



Doing Nothing Is Better Than Acting

The Trump administration is making a smart foreign policy decision not to intervene in Syria after the recent chemical attack.

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The Bashar Assad regime's most recent chemical weapons attack in Idlib province killed dozens of people and injured many more. It was a cynical and desperate move by a regime that has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of the world. But the attack was also our first opportunity to see what the Trump administration would do in response to such a situation.

The answer, as it turned out, was nothing. As strange as it may sound, that is the right answer in this case.

President Donald Trump and his team are already getting plenty of heat from political leaders and pundits in Washington for their lack of follow up. Over time they can expect increasing pressure to act. Many Americans, like people all around the world, are shocked and horrified and they will expect the president to do something about it. Obama drew fire from both the left and right for his inaction in the wake of the massive 2013 sarin attack near Damascus that killed more than 1,000 people.

But Trump may find himself facing even greater expectations thanks to his vocal criticism of President Barack Obama's handling of Syria throughout his presidential campaign. And on Tuesday the administration doubled down, with White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer laying the blame for the most recent attack on Obama, arguing "President Obama said in 2012 that he would establish a 'red line' against the use of chemical weapons and then did nothing."

This is not to say that doing nothing is always the right course. Sometimes the United States can and should act, as it often does in response to earthquakes, tsunamis and other natural disasters. And it is certainly true that the United States has at times failed to act when it could have

prevented grievous harms. President Bill Clinton, for example, referred to the failure to intervene in the Rwandan genocide as one of his greatest regrets.

But many problems – like the civil war in Syria – are beyond America's ability to solve. Obama didn't eschew intervention out of a lack of empathy. He chose not to intervene because he had learned hard lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq. He knew that even by putting thousands of American soldiers at risk and at great financial cost, he simply could not promise that the United States would be able to stop the fighting and put Syria back together again.

And so today, despite the Trump administration's desire to find a solution for Syria that does not include getting rid of Assad, it has acknowledged publicly that it cannot see one. Both Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Nikki Haley, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, have made clear in recent statements that the United States will no longer make ousting Assad a central tenet of its Syria policy. As Sean Spicer told reporters at the White House, "There is not a fundamental option of regime change as there has been in the past."

As the Trump administration comes to appreciate these dynamics in the case of Syria it should apply the same logic to other problem areas, especially in places such as North Korea, Yemen and the South China Sea, where U.S. actions have often done more harm than good of late.

At least since 9/11, the United States has suffered from a serious tendency to act before it is obvious that action is the right strategy. The interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq might have seemed urgently necessary in 2001 and 2003, but viewed in hindsight it is clear that knowing when not to act is critical to making sound foreign policy. The same logic and prudence must be applied today to hotspots around the world. Though unsatisfying to the public, doing nothing is far better than taking a precipitous action that risks entangling American and Russian forces in Syria, or worse, one that ends in a war with China over Taiwan or a nuclear exchange with North Korea.

Unfortunately, explaining the decision to do nothing is never easy, especially in the face of tragedies like Syria or the rampant fears stoked by acts of terrorism at home and abroad. Nuance and logic provide cold comfort when people are dying. As a result, doing nothing is also politically quite challenging. Obama's policy of not intervening in Syria may have looked like inaction to most people from the outside, but there is no question that it took an immense effort politically.

The upshot is that the Trump administration's current approach to Syria is exactly the right one. The administration should continue to denounce the attack on moral grounds and call on the Russians and Iranians to exert pressure on Assad to prevent future attacks. There is little hope that words alone will do much good, but avoiding further entanglement in a no-win situation is itself an important, if invisible, victory for U.S. foreign policy.

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