

The Japan Times

OPINION

[COMMENTARY](#) / [WORLD](#)

Once again, U.S. rushing to attack without facts

BY [RAMESH THAKUR](#)

CANBERRA – You could not make this up. On Aug. 26, the Western media concluded that some form of military action against Syria by the United States, United Kingdom and France was inevitable. The same day, a Foreign Policy article argued that CIA files prove the U.S. knowingly helped Saddam Hussein use chemical weapons against Iran in 1988 with intelligence on Iranian troop formations, location and movements. And they wonder why the rest of the world becomes yearly more cynical about Western motivations and hypocrisy.

Allegations are backed by horrific pictures and videos that chemical weapons were used to attack civilians in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on Aug. 21. Hundreds were killed and thousands injured by unspecified nerve agents. The UN demanded prompt access to the sites by its team to sift through the evidence, establish facts and apportion culpability.

The West does not help its credibility problem by jumping from allegations that chemical weapons might have been used by one conflict party, to conclusions that they were used by the regime and therefore military retaliation is justified and necessary. China and Russia have called for calm until facts are established and warned against any unilateral military action. Three critical questions need answering with cool heads instead of succumbing to the mass hysteria of exclamation marks: the facts, possible responses, and unilateral action without U.N. authorization.

Assertions that Syrian President Bashar Assad is guilty of chemical weapons use without hard evidence presented to the international community will not do — not after the dodgy dossiers fiasco on Iraq in 2003. The U.N. team of chemical weapons inspectors must be given the time to establish: Were chemical weapons used? Which ones, when, by whom and with how many casualties? The team should establish the chain of custody

from manufacture and storage to deployment, decision to use, and use. Then will be the time to hold those responsible criminally accountable.

Assad was winning the war against the rebels using brutal scorched earth tactics without chemical weapons. Using them with a U.N. inspection team in the country would be sheer stupidity. The politically savvy response by Assad would have been not just to acquiesce in, but demand immediate inspection by the U.N. team to confirm use and identify the guilty. But then, one of the oldest saws is that rational logic does not govern Middle East events.

Assad demurred for three possible reasons. The regime's default response to any charge of malfeasance is denial and delay. It may have been afraid that someone lower down the chain of command had used chemical weapons without authorization. Or it was in fact authorized by a senior commander or government minister.

What can the world do in response without further inflaming an extremely volatile region and badly damaging key major power relations? A war-weary public doubts the West has any dog in the fight in the Syrian civil war where a rebel commander filmed himself eating the heart of a government soldier.

The doubts, public scepticism and professional military caution counsel against deploying boots on the ground. Nor is there much appetite for declaring and enforcing no-fly zones or arming the rebels. The favored option seems to be a one-off strike to target planes, helicopters, airfields and other air assets at least risk of allied or civilian casualties. Broader and more sustained military action dramatically increases the military, humanitarian and political costs and risks.

Like friends with benefits, cruise missile strikes might offer instant gratification without lasting commitment. Will air strikes be limited to the retributive and deterrent functions of punishing Assad and preventing a repetition of chemical weapons use? Will the goal be to tip the internal balance against the regime even if this means an al-Qaida affiliated replacement? Or is the goal merely to retrieve U.S. credibility and save U.S. President Barack Obama's face?

What of the risks, known and unknown, as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld might ask? Which recent Western intervention has left a rosy afterglow instead of death, destruction and broken nations: Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya? Is the West determined to

prove the veracity of Einstein's observation that insanity lies in doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result each time?

Obama drew a red line that has been crossed with the use of chemical weapons. That his presidential and U.S. global credibility is on the line is not the world's problem. Hard as it is for Westerners to swallow, the "international community" has not appointed and will not accept them as the global sheriff.

The ghosts of Iraq in 2003 will continue to haunt and hobble the response to future acts of WMD barbarity. This is also why parliamentary democracies, including Australia, need urgently to modernize their procedures and structures for going to war with full parliamentary debate and sanction instead of by government fiat based on subterfuge, deception and lies.

Still, a global red line too has been crossed. That is the world's problem. If action is vetoed in the Security Council, the alternative forum for securing international legitimacy is the veto-free General Assembly. A meeting can be called in special emergency session under the decades-old Uniting for Peace Resolution. A solid majority authorizing "all necessary measures" will be proof of the international community's will.

Absent that, military strikes will be neither lawful nor legitimate, just another instance of vigilante justice by a trigger happy and out of control West.

Syria uses military force, including chemical weapons, inside sovereign borders and we want it held criminally accountable to international standards. The West uses military force across sovereign borders but exempts itself from international accountability.

This equation does not compute anymore. As power shifts to the rest, it is very much in the West's long-term interests to strengthen respect for the rule of international law and discourage the unilateral use of military force.

Professor Ramesh Thakur is director of the Center for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University.

KEYWORDS

CHEMICAL WEAPONS, SYRIA, U.S.