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The Thick Red Line: Implications of the 2013 Chemical-Weapons Crisis for Deterrence and Transatlantic Relations

Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais

In summer 2013, the Syrian regime launched a large-scale chemical-weapons attack against its own people in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, an event that left many people dead, disturbed France–US relations and reverberated around the world with potentially profound consequences for deterrence.

In the years leading up to the gassing of Ghouta, the United States, France and the United Kingdom had attempted to coordinate their policies toward the civil war that was threatening the rule of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. This included declaratory statements intended to deter the use of chemical weapons. And yet the response to the 2013 attack was disorganised, reflecting the very different paths that had led US president Barack Obama and French president François Hollande to that moment.

The American president had struggled for much of his presidency to articulate a doctrine on the use of force. Obama was able to defeat Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination, and then defeat Senator John McCain for the presidency, in no small part by emphasising that both candidates

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had supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Yet Obama was not a straightforward anti-war candidate – he had campaigned as a pragmatist who would wind down the unnecessary war in Iraq while seeking victory for the necessary one in Afghanistan. He used his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize address to articulate his doctrine for the use of military force, one that was consistent with his views on just-war theory and the US constitution. Moreover, Obama and his closest members of staff were largely dismissive of the conventional wisdom on foreign policy, which they believed had resulted in the catastrophe of Iraq. Ben Rhodes, the president’s speechwriter and a close confidant, was famously quoted as calling the foreign-policy and national-security community ‘the Blob’.¹ The term served to dismiss the objections of this community – which included members of Obama’s own cabinet – to the president’s foreign-policy choices as sour grapes from a discredited elite.

This was the context in which Obama formulated his response to the growing carnage in Syria. He had opposed the war in Iraq, and felt ‘boxed in’ by his generals in Afghanistan. The administration was also disappointed with the failure to create a stable government in Libya following the 2011 NATO intervention – in public, Obama called Libya a ‘mess’; in private, he referred to the situation in the country as a ‘shit-show’.² He also blamed the United States’ European allies, specifically the United Kingdom’s David Cameron and France’s Nicolas Sarkozy, for not ‘being invested in the follow-up’ necessary to create a stable Libyan government.³ As a result, Obama and those closest to him were reluctant to be drawn into the war in Syria, believing that intervention would mire the United States in yet another intractable conflict.

At the same time, the president had issued a strong warning that his position might change if Assad were to unleash his stockpile of chemical weapons against Syria’s civilian population. Asked about that possibility at a press conference, Obama indicated that the use of chemical weapons in Syria’s civil war would cross a ‘red line’ and change his thinking about the conflict. Obama’s remarks were widely reported around the world, including in Paris, where senior officials, not least Hollande, took them seriously. The first socialist to be elected president of France in two decades, Hollande was an unlikely hawk. And yet, shortly after taking office, he

had approved an intervention to stop Islamist forces from seizing control in Mali. His willingness to consider a military intervention in Syria had long exceeded Obama's.

Thus, when the Syrian Arab Army attacked Ghouta with the nerve agent sarin in August 2013, causing the deaths of several hundred people, Hollande and the French government, assuming that Obama would enforce his red line, began to prepare for a limited use of force to degrade Syria's chemical-weapons infrastructure, damage the military units responsible for the attack and ultimately punish Assad's regime.

In the United States, too, preparations began for what US officials also believed would be a strike – until Obama began to waver. After the Conservative government of David Cameron lost a vote on the strike in the British House of Commons, Obama announced that he would seek authorisation from Congress to use force, a step that appeared to many as a transparent effort to avoid a strike while laying the blame upon the president's opponents in Congress.

*Obama
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At the last moment, a Russian initiative to persuade Syria to abandon its chemical weapons and accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) ended the crisis. But the manner in which the crisis had played out was deeply unsatisfying. In Paris, Obama's decision was seen as a cynical attempt to avoid enforcing his red line, while shifting the blame to his opponents in Congress. Although comparisons with the tensions over Suez in 1956 or even the Iraq War in 2003 may be overblown, the president's actions alienated an ally in Paris. President Hollande was described as 'stunned' by Obama's turnabout, while outgoing foreign minister Laurent Fabius would publicly blame Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine on the Obama administration's failure to follow through in Syria.⁴ For his part, Obama and most of his staff were unrepentant about the decision to refrain from using force. The president told Jeffrey Goldberg, in a widely publicised interview, that departing from the 'Washington playbook' was among his proudest achievements. In the same interview he referred to US allies, including Britain and France, as 'free-riders', a depiction that angered many in Paris.⁵

With the end of the Obama and Hollande administrations, it is now possible to take a dispassionate look at what happened – and what went wrong – in 2013. Regardless of one’s opinion on the wisdom of the course of action that was ultimately adopted, its execution was clearly bungled, resulting in a severe and unnecessary strain to the US–France relationship. It is worth asking what lessons might be learned from the ‘red line’ incident, both for deterring future nuclear, biological or chemical attacks, and also for managing crisis coordination among allies.

Drawing red lines

In spring 2012, intelligence began to suggest that Syria might unleash its chemical-weapons stockpile in an effort to win the civil war that had erupted following the Arab Spring. Over the course of 2012, there were reports of small-scale uses of chemical weapons, including sarin. The US, France and Britain increased mutual consultations and worked on possible responses. François Hollande, the new French president, was personally inclined to take a hard line on the Syrian question as soon as he was elected.⁶ By summer, he had ordered contingency planning to be moved forward.

In August, the intelligence strengthened, encompassing reports of troops being ordered to prepare for the use of chemical weapons, and images of technicians mixing binary agents and the loading of trucks used to transport chemical weapons. The possibility that Syria might be preparing for a large-scale chemical-weapons attack was apparently on Obama’s mind when, on 20 August, he surprised his national-security team with an unscripted remark that appeared to commit the United States to a Syrian intervention in the event that the Assad government used chemical weapons:

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. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.⁷

Later reports would suggest that indications from the previous 48 hours factored into the president’s surprising statement.⁸ ‘The idea was to put a

chill into the Assad regime without actually trapping the president into any predetermined action', one senior official told the *New York Times*.⁹ The red line was intended to deter a mass chemical-weapons attack – and, perhaps even more importantly at that time, prevent the transfer of such weapons to terrorist groups such as Hizbullah – in the face of growing evidence of small-scale chemical-weapons use. Yet this 'nuance got completely dropped' and the administration struggled to recast the remark as a reference to the international norm against chemical-weapons use.¹⁰ Presidential utterances, it seems, are not an easy thing to reframe. Over the coming days, Obama's statement would be repeated to create precisely the trap the president had wished to avoid. On 24 August, Obama and Cameron stressed that they had a common position: they 'both agreed that the use – or threat – of chemical weapons was completely unacceptable and would force them to revisit their approach so far'.¹¹

Hollande drew his own red line a few days later, stating that, 'with our allies, we remain very vigilant to prevent the employment of chemical weapons by the regime, which would be for the international community a legitimate cause of direct intervention'.¹² By then, Hollande had already identified the possibility of Western reprisals as a potential means of altering the political situation in Syria; the question of Syrian chemical-weapons use was the topic of a Defence Council meeting every two months. Hollande ordered 'maximum cooperation' with the United States on the topic.¹³ He later reported that Syrian chemical sites were being identified in liaison with the United States and Israel.¹⁴

In December 2012, Obama made a second statement that was no more nuanced than his previous one had been. Addressing Assad directly, he warned, 'The use of chemical weapons is, and would be, totally unacceptable and if you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable'.¹⁵ He then clarified his previous statement about 'chemical weapons moving around', saying that this should be taken to mean 'transferred to terrorist groups' or 'being prepared for use'.¹⁶

In spring 2013, reports of chemical-weapons attacks multiplied. In April, France and the United Kingdom sent letters to Ban Ki-moon, then

secretary-general of the United Nations, stating that soil samples and witness interviews provided credible evidence of chemical-weapons use by the regime in multiple locations. The US intelligence community seems to have been reluctant to draw any conclusions, however. James Clapper, then director of National Intelligence, was non-committal in congressional testimony on the subject,¹⁷ with an anonymous senior US official explaining to Reuters that ‘More review is needed’.¹⁸ Nevertheless, on 25 April, the White House formalised its red line in a letter to Congress:

The President has made it clear that the use of chemical weapons – or the transfer of chemical weapons to terrorist groups – is a red line for the United States of America. The Obama Administration has communicated that message publicly and privately to governments around the world, including the Assad regime ... The Administration is prepared for all contingencies so that we can respond appropriately to any confirmed use of chemical weapons, consistent with our national interests. The United States and the international community have a number of potential responses available, and no option is off the table.¹⁹

Eventually, the administration would determine that Assad had, in fact, ‘used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year’.²⁰ The finding was released in June, along with an announcement of additional assistance to Syrian rebels, including limited quantities of arms that would arrive in September. This had been the Obama administration’s preferred option all along. While it represented a modest escalation of commitment, it represented continuity, not change, with Obama’s previous calculus. Overall, the emphasis remained on diplomacy backed with almost no force. Far more emphasis was placed on demanding that the Syrian government provide access to the UN fact-finding team investigating claims of chemical-weapons use. Meanwhile, French foreign minister Laurent Fabius made public the French government’s own findings about chemical-weapons use in Syria, the evidence for which Hollande then chose to hand over to UN experts.²¹ The threat of force was to remain a deterrent against a larger attack.

Reacting to the Ghouta attack

Alas, Assad was not deterred. He may have calculated that Obama was unwilling to engage in another Middle East war. Or perhaps he simply concluded that the advantage of the attack was worth the risk.

On Wednesday 21 August 2013, gruesome videos surfaced of a mass chemical-weapons attack perpetrated by the Syrian regime against civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta. The attack stood out from previous ones both in terms of its scale and the ease with which it could be verified: thousands of people were affected, videos of the attack surfaced immediately, and there was a consensus among humanitarian groups in Syria and intelligence entities around the world that the Assad regime had used sarin against the civilian population as part of a military offensive in the area. French intelligence assessed total fatalities to be anywhere between 281 (confirmed) and 1,500 (probable), the latter number being close to the US estimate (1,429).²²

The attack on Ghouta was the first indisputable case of chemical-weapons use by the Assad regime to occur since the US red line had been drawn almost exactly a year earlier.²³ Although Obama had not committed himself to a specific course of action should Assad cross the line, the power of presidential utterances is such that most observers expected the red line to be enforced with military action. Indeed, the United States, France and the United Kingdom began to prepare for military strikes following the Ghouta attack, and London called an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council. Assad vehemently denied that his government was responsible for the attack, blaming Syrian opposition forces instead. The Syrian regime offered to allow UN inspectors access to Ghouta in order to investigate.

In Paris, the Ghouta attack was perceived as a turning point. The Foreign Ministry set up a task force, and Fabius consulted with US secretary of state John Kerry.²⁴ On 22 August, Fabius mentioned the use of force on French radio. Images of Syrian casualties broadcast on 23 August bolstered Hollande's resolve. 'We cannot let this happen', he reportedly said.²⁵ He pushed the issue personally, overcoming some reservations in the defence and foreign ministries. At the same time, mindful of the controversy about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the French were keen to carry

out an independent technical evaluation. In addition to analysing photographs and films, the government arranged for Syrian casualties to be exfiltrated to Amman for examination.²⁶ By 25 August, French analysis of samples taken from the attack site had revealed that the chemical agent used, while deadly, contained only one nanogram of sarin per millilitre. Nevertheless, the tactics used by the Syrian forces showed clear intention, and the UK and US samples showed sarin concentrations that were many times higher. Moreover, French intelligence had evidence that the order to attack had been given at a 'very high level', and that Assad had tacitly approved the strike, if perhaps only in retrospect.²⁷ Thus, the suggestion

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that the gas had been more lethal than intended – a hypothesis suggested by German intelligence, and deemed credible by the French – was politically irrelevant.²⁸ French officials noted that no Syrian military official had been fired over the incident.²⁹

Intense transatlantic consultations took place during the weekend of 24–25 August, with Washington, London and Paris discussing 'possible responses'.³⁰ French sources claim that a common response was agreed on either 25 or 26 August.³¹ Paris believed that the British were on board, and that the United States could not let the incident pass without a reaction.³² On 27 August, in his annual address to France's ambassadors, Hollande publicly raised the question of Assad's chemical-weapons use, saying that Paris was 'ready to punish' the Syrian regime.³³ The next day, on 28 August, a French Defence Council formalised the presidential decision. The minutes of the meeting allegedly referred to 'the reality of a chemical attack now recognized by all parties' and the 'responsibility of the regime'; it was decided 'to prepare a punitive strike coordinated with the Americans and the British, that could be launched on short notice on the basis of an air raid from the national territory, delivering cruise missiles on the Syrian regime's military targets linked with its chemical capabilities'.³⁴ Hollande reportedly affirmed that 'under no circumstance should we appear as auxiliaries in a possible use of force as a response to this chemical attack. In this regard, any military action will have to be commonly and simultaneously decided and conducted with

our allies, notably our American allies.³⁵ This was to be a 'firm and proportionate response against the Damascus regime'.³⁶ The possibility of terror attacks against French territory or interests (such as the French UN military contingent in south Lebanon) in reprisal was taken seriously.

Also on 28 August, Obama announced that the US had conclusive evidence of the Assad regime's guilt. Over the next few days, all three countries would release intelligence dossiers to demonstrate Assad's culpability. At this stage, a military strike on Syria seemed inevitable. The US plans reportedly involved a large number of cruise missiles (100–150) being fired from the Mediterranean against nearly 50 targets, though not at the chemical-weapons stockpiles themselves for fear of dispersal.³⁷ 'Our finger was on the trigger', recalls Martin Dempsey, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 'We had gone through the targeting plans and the targeting solutions. The crews were alerted. And so we had everything in place, and we were just waiting for instructions to proceed.'³⁸ According to Philip Gordon, the goal was 'to deter [Assad] from ever using chemical weapons again, to degrade his capacity to do so'. It was to be 'a targeted strike to increase the cost [of] having used chemical weapons. It was not a decision to go to war and change the regime in Damascus.' The model was the 1998 US–UK *Desert Fox* operation against Iraq.³⁹ Though the plan involved significantly fewer munitions than the 600 employed during that operation (including 415 cruise missiles), it was clearly not the 'unbelievably small, limited kind of effort' announced by John Kerry in early September.⁴⁰

It was decided that the strikes would take place between 30 August and 2 September.⁴¹ The time frame was dictated by the need to wait until the UN inspectors left Syria but also to ensure that the strike took place before the planned G20 Summit on 5 September. The French insisted that waiting for a UN inquiry would waste precious time and that a Security Council decision was improbable due to Russian obstruction.⁴² There was a risk that Syrian targets would be relocated if the operation was delayed. 'We need to act fast, for operational and political reasons', recommended diplomatic adviser Paul Jean-Ortiz.⁴³ Accordingly, the strikes would begin as soon as the UN inspectors returned from Syria, during the night of 31 August–1 September.⁴⁴

In terms of the French contribution, the presidential order for the strike was to be given at 20.00 CET; aircraft were to take off at 22.40 CET (from Abu Dhabi and Djibouti); and the strike was to take place at 03.00 CET the next day.⁴⁵ This was to be a modest contribution: while the exact number remains classified, most testimonies suggest that a dozen SCALP-EG cruise missiles were to be used.⁴⁶ They were to be fired on targets in and around Damascus, including chemical-weapons command centres and brigades, as well as *Scud* missile sites. French sources insist that operations were to be strictly limited to sites connected with chemical weapons, in order to avoid escalation and to signal that the strike was not aimed at bringing about regime change.⁴⁷ (Hollande himself would later describe the goal as being 'to destroy chemical installations, as well as administrative centres from which we know that the orders had been given'.⁴⁸) Chemical-weapons stocks would not be targeted to avoid creating any risk of agent dispersal.⁴⁹ Aircraft would strike from the Mediterranean without overflying Turkish territory so as not to leave the impression that Ankara was an accomplice. The strikes would be limited to western Syrian targets due to the limited range (250 kilometres) of the SCALP-EG missiles.⁵⁰ Hollande also ordered his officials to 'study the planning of follow-on strikes to respond, if needed, to response or retaliation by the regime'.⁵¹ Such a follow-on strike could have taken place 72 hours after the initial strike.⁵² Planning was coordinated with United States Central Command (CENTCOM) in Tampa, Florida. The Americans and the French reportedly shared 'everything' with each other in terms of military planning: an adviser to French defence minister Jean-Yves Le Drian would later say, 'We had planned everything together, the Americans had opened all their books to us. For the first time, it was just the two of us in the bedroom.'⁵³

The French identified three goals for the strike. One was to punish the regime: 'It was about showing that, when one crosses a number of lines, one has to pay a bitter price', said one presidential adviser.⁵⁴ For Hollande, the attack had been a 'crime against humanity' that could not go unanswered.⁵⁵ A second goal was to reduce the threat posed by the Syrian regime by neutralising some of its capabilities and by deterring it from undertaking future attacks. As one high-level military official said of the strike, 'It was [first]

about deterrence', but also about 'reducing [the regime's] ability to inflict harm'.⁵⁶ Hollande described it as 'an act of international self-defense'.⁵⁷ The French believed that the strike needed to be seen against the bigger picture of WMD proliferation and use – committed as they were to the negotiation of a deal with Iran. The congratulatory telegram sent by Damascus to Kim Jong-un on 6 September, on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, would not go unnoticed in the Elysée.⁵⁸

A third goal was to change the politics of the Syrian conflict through symbolic but determined military action. This was not a clearly articulated goal, but one the French reportedly had in mind as early as 2012.⁵⁹ Additionally, France wanted to be 'in the game' as early as possible: memories of the initial shots of *Operation Enduring Freedom* on 8 October 2001, from which France was excluded (partly because it did not have cruise missiles at the time), were still present. 'Never again!' was reportedly a motto at the French Ministry of Defense.⁶⁰

UK and US backtracking

Although the strike had until now seemed inevitable, on the evening of 29 August 2013, David Cameron's Conservative government unexpectedly lost a vote in the House of Commons, which had been called to authorise British participation in the strikes. The outcome seemed to have been affected by lingering memories of the Iraq War, and by the view that the Libyan operation of 2011 had been a dubious success at best.

The British vote unnerved Obama: according to Jeffrey Goldberg, 'This [was] the day that Obama really became plagued by doubts'.⁶¹ Friday 30 August was supposed to be dedicated to refining the military plans. Yet that afternoon, Obama took an hour-long walk with his chief of staff, Dennis McDonough – described by Goldberg as 'the Obama aide most averse to U.S. military intervention' – following a long National Security Council meeting.⁶² When he returned, he informed his White House staff of his decision to seek congressional support for a strike, touching off a 'vigorous' debate said to have lasted for two hours.⁶³ The president then notified cabinet officials, as well as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. After

speaking with the president by phone, secretary of state John Kerry reportedly told a friend, 'I just got fucked over'.⁶⁴

The House and Senate were in recess at the time, meaning that a formal bill to authorise the use of force would not be submitted until a special session of the Senate could be convened on 6 September. The administration appeared to make a sincere effort to win support in the Congress, although it became increasingly clear that the vote in the Senate would be close, and that the House would be unwilling to support any measure.

Meanwhile, the vote in the British House of Commons (described by *Le Monde* as a 'cold shower' for the French⁶⁵) forced a readjustment of target-

Hollande was confident

ing, with Paris and Washington taking over the former UK targets.⁶⁶ Kerry assured the French that the vote had not changed the US position, publicly confirming Washington's resolve on Friday 30 August and flattering the French by recalling their status as 'America's oldest ally'.⁶⁷ He reportedly told Fabius that Obama had asked him to 'prepare (US) public opinion for strikes'.⁶⁸ Yet in a conversation with French presidential adviser Paul Jean-Ortiz, US national security advisor Susan Rice would only say that Obama was 'almost ready to go ahead'. Overall, the conversation left Jean-Ortiz with the impression that the US commitment was no longer fully assured.⁶⁹

That same day, a 45-minute conversation took place between the two presidents. According to Hollande, Obama told him that he was exploring several options. 'There are two solutions', he reportedly said: 'either we go very fast, or we wait' until after the G20 Summit in St Petersburg.⁷⁰ The French president pressed his US counterpart to act as early as possible – ideally right after the return of UN inspectors, scheduled for the evening of the next day – to ensure that the intelligence would still be valid, though he acknowledged that without UN support, their political position was not fully assured.⁷¹ Obama reportedly concluded by saying, 'We have these two options, we have to think about them, I'll call you back on Sunday'.⁷² The conversation confirmed to Paris that the White House was not 100% committed. Still, Hollande was confident. 'Obama is slow to make decisions', he told journalists that day, adding that he understood

how difficult it was for Obama to launch a WMD-related operation in the Middle East after Iraq.⁷³

On Saturday 31 August, Jean-Ortiz learned that the White House had called during the night to schedule a presidential phone call, which the French presidential team assumed would be the go-ahead for the operation. A call was scheduled for late afternoon, only for the White House to then move its timing forward by one hour. The French interpreted this as a good sign, expecting Obama to say he wanted to move the timing of the Syrian strike forward.⁷⁴ The Defence Council was convened in the next room so that the decision to strike could be immediately formalised after the call.

By mid-afternoon, a few minutes before the presidential conversation was to begin, Rice called Jean-Ortiz, who sensed that something was wrong.⁷⁵ Still, French refuelling aircraft took off. When the call came, Obama began by assuring Hollande of his 'determination' and 'solidarity'.⁷⁶ He claimed that he had 'decided to go ahead'.⁷⁷ But he then reminded his French counterpart of the trauma of recent US military involvements, saying that he had been elected to stop wars, not to begin them. He also argued that two elements had changed his perspective: the British vote, and the impossibility of reaching a consensus at the UN Security Council. In light of all this, he preferred to have congressional support to ensure the legitimacy of the operation.⁷⁸ (Securing congressional backing could also prove useful in case the operation was unsuccessful or backfired.⁷⁹) The intervention was 'neither cancelled nor stopped', only 'postponed until the vote of the US Congress'.⁸⁰ Hollande insisted that it would be difficult to strike later, due to the forthcoming G20 Summit and the perishable nature of intelligence. However, when asked, Obama gave a time frame of 'fifteen days'. This was, for the French president, tantamount to giving up.⁸¹ The call lasted about half an hour.⁸²

Despite the warning signs before this fateful phone call, most French officials were aghast.⁸³ Hollande himself was reportedly 'stunned'.⁸⁴ However, he concealed his disappointment, telling the council that he understood the US position.⁸⁵ 'I think [Obama] was looking for a solution, not a pretext', he would later say.⁸⁶ Still, some Defence Council participants – who were immediately informed – understood right away that there would be no operation.

Later that morning (US time), Obama announced his dual-track decision in the Rose Garden, with vice president Joe Biden at his side. He first explained all the reasons why it was necessary to act: the importance of maintaining the taboo on chemical-weapons use; the risk of terrorist acquisition; the need to avoid broader WMD proliferation, including Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon. He then stated that

After careful deliberation, I have decided that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets ... I'm also mindful that I'm the president of the world's oldest constitutional democracy ... and that's why I've made a second decision: I will seek authorization for the use of force from the American people's representatives in Congress.⁸⁷

A few French officials thought – or wanted to believe – that since US credibility was on the line, the White House would work to mobilise congressional support. Had not Obama stated that he had ‘decided’ to strike? Paris increased the pressure by publicising on 2 September a dossier prepared during the weekend, composed of declassified French intelligence assessments of the Syrian regime’s responsibility for the 21 August strike.⁸⁸ The publication was intended to build the image of France as a leader, not a US follower.

Hollande asked his advisers if he would achieve a majority if he decided to ask for parliamentary support. He was told that any majority would be a small one that would do little to create an impression of overwhelming support and legitimacy. He thus discarded this scenario, deciding instead to take full advantage of the power invested in him by the French constitution with the justification that speed was of the essence.⁸⁹ In any case, a parliamentary debate had already been scheduled for 4 September, after the strikes had been expected to take place. Fabius addressed the National Assembly, presenting the Hollande administration’s case as if nothing had changed.⁹⁰

At the G20 meeting in St Petersburg on 6 September, Obama and Hollande met for 45 minutes. The US president kept his cards close to his chest – ‘It’s difficult’, he reportedly said about the prospect of gaining congressional support⁹¹ – but Hollande was left with the impression that action was still

possible. When asked about a new date for the strikes, Obama replied, 'let our chiefs of staff work together'.⁹² Hollande also felt vindicated by EU-wide support for a 'strong and clear' international reaction at a defence ministers' meeting in Vilnius on 5 September, as well as by John Kerry's strong statement, containing an inevitable reference to Munich, two days later in Paris.⁹³ At this point, he reportedly still believed that US congressional support would be forthcoming, anticipating additional support from a UN technical report on the Ghouta attack that was expected by mid-September.

The Russian surprise

The crisis entered its final phase on 9 September 2013. Speaking in London on that day, Kerry was asked, 'Is there anything at this point that [Assad's] government could do or offer that would stop an attack?' He responded:

Sure. He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay, and allow a full and total accounting for that. But he isn't about to do it, and it can't be done, obviously.⁹⁴

Despite the caustic tone of the remark, the State Department felt obliged, in response to queries from the news media, to release a statement clarifying that 'Secretary Kerry was making a rhetorical argument about the impossibility and unlikelihood of Assad turning over chemical weapons he has denied he used'.⁹⁵ Yet by the end of the day in Washington, Russia had proposed just such a deal, suggesting that if Syria agreed to dismantle its chemical weapons and place them under international control, the US could forgo a military strike.

The chemical-weapons disarmament plan was an Israeli idea. On 22 August, Israel's minister for intelligence and strategic affairs, Yuval Steinitz, told Israel Radio that the government believed the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons in Ghouta the day before.⁹⁶ A Russian official then requested a meeting with him and his staff to confirm the information. Moscow wanted to avoid a US intervention but did not trust US assertions that Damascus had used sarin. During the conversation, the Israelis

suggested the disarmament plan, an idea they had imagined beforehand. Given Russian interest, the Israeli government immediately informed the White House. The Israelis thought that Obama had backed himself into an intractable situation and were eager to help Washington. They also thought that the implementation of such a plan would significantly reduce the Syrian chemical threat.⁹⁷

With the measure to authorise the use of force likely headed toward defeat in Congress, Obama agreed to consider the proposal (and to postpone airstrikes), as did Syria. Over the next several days, the US and Russia worked together to draft a full proposal. On 14 September, they announced a plan, to be known as the Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons, to eliminate Syria's chemical-weapons stockpiles. The measure to authorise the use of force was never brought to a floor vote.

For the French, this was a second major surprise – and the second time in less than ten days that they felt let down by the Americans.⁹⁸ A key defence-ministerial adviser said he was convinced that the French had been 'duped' by the US administration (especially since there was no call by US defense secretary Ash Carter to his counterpart, Le Drian); but the Elysée team thought that it had all been improvised, and that the US had been sincere.⁹⁹ On 10 September, Hollande and Obama had had another conversation which, according to the French president, concluded with an agreement to 'keep all options open'.¹⁰⁰ The next day, Hollande duly ordered the Defence Council to keep planning in order to 'maintain pressure' on the new diplomatic process and to 'stand ready' in case the situation evolved; it was also important for France to signal 'its doubts about the [Russian] proposal', to 'avoid appearing aligned on the US renouncement' and to 'avoid demoralising the Gulf countries and Syrian opposition'.¹⁰¹ At the same time, he admitted that 'the probability of a strike is now weaker'.¹⁰² There was a risk that the Syrian regime would have dispersed its assets, or even prepared for a strike by using 'human shield' tactics.¹⁰³ Hollande had studied the option of going alone: France was technically capable of doing so, but the president refused to go down that road for political reasons.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, US officials, with little to no hope of receiving congressional authorisation, embraced the Russian proposal. The focus of US efforts turned

to the mechanics of eliminating Syria's stockpiles of chemical weapons and precursors, a long and complex task that involved failed efforts to enlist Albania, and ultimately a decision to eliminate some materials aboard a ship at sea.

The French continued to make the best of a situation which by now had largely escaped their control. As late as mid-September, French planners were still preparing target packages in liaison with CENTCOM.¹⁰⁵ Thinking they might also be able to influence and strengthen the diplomatic process, they presented a strong draft UN resolution under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

On 21 September, Syria started to comply with the US–Russian framework by submitting a declaration of its chemical-weapons stockpiles and agreeing to give them up. By 27 September, a UN resolution was adopted, one that was unsurprisingly toned down due to Russian objections. On 14 October, Syria formally acceded to the CWC. In mid-2014, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) indicated that the destruction of Syrian weapons was largely on schedule despite some hiccups. In July 2015, the OPCW reported the successful destruction of more than 90% of the weapons that were supposed to have been eliminated.

The United States had stumbled into the crisis, then stumbled out of it.

What impact on deterrence?

Former US administration officials are adamant that Obama made the correct decision and that the outcome was a good one, regardless of how the process to get there looked from the outside. 'Far from a failure, the "red line" episode accomplished everything it set out to do – in fact, it surpassed our expectations', Derek Chollet has argued. 'But the fact that it appeared to occur haphazardly and in a scattered way was enough to brand it as a failure in Washington's eyes.'¹⁰⁶ Obama himself has gone further, suggesting that

there's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.¹⁰⁷

In retrospect, it seems that Obama's decision to refrain from acting was triggered by two different sets of factors. Firstly, to use Jeffrey Goldberg's words, the president felt 'trapped'.¹⁰⁸ He resented being forced to follow the Washington 'playbook', and yet, by repeatedly committing himself to changing his preferred course of action in the event of a large-scale use of chemical weapons, he had set his own trap. We now know that arming the Syrian opposition was the US administration's initial preferred response. The conclusion in June 2013 that Syria had used chemical weapons was used not to change course, but to justify the sending of small quantities of weapons to rebels – a decision that seemed calibrated to turn the tide in Washington rather than Syria.¹⁰⁹ Obama wished to avoid escalation, believing that military action would not deter Assad. Central to this conclusion was the knowledge that the chemical stockpiles themselves could not be struck, leaving Assad in a stronger place. Said Obama,

We could not, through a missile strike, eliminate the chemical weapons themselves, and what I would then face was the prospect of Assad having survived the strike and claiming he had successfully defied the United States, that the United States had acted unlawfully in the absence of a UN mandate, and that that would have potentially strengthened his hand rather than weakened it.¹¹⁰

Some of the president's political opponents have also argued that Obama may have avoided acting in Syria for fear of undermining secret negotiations then under way with Iran in Oman, although it should be added that this view is not widely held in Paris.¹¹¹

A second and perhaps more important set of factors had to do with the domestic legitimacy of military action. According to a Reuters poll conducted on 24 August 2013, 60% of US voters opposed a strike, with only 9% in support.¹¹² Obama often stated that he had been elected by the American people to end wars, not to start new ones. While many observers saw his decision to seek congressional authorisation as a transparent ploy to avoid using force while shifting the blame to Congress, senior officials, as well as Obama himself, are adamant that he was motivated by deeply held beliefs about the

president's war powers. 'This falls in the category of something that I had been brooding on for some time', he would later tell Jeffrey Goldberg. 'I had come into office with the strong belief that the scope of executive power in national-security issues is very broad, but not limitless.'¹¹³ While Obama's advisers admit that they were surprised by his decision, most now claim that once the shock wore off, they realised that it was consistent with the man they knew.¹¹⁴ According to a then-senior State Department official, the unexpected UK vote was critical because 'we not only lost a key partner but also saw political leaders at home suddenly remembering Congress's hasty 2002 acquiescence in what became an unwise march to military action in Iraq'.¹¹⁵ A vote in the House of Representatives seemed impossible to win.¹¹⁶

A case might be made that Russia's intervention was less a *deus ex machina* than the outcome of deliberate moves by Obama toward a military strike. Perhaps the mere process of seeking congressional authorisation provided sufficient coercive leverage to force Damascus into giving up its chemical weapons. This is the defence offered by many – including Obama himself – who claim that the president's approach was a success, no matter how disorganised it may have seemed at the time.¹¹⁷ However, while Syria's accession to the CWC does seem to have denuded Assad's chemical-weapons stores, deterrence has not held. The Assad regime has continued to use chemical weapons, initially in the form of improvised 'barrel bombs' filled with chlorine. While chlorine is a common industrial chemical that cannot reasonably be expected to disappear altogether, its use as a chemical weapon is nevertheless prohibited by the CWC. Moreover, the Syrian government did not entirely eliminate its chemical-weapons stockpile, maintaining a covert stockpile of sarin. Had deterrence held, the Obama administration might have been justified in saying that the removal of the vast majority of Syria's weapons was at least an improvement. But the regime used sarin against civilians again in 2017.

The manner in which the agreement for Syria's accession to the CWC was handled also had the unfortunate effect of re-legitimising Assad's rule without establishing a firm norm against chemical-weapons use. After all, the implementation of the agreement consolidated his position as the ruler of Syria.¹¹⁸ It also allowed regime troops to access areas controlled by the

rebellion.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the regime, as well as the opposition and general population, understood that the Assad government would not face any significant military action under Obama. Thus, the possibility that accession to the CWC would ‘strengthen Assad’s hand’, as Michelle Bentley has suggested, seems to more readily explain Syria’s willingness to accede to the convention.¹²⁰ The White House was at pains to convey the symbolic nature of any strike, with Kerry stating that it would be ‘unbelievably small’, and president Obama himself stating that the object of a strike would fall short of weakening the regime because he did not ‘think we should remove another dictator with force’.¹²¹ This interpretation was only bolstered by the regime’s use of sarin in 2017.

The bungled process that played out in summer 2013 may have been a turning point in the Syrian war. As an observer later noted,

By early 2014, opposition hopes in a Western-backed military victory were deflated. Syrian government loyalists seemed to feel a new sense of security, and the US intelligence community had begun to worry more about jihadi segments of the opposition than about Assad himself.¹²²

In France, there is a strong sense that the rise of jihadi forces was partly caused by a feeling of abandonment by the West. Hollande, in particular, is ‘convinced’ that Syria’s fate would have been different had the West carried out a substantial strike.¹²³ Having witnessed Obama’s desertion of Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt, Gulf allies saw the US administration as feckless and unreliable (something the French soon benefited from both politically and commercially). The United States’ own National Intelligence Council noted in a report that ‘unenforced red lines’ had damaged US influence in the Middle East.¹²⁴ Secretary Kerry – who had lobbied in 2013 for action partly in the name of US credibility – admitted as much in 2016.¹²⁵

Whether the Ghouta episode affected Western deterrence more generally is a valid question that remains unanswered. Was Russian President Vladimir Putin encouraged by the incident to act in Ukraine? Did Obama’s failure to act leave Iran and North Korea with the impression that US threats were hollow, thus encouraging them to continue to resist the West? Many

believe so.¹²⁶ Three former defense secretaries under Obama have stated that US credibility was damaged.¹²⁷ French officials have taken a similar view: Hollande reportedly wondered how, ‘if Obama did not strike, [anyone could] believe that he will help Israel in case it was attacked by an Iran that crossed a red line?’.¹²⁸ Indeed, some French leaders expressed the view that the 2013 US abstention encouraged aggression elsewhere. ‘President Obama had said that it was a red line and that “if he did that, I would react”. We were ready to react, then there was no reaction. From then on, Mr. Putin decided that he could intervene in several territories, like Crimea and Ukraine’, said Fabius.¹²⁹ ‘This signal has been interpreted as weakness by the international community. That is what provoked the Ukraine crisis, the illegal annexation of Crimea and what is happening right now in Syria’, said Hollande.¹³⁰ ‘I am connecting what did not happen in Syria with what happened in Ukraine’, he would later say.¹³¹ Interestingly, current French President Emmanuel Macron has adopted the same line.

To be sure, some scholars have cast doubt on the belief that credibility is a decisive consideration in international affairs, finding little evidence for it in their datasets or models.¹³² But many policymakers feel strongly that credibility *does* matter, and have asserted that episodes such as the Ghouta attack alter their judgements about the reliability of the American president. The decision not to carry out any retaliatory strikes in that case was, after all, taken by a president whose own vice president and deputy national security advisor had both flatly stated that great powers ‘don’t bluff’.¹³³ Still, it is difficult to marshal hard evidence that the episode influenced subsequent events: Russian officials deny that there was any connection between events in Syria and later actions by Moscow in Ukraine.¹³⁴

Trump and Macron: Repairing the damage?

In the years following Syria’s accession to the CWC, the Assad regime has continued with low-level chemical-weapons attacks, with Syrian helicopters dropping some 100 chlorine bombs between 2014 and 2017.¹³⁵ It has even used sarin again, attacking first Al-Lataminah, near Hama, on 30 March 2017 (no fatalities reported), then Shaykhun, a small town in the Idlib Governorate, on 4 April 2017, killing nearly 100 people.

The Trump administration, explicitly criticising the failure of its predecessor to enforce its red line (even though President Donald Trump had opposed Obama's red line in 2013), responded during the night of 6–7 April with a strike using 59 cruise missiles targeting the Shayrat air base from which the attack had originated. This strike was followed by a threat to use force again, reportedly after intelligence indicated that Syria might be preparing a second attack.¹³⁶

A few weeks later, newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron unexpectedly drew his own red line during a press conference with Vladimir Putin:

A very clear red line exists on our side, the use of chemical weapons, whoever does it ... Any use of chemical weapons will be met with reprisals and an immediate response, at least from the French.¹³⁷

Macron's statement was remarkable in two ways. Firstly, it implied that the red line applied to any state or entity. Secondly, Macron signalled for the first time that Paris would be ready to act alone if needed.¹³⁸ For Macron, the statement was intended to do more than just shore up his credentials as a military leader and differentiate him from Hollande, who had refused to act unilaterally for political reasons. It was also a matter of ensuring that the use of chemical weapons remains a taboo – especially by a country which, contrary to the situation in 2013, was now a party to the CWC.

The new French president developed his thinking in a major foreign-policy interview published on 21 June 2017. When asked if France was prepared to strike alone in case chemical weapons were used in Syria, he replied,

Yes. When you set out red lines, if you are unable to enforce them, then you decide to be weak. Such is not my choice. If it is proven that chemical weapons are used on the ground and that we know how to trace their origin, then France will proceed with strikes to destroy the identified chemical weapons stockpiles. What stopped the process in 2013? The United States fixed red lines but eventually chose to not intervene. What weakened France? To have drawn a political red line and not draw the

consequences of it. And what, in turn, freed Vladimir Putin in other theatres of operations? The fact that he saw he had in front of him people who had red lines but did not enforce them ... I have two red lines: chemical weapons and humanitarian access. I told Vladimir Putin very clearly that I would be inflexible on these matters. And thus the use of chemical weapons will be met with responses, including from France alone [if needed]. In this regard, France will be perfectly aligned with the United States.¹³⁹

A few days later, Macron and Trump agreed on ‘the need to work on a common response’ in case of a new chemical attack in Syria.¹⁴⁰ In August, Macron somewhat cryptically claimed that France had obtained ‘concrete results’ in pursuing its goal of ‘ending the use of chemical weapons’ since the president’s June meeting with Putin.¹⁴¹

It remains to be seen if the April 2017 airstrike has restored deterrence. Some former US officials believe it may have helped.¹⁴² At a minimum, it was a welcome, and frankly somewhat surprising, sign that despite disagreements on many strategic issues, the United States and France might find a common purpose. The United Kingdom, meanwhile, has been left out – a reversal of the situation before the invasion of Iraq, when Washington and London acted together, leaving France on the sidelines. The United States and France seem to have concluded that, for the moment, the United Kingdom is out of the picture as it deals with the fallout from the Brexit referendum and exhibits clear signs that a parliamentary motion to support airstrikes against Syria in response to any chemical-weapons use would likely fail.¹⁴³

Despite the current problems, Britain, France and the United States need to stick together. Any solidarity among these three permanent members of the UN Security Council is an asset at a time when the unity of the West is being challenged from both within and without.¹⁴⁴ The other permanent members, Russia and China, are unlikely to authorise any Chapter VII measures to punish a chemical-weapons perpetrator – including Syria, despite the mechanisms set up in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2118. In Syria-like situations, we would recommend

that, in addition to publicising national-intelligence assessments for domestic reasons, the three countries make a joint announcement summarising their consensus on facts, and supporting military action if needed, while leaving decisions of national actions to each country according to its constitutional procedures, political traditions and preferences. Red lines, meanwhile, should never be improvised.¹⁴⁵

Notes

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- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
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- ⁷⁵ Panon, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie française*, p. 182.
- ⁷⁶ Fabius, 37 *Quai d'Orsay*, electronic version. The exact time of the presidential conversation is unclear. Fabius gives a time of 16.30, but other sources say 17.00 (Panon, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie française*, p. 182), 18.00 (Revault d'Allonnes, *Les Guerres du président*, p. 66) or 18.15 (Wieder and Guibert, 'Comment François Hollande a choisi l'option militaire' – also the source of the claim that the timing of the call had been moved forward by one hour by the White House). See also Jauvert, 'Objectif Damas'.
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- ⁷⁸ Lhomme and Davet, *Un Président ne devrait pas dire ça...*, electronic version.
- ⁷⁹ Interview of Philip Gordon by Antoine Vitkine.
- ⁸⁰ Revault d'Allonnes, *Les Guerres du président*, p. 67. An adviser to Hollande summarised Obama's point of view as 'There is no international coalition ..., no majority at the UN Security Council, no public opinion support, so I need to at least have Congressional approval, because I'm not George W. Bush'. Quoted in Barthe et al., 'L'été où la France a presque fait la guerre en Syrie'.
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- 100 *Ibid.*, p. 192.
- 101 Revault d'Allonnes, *Les Guerres du président*, p. 70. He added that maintaining French credibility 'in case of a similar scenario with Iran' was important.
- 102 Panon, *Dans les coulisses de la diplomatie française*, p. 193.
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- 104 Guibert and Semo, 'Le testament syrien de François Hollande'. Some French officials were more dubious: they believed that a follow-on strike could only have been executed with US or UK support. Interviews with former senior French officials, Paris, January–July 2017.
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- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*
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