conference, perhaps including Iran, that could end the conflict.

Some have predicted catastrophic consequences to the credibility of President Obama and our country if Congress were to reject his request for approval of military action against the Assad regime in Syria. These dire predictions are exaggerated. It is no reflection on the president that he expressed his decision clearly to our citizens and to the world, properly sought congressional concurrence and has done his utmost to implement his decision by securing necessary votes in the House and Senate. All U.S. presidents have been forced to endure highly publicized rejections of major proposals concerning both domestic and international issues. This is to be expected in any democratic nation, as has occurred recently in Britain and might soon happen in France.

It requires a lot of political courage to risk a public rejection, especially when the decision is believed to be right but known to be unpopular with the public, many allies and top military leaders. There is a special problem when the Security Council is divided on an issue the United States considers crucial and when our NATO allies refuse to take a stand. It is well known that some of the president's political adversaries will not support any conceivable proposal he might make, that dovish members of Congress are likely to oppose military action and that some congressional hawks want strong and sustained action to change the course of the Syrian civil war. Going ahead with limited military action after a rejection by Congress would amplify many of these critical voices.

The president has wisely refused to answer media questions about how he would proceed if his efforts failed in Congress. If and when a vote takes place, there will be many factors involved, but the assumption of compliance is best because supportive votes would be lost by the president saying he would ignore a negative vote. Many legislators will be looking, at least in part, for popularity with constituents who strongly oppose using force. For those who are eager to

see a strike against Syria, a presidential pledge to attack without approval would make it possible to achieve their objective without alienating voters back home. And for those who oppose military action but are willing to alienate constituents because of loyalty to the president, his pledge to ignore a congressional decision might lessen their commitment to him.

Despite all of the back and forth, some facts about the situation are generally accepted. Incontrovertible proof has been presented by Secretary of State John Kerry that there has been horrific use of chemical weapons in Syria. The international community should take concerted action to discourage or prevent a repetition of this crime. Although Security Council condemnation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is not possible because of division among world leaders about who is responsible for the atrocity, and a strong condemnatory resolution is likely to be vetoed, the ultimate goal of deterring future use of weapons of mass destruction would be greatly enhanced if the major powers were unanimous in their commitment.

Many members of Congress are still in a quandary concerning the ultimate consequences of an attack. The Syrian regime has had adequate time to intermingle war materiel and civilians, and more noncombatants in Syria will be vulnerable to U.S. missiles and bombs. Any casualties among them will be exaggerated and exploited to bring additional condemnation on the United States within the Arab world. The effect of limited airstrikes would be transient at best, but a sustained and robust action is more likely to incur a deeper and more lengthy U.S. involvement and result in additional waves of refugees.

Despite the claims and counterclaims that have surrounded the chemical attack near Damascus on Aug. 21 and an unknown number of earlier attacks, the issues are now clearly defined. The main goals of condemning the use of these outlawed weapons and

preventing their further use can still be realized by concerted international action.

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