



## Obama's talk on Syria 'red line' was spin, analysts say

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama's statement earlier this week that he wasn't the one who'd set a red line against chemical weapons in Syria caught Washington by surprise and lit up the Web and social media. It was no accident.

Obama's shifting language – from apparently declaring a red line to saying it was one the world demanded – is part of a strategy designed to take the focus off the president as he presses reluctant U.S. lawmakers and world leaders to use military force against Syrian President Bashar Assad, who's accused of using nerve gas on his own people.

"He's skillfully shifting the argument to the international community," said Anthony H. Cordesman, a military analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who described the change as political "spin." Obama initially drew the line in a seemingly off-the-cuff remark at an August 2012 news conference. "We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized," he said at the time. "That would change my calculus. That would change my equation."

"Now that he's determined that Syria did cross the line with what the U.S. calls an August chemical attack on its people, Obama has decided to launch airstrikes against Assad's regime. Yet he's delayed action to seek approval from Congress and support from other nations, and he's finding a skeptical audience."

So as part of his campaign, he changed his rhetoric this week. At a news conference Wednesday in Stockholm, Obama tried to recast the red line to make it less about him and more about the international community.

"I didn't set a red line; the world set a red line," the president said. "My credibility is not on the line. The international community's credibility is on the line. And America and Congress' credibility is on the line because we give lip service to the notion that these international norms are important."

Part of his goal was to persuade lawmakers, especially Republicans who are often reluctant to act on proposals he's pushing, that the issue of chemical weapons is bigger than he is. "There's a general knee-jerk reaction not to trust the opposition," said George Edwards, a presidential scholar at Texas A&M University. "It's gotten worse since Obama has been president."

Ron Bonjean, a GOP consultant who worked as an aide in the House of Representatives, said Republicans saw Obama's changing rhetoric as an effort to blame them if Congress voted against a resolution. "He's trying to take the heat off himself should he lose," Bonjean said. Andrew Kohut, the founding director of the Pew Research Center, said that no matter what Obama said now most Americans still associated the president with the red line in Syria.

Obama also was trying to prod other nations to step up.

Most countries have signed on to the Chemical Weapons Convention – an arms control agreement outlawing the production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons that Obama referred to – but they're often reluctant to act in the face of violations. Even Britain, one of the U.S.'s closest allies, voted down the use of force last week.

"He's trying to make this about more than himself," said Christopher Preble, the vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "But if this is the global norm, where is everyone else?"