

RUSH TO SYRIAN WAR: WHAT ABOUT US RELATIONS WITH IRAN AND RUSSIA?

Today's New York Times opens its article on the effects a US attack on Syria would have on the efforts by the US to halt Iran's development of nuclear technology by framing the question from the militaristic point of view that we must be "strong":

As the Obama administration makes a case for punitive airstrikes on the Syrian government, its strongest card in the view of some supporters of a military response may be the need to send a message to another country: Iran. If the United States does not enforce its self-imposed "red line" on Syria's use of chemical weapons, this thinking goes, Iran will smell weakness and press ahead more boldly in its quest for nuclear weapons.

And it is this need for the US to be tough (and for Obama to prove that he has a big d) that seems to be dominating virtually all of the media coverage of the push to get Congressional authorization for a strike. At least the Times does realize there is a very important flip side to that position, though, and that we may now be on the brink of more substantial talks with Iran than we have had in a long time. Here are the next few paragraphs:

But that message may be clashing with a simultaneous effort by American officials to explore dialogue with Iran's moderate new president, Hassan Rouhani, in the latest expression of Washington's long struggle to balance toughness with diplomacy in its

relations with a longtime adversary.

Two recent diplomatic ventures have raised speculation about a possible back channel between Washington and Tehran. Last week, Jeffrey Feltman, a high State Department official in President Obama's first term who is now a senior envoy at the United Nations, visited Iran to meet with the new foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and discussed possible reactions to an American airstrike in Syria.

At the same time, the sultan of Oman, who has often served as an intermediary between the United States and Iran, was in Tehran meeting with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

It is not lost on Iran that the AUMF for action in Syria is written broadly enough that US military action could spill over into Iran. A Fars News article dated yesterday cites the Jack Goldsmith analysis of the draft AUMF that foresees US action in Iran:

Goldsmith asked whether the proposed AUMF authorizes the President to use force against Iran or Lebanon's Hezbollah, in Iran or Lebanon? Again, yes, if the President accuses Iran or Hezbollah of having a (mere) connection to the use of WMD in the Syrian civil war, and the use of force against Iran or Hezbollah would prevent or deter the use or proliferation of WMD within, or to and from, Syria, or protect the US or its allies (e.g. Israel) against the (mere) threat posed by those weapons. Again, it is very easy to imagine.

The article continues, noting (as Marcy has many times) how the 9/11 AUMF has been interpreted broadly:

It brings to mind the AUMF passed in the

aftermath of September 11. While that resolution directly concerned Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it was later broadened to justify drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—even on targets that were clearly not part of Al-Qaeda.

I find it truly remarkable and somewhat surprising that even in the midst of a domestic economy that the US has ruined through its sanctions and with new threats looming that could turn into direct US military action within Iran, there are still back channel efforts that show avenues of discussion being maintained. And yet those who lust after an attack on Syria seem ready to shut off those communications which almost certainly would come to an immediate end once the first cruise missile heads into Damascus.

But it's not just the crucial opportunity for negotiations with Iran that will be lost when the US launches its attack. Russia also is closely allied with Syria. Of course, with many questions still unanswered on the Boston Marathon bombing and with Edward Snowden having asylum in Russia, the US has very important reasons for maintaining an open and healthy dialog with Russia.

Especially now as the report directly implicating Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan supplying sarin to rebel factions in Syria to carry out the deadly attack gathers more attention, the US needs to be more forthcoming in its sharing of its intelligence that points toward the Assad regime as carrying out the attack. And so far, Russia is not pleased with US behavior on that front:

"What we were shown before and recently by our American partners, as well as by the British and French, does not convince us at all," Mr. Lavrov said on Monday. "There are no facts, there is simply talk about 'what we definitely know.' But when you ask for more

detailed evidence, they say that it is all classified, therefore it cannot be shown to us. This means there are not such facts to encourage international cooperation.”

Mr. Lavrov also took a direct jab at Mr. Kerry. “It is very strange to hear, when we recently discussed the issue, my good colleague, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, say that the American side had produced irrefutable evidence for Russia of the Assad regime using chemical weapons, and then claiming that Russians deliberately refused to recognize the fact.”

Lavrov has a dire prediction for the consequences of a US attack carried out without the consent of the UN Security Council:

“If someone tries to make gross violations of international law a norm, then we will create chaos,” Mr. Lavrov warned. “We will create a situation where the U.N. Charter and the principles under which all the nations of the world have signed up, including the principle of unanimous agreement of the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, the so-called right of veto, which the United States insisted on – then all of these principles will simply collapse.”

Perhaps Obama should keep the size of his d a classified secret and instead share the “convincing” evidence that the Assad regime carried out the attack. Who knows, if there is real evidence that is convincing, perhaps Russia and Iran could find a peaceful way for the Assad regime to give way to rapid elections. In case you think that is a far-fetched idea, note that Lavrov directly tied the sharing of “facts” to the ability of those facts to “encourage international cooperation”. The alternative is a

regional war that leaves the US increasingly isolated and viewed as preferring missiles over diplomacy.