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Secretary of State John Kerry
Opening Statement on Syria to the House Armed Services Committee
Tuesday, September 10, 2013

Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the Committee: Thank you very much for having us here today. As we convene for this briefing, it's not an exaggeration to say to all of you, my former colleagues, that the world is watching. It is watching to see how we make this decision and whether in a dangerous world, our government can speak with one voice and make a difference.

This is obviously one of the most important decisions any Member of Congress can make in the course of a career. So I want to make sure we're leaving plenty of time for discussion and a real back and forth. I'll open with just a few quick comments about the questions I'm hearing from many of your colleagues and what I'm hearing in the news.

First, people have asked me why we are choosing to have a debate on Syria when there is so much we need to be doing here at home. Let me assure you – the President didn't wake up one day and say, "Let's go take military action in Syria." He didn't choose this. We didn't choose this. We are here today because Bashar al-Assad and his military made a decision to use the world's most heinous weapons to murder more than 1,400 innocent people, including more than 400 children. They made a choice, and I believe we have no choice but to respond. To those who doubt whether Assad's action must have consequences, remember that our inaction is guaranteed to invite even worse consequences.

Which brings me to the second question I've heard lately: What really is at stake here? The answer is plain and simple: What Assad has done directly affects America's security. We have a huge national interest in containing all WMD. Allowing these weapons to be used with impunity would be an enormous chink in our armor against proliferation.

Think about it: Our own troops have not been subjected to a chemical weapons attack since World War I. There's a reason for that, and the reason is the international community's agreement that these weapons are inhumane. If we don't answer Assad today, we will irreparably damage a century-old standard that has protected American troops in war.

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The stability of the region is also in our direct security interest. Our allies and friends in Israel, Jordan, and Turkey are one stiff breeze away from being hurt or killed by an empowered Assad and his wanton use of chemical weapons. Failure to act now will make an already volatile neighborhood even more combustible. It will almost certainly pave the way for a more dangerous challenge in the future.

Third, not acting would corrode American leadership and influence in an already dangerous world, one where we remain the indispensable nation. Bad actors will mistake our reluctance to follow through for weakness.

For example, if we choose not to act, we will be electing to send Iran a message of American ambivalence and weakness. That will undoubtedly put Israel's security – and the region's – at risk. There is a reason Israel supports our taking this action.

Let me also remind you that Congress passed the Syria Accountability Act, which says clearly that, Syria's chemical weapons threaten the security of the Middle East – and it also recognizes that they threaten, and I quote, “the national security interests of the United States.” With that Act, you have acknowledged the danger that chemical weapons pose to our friends and to our own interests.

The fourth question I've been asked many times is why diplomacy isn't changing this dynamic. Let me assure you: Diplomacy is our first resort. We have brought this issue to the UN Security Council on many occasions. We have sent direct messages to Syria, and had Syria's allies bring the regime direct messages about chemical weapons – all to no avail.

In the last three years, Russia and China have vetoed three Security Council resolutions condemning the Syrian regime for inciting violence, or resolutions that promote a political solution to the conflict. Russia has even blocked press releases that do nothing more than express humanitarian concern for what is happening in Syria, or merely condemning the generic use of chemical weapons.

We have brought these concerns to the UN, making the case to members of the Security Council that protecting civilians, prohibiting the use of chemical weapons use and promoting peace and security were in our shared interests.

That's why I have been working with the Russians and the region's players to get to a Geneva II peace negotiation. The end to the conflict in Syria requires a political solution. But make no mistake: it will never happen if Assad believes he can just gas his way out of his predicament.

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We are, without questions, building a coalition of support. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France, and many others are committed to doing this together. More than 20 nations have now signed on to the G12 statement in support for our action, partnerships that will also help us put a day-after strategy in place. But our diplomatic hand only becomes stronger if other countries know America is speaking with one voice. We are stronger when we are united.

And in order for us to speak with one voice, we need you, the Congress. We need to Congress to uphold the commitments you have made. Congress agreed to the Chemical Weapons Convention. And Congress, as I mentioned, wrote and passed the Syria Accountability Act.

Now, I want to be crystal clear about something. Some want to do more in Syria, some are leery about doing anything at all. But one goal we can all agree on is that chemical weapons cannot be under the control of a man so craven he has repeatedly used chemical weapons against his own fellow Syrians with horrific results, as all the world can see.

Yesterday, we challenged the regime to turn them over to the secure control of the international community so they could be destroyed. That, of course, would be the ultimate way to degrade and deter Assad's arsenal and the ideal way to take this weapon away from him.

Assad's chief benefactor, the Russians, responded by saying they would come up with a proposal to do exactly that if it would avert military action.

We're waiting for that proposal. But we're not waiting long.

President Obama will take a hard look at it – but it has to be swift, it has to be real, and it has to be verifiable. It can't be a delaying tactic, and if the UN Security Council seeks to be the vehicle to make it happen, well then it can't be a debating society.

Many countries – and many of you in Congress, from those who wanted military action to those skeptical of it – want to see if this idea could become reality.

But make no mistake about why this is now even on the table. They say nothing focuses the mind like the prospect of a hanging. It is the credible threat of force that has been on the table these last two weeks that has for the first time brought

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the regime to even acknowledge that they have a chemical weapons arsenal, and it's been our determination to hold Assad accountable that has motivated others to even talk about real and credible international action.

How do you maintain that pressure? We have to continue to show Syria, Russia and the world that we will not fall for stalling tactics. If the challenge we laid down is going to become a real proposal, it is only because of the threat of force we are discussing today – and that threat is more compelling if Congress stands with the Commander-in-Chief.

Finally, let me correct a common misconception. I keep hearing about America going to war. We're not going to war. President Obama is not asking for a declaration of war. There will be no American boots on the ground. Let me repeat: There will be no American boots on the ground. What we're talking about is a targeted, limited, but consequential action that will reinforce the prohibition against chemical weapons. We're talking about action that will degrade Assad's capacity to use these weapons and ensure they do not proliferate.

With this authorization, the President is asking for the power to make sure that the United States of America means what we say.

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, members of the Committee: The risk of not acting is far greater than the risk of acting. If we fail to act, Assad will believe he has a license to gas his own people again. That license would turn prohibited weapons into tactical weapons. It would take an exception and make it the rule. It would degrade America's security, undermine our standing and erode our strength in the world.

In a world of terrorists and extremists, we ignore these risks at our peril. We simply cannot afford to have chemical weapons become the IED or car bomb of tomorrow. Neither our country nor our conscience can bear the costs of inaction. Thank you.

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