



CBO can't determine costs of Syria intervention

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Jason Pye

Among the reasons that have been cited against military intervention against Syria is the potential cost, not just in terms of what the Obama Administration says will be “limited strikes,” but also the possibility of a broader engagement should the situation worsen.

But the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), which frequently issues cost scores on legislation, issued a report on Monday afternoon noting that they could not accurately predict the cost of Syria intervention. Why? Because Obama Administration has “has not detailed how it would use the authority that would be provided” by the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF).

“S. J. Res. 21 would authorize the President to use military force against the government of Syria, for up to 90 days, in response to its use of chemical weapons,” noted the CBO in its summary of the resolution.

The CBO explained the AUMF requires that President Barack Obama to submit a plan to Congress showing that it has exhausted potential diplomatic solutions and how strikes against the Syrian government are in the national security interest of the United States. It also requires the Obama Administration to present a strategy for completing stated objectives of the strike.

“The Administration has not detailed how it would use the authority that would be provided by this resolution; CBO has no basis for estimating the costs of implementing S. J. Res. 21,” they added.

There are a lot of questions about the scale of intervention, despite the Obama Administration saying that military strikes will be, as Secretary of State John Kerry said on Monday, “unbelievably small” and won’t involve ground troops.

But if Syria or its supporters retaliate against an ally, such as Israel, or some other United States interest in the region, it would almost certainly elicit a response that would escalate the conflict.

Some of the potential costs have already been outlined by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey.

In a letter to Sen. Carl Levin (D-MI), Dempsey, who called intervention an “act of war,” explained that establishing a no-fly zone over Syria would initially cost \$500 million and another \$500 million to train and advise rebels fighting Assad’s regime. He also estimated that putting troops on the ground in Syria would cost \$1 billion per month.

But remember that estimates for military actions are frequently off the mark. Remember, the Bush Administration told Congress that the Iraq War would cost up to \$60 billion. Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, notes that the actual price tag for the misguided war in Iraq is now approaching \$2 trillion.

“The costs of reconstruction in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein cost Americans \$53 billion from 2003 to 2012, or \$15 million dollars a day. That of course doesn’t include the costs of fighting the war itself, including when U.S. troops got caught in the middle of a multisided Iraqi civil war,” wrote Preble. “Total war costs in Iraq already exceed \$1.7 trillion, and are expected to climb well beyond \$2 trillion.”

Preble also notes that the cost of military intervention doesn’t anticipate the aftermath, pointing to comments made by Stuart Bowen, Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, who has said that rebuilding Syria after the two-year civil war could cost “tens of billions.”

While it’s hard to determine the costs of war, especially when the scale of intervention is in question, what we do know is that taxpayers have seen a river of red ink flowing from Washington over the last several years and a \$16.7 trillion national debt.

Spending more money on questionable military intervention when our national security is not at stake seems like a very unwise decision.