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Editorial: Military intervention in Syria won't solve anything

NCR Editorial Staff | Aug. 29, 2013
Editorial

Current wisdom holds that it is not a question of whether but when -- and how -- the United States will use armed force against Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons by the regime of President Bashar Assad. In the reductions necessary in many of today's sound-bite venues, the matrix is straight off the playground: Syria, the bully, was warned against using chemical weapons; Obama said something about a red line; the U.S. must punish Syria to a degree that will deter Assad and others from ever using such weapons again.

In the real world, the playground becomes far more complex and dangerous in a hurry. Such an extreme measure as military intervention never ends up as neatly executed as it is designed. The effects of such intervention always spill over into far wider circles than military planners predict.

Furthermore, the intelligence is far less precise than first accounts led us to believe. (That's scarily reminiscent of 2003 arguments to invade Iraq because of weapons of mass destruction.) We don't know how much control Assad has over the chemical weapons, let alone if he ordered their use, so who are we punishing? We may not even know where the weapons are stockpiled or manufactured. What, then, would our cruise missiles destroy?

In the current circumstances, the possibilities are simply nightmarish of lethal, unwanted and ongoing unintended consequences.

We know of those possibilities because in the Middle East, the United States has been about this business of military intervention for a very long time, starting with the ill-fated 1991 invasion of Iraq. Then came 10 grinding years of U.S.-imposed sanctions there -- the effects of which were worse than the war -- and the second combat phase of the Iraq War while trying to make some success of the invasion of Afghanistan.

Decades later, against hundreds of thousands of dead, many of them women and children, and a growing population of physically and mentally wounded warriors, what we know for certain is that the most awesome military power the world has ever known is severely limited in its ability to solve 21st-century problems.

One need not call up pacifist inclinations to understand the bankruptcy of the military strike idea. Iraq and Afghanistan are prime lessons. In each case, we installed not democracy, but chaos. We inflamed old enmities and, in the case of Iraq, destroyed the last secular Arab state in that region, sent its middle class packing, destroyed its infrastructure and left it an open experiment for those most talented in the art of corruption. In Afghanistan, the weapons we supplied to rebel forces to fight the Russians came back to haunt the United States.

Even those who advocate intervention know it cannot be a unilateral undertaking. With Britain's reluctance to join a military venture, Italy's opposition and the U.N. vote against intervention, it appears the options are limited. Perhaps another harsh reality of this era is that civil wars of this sort must run their course before the international community has any leverage to effect change.

What we should have learned is that the Middle East is a messy neighborhood where coming in on one side of a civil war in the end only strengthens the other side and provides openings to opportunists. In this case of Syria, one line of analysis is that intervention will show Iran that the United States means business and should take

seriously our warnings against developing nuclear weapons. Given precedent, the opposite might be true, that Iran would be seen as one more country on the side of a regional power trying to fend off the might and influence of the United States.

But what about the moral high ground? What of the fact that everyone believes the use of chemical warfare is a step too far that requires a punitive response?

It would perhaps be well to note, disturbing as it is, that we knew Iraq used chemical weapons, including mustard gas and sarin, to get an advantage in its eight-year war with Iran. It also used chemical weapons -- and, again, we knew it -- against the Kurds. And what, in the end, is the moral difference between knowing that kids have been gassed and knowing that 10 years of sanctions, as the U.N. reported, were directly responsible for the deaths of more than 500,000 Iraqi children under the age of 5? They died, endless streams of them in hospital beds, of water-borne and other diseases that are otherwise easily and quickly cured because they couldn't get the medicine. And they couldn't get it because we, the United States, wouldn't allow it in. Our Secretary of State at the time, Madeleine Albright, in a regrettable response to an interviewer who asked if 500,000 children was a price worth the goals of the sanctions, replied: "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price -- we think the price is worth it."

There is a grim and unavoidable reality to war, whether waged with armaments or with the power of sanctions, that begins to overrun moral categories.

President Barack Obama, who won his first election in part because he opposed the war in Iraq and promised to extract the United States from endless, open-ended conflicts, has understandably been reluctant to begin a new round of violence in the Middle East.

Perhaps the only imprudent step he's taken was the remark about a red line. As a *Washington Post* columnist so aptly put it, if we were to intervene again in the Middle East, "it will not be to decisively alter events, which we cannot do, in a nation vital to U.S. interests, which Syria is not. Rather, its purpose will be to rescue Obama from his words."

At this point, it appears as if Obama, if he were to resort to armed intervention, would be willing to forego consultation with Congress and approval by the United Nations, a decision that could haunt him for the rest of his term should the United States be drawn into another protracted involvement in the Middle East.

If we are weary of war, and most polls show we are, it is not because there is a growing isolationism of the sort that shrinks from alliances or international responsibilities but because the pragmatist in us says there is no good end to this. The use of military force doesn't work to solve problems. No lesson will be taught or learned.

Our experience tells us that the last two decades of war have extracted a great price at home with so little to show for it. And the loss has not been just in lives and treasury, though those losses are staggering, but also in our understanding of who we are and what moral imperatives drive our decisions. In this case, the real strength may be in resisting the bully's taunt.

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Men make homemade masks for protection against chemical attacks Aug. 23 in the Damascus suburb of Zamalka in Syria. (CNS/Reuters/Hadi Almonajed)

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