

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Obama's Bad Case for War

By: Doug Bandow - September 10, 2013

To his credit, President Barack Obama has gone to Congress for authority to attack Syria. To his discredit, he is making a disappointing, even dishonest, case for taking America into another unnecessary Middle Eastern war.

For two and a half years the president took a cautious approach to Syria's tragic implosion. But now, after over one hundred thousand deaths, he perceives global disaster arising from the violation of heretofore unenforced international norms: "If we won't enforce accountability in the face of this heinous act, what does it say about our resolve to stand up to others who flout fundamental international rules? To governments who would choose to build nuclear arms? To terrorists who would spread biological weapons? To armies who carry out genocide?"

That's a bizarre amalgam of non sequiturs. The United States long has prudently tempered outrage over other governments' "heinous acts". Mass murder in Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China sparked no military intervention. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran resulted in far more deaths than his use of chemical weapons, yet Washington supported him over Tehran.

Only rarely has the United States bestirred itself to stop foreign slaughter. After all, war is a [dubious humanitarian tool](#)—witness the carnage in Iraq that resulted from U.S. intervention. Nor is it obvious how Washington could have sorted out slaughter in Burundi, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone, civil war in Liberia and Sudan, and regional war in Congo. Civil wars typically are the hardest conflicts to resolve, as Ronald Reagan discovered in Lebanon, which at one point hosted twenty-five warring factions.

As for nuclear weapons, the United States never considered military action against Pakistan, perhaps the most dangerous country in the world. And Washington has given up on North Korea, lest military action there trigger a devastating war on the Korean peninsula. The Obama administration seems no more enthused about attacking Iran. Ironically, a strike on Syria likely would convince Tehran to move forward on a weapon, since only a nuclear arsenal could offer genuine security from American military action.

In contrast, for a dozen years the United States has shown its commitment to killing and incapacitating terrorists who threaten America. In this area no one can doubt Washington's bipartisan resolve. Yet blowing up Syria would empower the most radical rebel factions, likely yielding more terrorists.

Equally unpersuasive was the president's contention at his [Stockholm press conference](#): "The international community's credibility is on the line. And America's and Congress' credibility is on the line

because we give lip service to the notion that these international norms are important.” Without U.S. action “somebody who is not shamed by resolutions can continue to act with impunity and those international norms begin to erode and other despots and authoritarian regimes can start looking and saying ‘That’s something we can get away with’.”

But there is no such thing as “the international community,” let alone the “international community’s credibility.” And it’s a bit late to worry about the president and Congress giving only lip service to international norms. The United States says it doesn’t like the use of chemical weapons, but did not attack Saddam Hussein for using them. The United States promises to confront nuclear proliferation, except when by an American ally, such as Israel, or an American adversary which could start a war, such as North Korea, or an important mid-level power, such as India or Pakistan. The United States doesn’t like genocide, except when it occurs in Africa or Asia, in which case Washington normally does nothing.

Enforcing a throwaway red line about an “interest” which is not important, let alone vital, is a foolish way to try to establish credibility. Better would be to reserve red line-drawing for critical issues important enough to warrant going to war. Even bombing Syria is not likely to convince other countries that the United States will enforce norms that Washington has routinely ignored in the past.

Secretary of State John Kerry told House Democrats that the United States faced a “[Munich moment](#)” as to whether Washington would attack Syria for its alleged use of chemical weapons. Otherwise, Bashar al-Assad would “continue to act with impunity.” On *Meet the Press* Secretary Kerry [said](#) that Assad “now joins the list of Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein who’ve used these weapons in a time of war.”

Kerry was not the only one raising the hoary image of Britain’s Neville Chamberlain. Michael Hirsh of *National Journal* [argued](#) that Hitler’s invasion of Poland “discredited the concept of ‘appeasement’ as a foreign policy tool.” But, he warned, if Congress said no and the president didn’t act “the ‘A’ word will likely come to dominate the international debate once again.” While he admitted that Assad is no Hitler, Hirsh claimed that the “international order is what is now in some danger,” and “If one becomes unwilling to strike dictators and mass murderers, all that remains is to appease them.”

It’s not a serious argument.