

Using the Kosovo Precedent in Syria: Damaging US Relations With China and Russia

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The apparent use of chemical weapons in Syria's civil war has produced shrill calls for launching air strikes on the regime of Bashar al Assad. Even the inconvenient detail that the source of the chemical attack is not clear has not deterred advocates of a U.S.-led military response. Some proponents have latched onto the 1999 NATO war in Kosovo as an ideal precedent. Kosovo is a precedent all right—an object lesson for why going to war in Syria would be morally dubious and strategically unwise.

Adopting that approach especially has the potential to cause serious tensions in Washington's already delicate ties with China and Russia. Policy regarding Kosovo has been a festering sore on U.S. relations with those countries since the original crisis in the late 1990s. The supposedly inadvertent U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade in 1999 was only the most spectacular example of the diplomatic carnage.

Indeed, for Chinese and Russian leaders, Kosovo has become a symbol of Washington's contempt for international law and disdain for the prerogatives of other major powers in the international system. No rational person should wish to replicate that outcome by pursuing the same high-handed strategy in response to the Syria conflict.

President Bill Clinton and his supporters insisted that adequate international support was sufficient authorization for U.S. action against Serbia over the Kosovo issue, even absent congressional approval. International support typically meant a UN Security Council resolution—an argument that George H.W. Bush made before belatedly deciding, under domestic public pressure, to seek congressional authorization for the Persian Gulf War.

The Kosovo conflict, though, posed a problem for pro-war internationalists in the U.S. foreign policy community. Both Russia and China vehemently opposed intervention against Serbia, and there was, therefore, no chance of passing a Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force. Clinton administration officials overcame that impediment by simply bypassing the Council just as they bypassed Congress. “Sufficient international support” now meant support from the U.S.-dominated NATO alliance.

Washington’s subsequent actions under the administration of George W. Bush further antagonized Beijing and Moscow and undermined international security cooperation. Bush took the Kosovo precedent one step further with the invasion of Iraq. Once again, Russia and China believed that military action was unwarranted and threatened to use their Security Council vetoes. This time, even NATO was divided, so U.S. leaders could not use the alliance’s imprimatur as supposed sufficient justification for an armed intervention. Washington overcame that problem by arguing that endorsement by an ad hoc “coalition of the willing” (or as cynical wags described it, the coalition of the bribed and bullied) constituted adequate international support. Seething leaders in Russia and China disagreed.

The Bush administration was not done showing its contempt for the views and rights of its fellow permanent members on the Security Council. Although the Council had reluctantly authorized

the NATO-led postwar occupation of Kosovo under nominal UN auspices, Beijing and Moscow assumed that the province would not be granted independence from Serbia without another Council vote. But the United States, Britain, and France adopted a markedly different course. They recognized Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008—once again over the strenuous objections of China and Russia.

Events soon showed that those countries could respond to such policy snubs in ways that frustrated U.S. officials. The Russian government cited the Kosovo precedent for its own moves against the Republic of Georgia in 2008, helping to detach that country's two restless regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite Washington's angry denunciations and the lack of UN Security Council approval. China issued pointed warnings that U.S. leaders should not even think about using the Kosovo strategy toward such sensitive secessionist issues as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

Barack Obama has demonstrated that he is no more respectful than his two predecessors toward the views and interests of Russia and China. Washington persuaded Beijing and Moscow not to veto a Security Council resolution authorizing force against the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi by assuring those governments that air and missile strikes would be limited in nature and motivated solely to prevent atrocities against innocent civilians. That proved to be untrue. It quickly became apparent that the real goal of the United States and its NATO allies was regime change. Chinese and Russian officials felt, with considerable justification, that they had been conned. Now, Obama is offering similar assurances that attacks on Assad's forces would be only to punish the regime for the chemical attacks, not help the rebels oust Assad. Unsurprisingly, those assurances are being viewed with a good deal of skepticism.

Adding a Syria intervention to the Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya episodes will convince Beijing and Moscow, if any doubt lingers, that the United States shows no respect for their Security Council roles and will use the Council when, and only when, it is convenient for Washington's policy objectives. Given the number of economic and security issues requiring cooperation with Russia and China, the Obama administration's flirtation with that course is myopic and counterproductive. The damage to Washington's crucial relations with Beijing and Moscow will likely exceed any conceivable policy "victory" with regard to Syria.

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