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## FISHER: More than a mere shot across Syria's bow

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By Louis Fisher

Sunday, September 8, 2013

It's all bite and no bark once Obama lets slip the dogs of war

Advocates of military action against Syria describe the use of force wholly unrealistically, relying on such terms as "narrow," "proportional" and "surgical." President Obama says he is considering a "limited, tailored" operation to send "a shot across the bow." His analogy fails. A shot across the bow is deliberately designed to miss an adversary, intending to send a clear and threatening warning. In contrast, Mr. Obama and his advisers plan to hit and destroy specific military targets in Syria to punish President Bashar Assad for the use of chemical weapons against his own people.

The analogy is not merely a bad one. It misleads the public, and the world, about what the Obama administration wants to do. Presidents need to talk straight to build credibility and public trust. The truth is that Mr. Obama cannot limit the consequences of a military initiative. It will be open-ended and entirely beyond the predictive capacity of his administration to anticipate what comes after the initial attack.

Recall what happened two years ago when President Obama used military action against Moammar Gadhafi. Mr. Obama confidently announced that operations in Libya would be a matter of days, not weeks. They lasted seven months. The military action, as authorized by the U.N. Security Council, had the exclusive purpose of protecting innocent civilians, particularly those in Benghazi. However, cruise

missiles, armed drones and aircraft bombings did extensive damage throughout Libya and ended up killing civilians. Initially, the Obama administration said it would not side with rebel forces fighting against Gadhafi. It proceeded to do precisely that. As another step in mission creep, the administration added the goal of regime change, leading to the capture and killing of Gadhafi.

With Syria, the risks of errors, miscalculations and unintended consequences are much, much greater than in Libya. Gadhafi, particularly after the bombings required to create a no-fly zone, had no capacity to respond to U.S. and NATO attacks. That is not true of Syria, which has the means of self-defense. When it reacts to military actions by the United States and its allies, those nations will respond in kind, most likely by escalating the violence. Syria will answer. Mr. Assad is likely to gain public support because his nation is under attack, especially after reports of civilian casualties.

If the Obama administration carries out strikes against Syria, armed combat is likely to spill over into neighboring states, including Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Israel. Russia, Iran, Egypt and other countries will become involved. There can be no risk-free shot across the bow. Mr. Obama can exercise control over the initial military action. He will have scant influence over subsequent developments. The lesson of wars is that they have their own logic and endlessly surprise human actors.

The bill submitted to Congress by the administration is far too broad. It would authorize the president to use armed force "as he determines to be necessary and appropriate" in connection with the use of chemical weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. Nothing in the bill limits the scope and duration of military activity. The door would be wide open for broad and ongoing use of force in the region. It would be great error for lawmakers to mechanically endorse what a president asks for, as they did with the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964 and the Iraq Resolution of October 2002. Both actions produced terrible results. Legislation on Syria risks the same, or even greater, damage.

The Obama administration insists that Mr. Assad must "pay a price" and be held accountable. Why is military force the only choice? The key issue is not Mr. Assad's personal responsibility for the gas attack or the need to hold him accountable. Rather, it is this: Is a military solution the best course of action? Other options could be more effective and less likely to unleash war throughout the Middle East. Reasonable and sensible nonmilitary methods are available to hold Mr. Assad accountable, including economic sanctions and blocking Syria's access to military supplies from other countries. There are opportunities to work jointly with other nations, including Russia, to monitor and control Syria's chemical weapons.

The danger is great that a military response to Syria will backfire, leading to tragedy in the Middle East and another war that we will regret we started. The bill submitted by the administration, advocating military force, needs to be put aside without efforts to amend it. Lawmakers can then hold hearings to seek advice from experts who can recommend how the confrontation with Syria can be handled short of war.

*Louis Fisher, scholar in residence with the Constitution Project, is author of "Presidential War Power" (University Press of Kansas, 2004).*

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