

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE CHUCK HAGEL  
OPENING STATEMENT ON SYRIA  
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2013**

Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, members of the committee.

The Department of Defense has a responsibility to protect the national security interests of the United States, and General Dempsey and I take these responsibilities very seriously.

That's why I strongly support President Obama's decision to respond to the Assad regime's chemical weapons attack on its own people, a large-scale and heinous sarin gas assault on innocent civilians, including women and children.

I also wholeheartedly support the President's decision to seek congressional authorization for the use of force in Syria.

The President has made clear that it is in our country's national security interest to degrade Assad's chemical weapons capabilities and deter him from using them again. As Secretary Kerry mentioned, yesterday we outlined a way to accomplish this objective and avert military action. It would require the Assad regime to swiftly turn its chemical weapons arsenal over to international control so it can be destroyed forever in a verifiable manner.

All of us are hopeful that this option could be a real solution to this crisis, yet we must be clear-eyed and ensure it is not a stalling tactic by Syria and its Russian patrons. And for this diplomatic option to have a chance of succeeding, the threat of U.S. military action must continue to be very real and credible. It was the President's determination to hold Assad accountable, and the fact that he put military action on the table, that enabled this new diplomatic track to gain momentum. The support of Congress for holding Assad accountable will give even more energy and urgency to these efforts.

So Congress has a responsibility to continue this important debate on authorizing the use of force against the Syrian regime.

As each of us knows, committing our country to using military force is the most difficult decision leaders can make.

All of those who are privileged to serve our nation have a responsibility to ask tough questions before that commitment is made.

We must be able to assure the American people that their leaders are acting according to U.S. national interests, with well-defined military objectives, and with an understanding of the risks and consequences involved.

The President, and his entire national security team, asked those difficult questions before we concluded that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets.

I want to address how we reached this decision by clarifying the U.S. interests at stake, our military objectives, and the risks of not acting at this critical juncture.

### **1. U.S. National Interests**

As President Obama has said, the use of chemical weapons in Syria is not only an assault on humanity – it is a serious threat to America’s national security interests and those of our closest allies.

The Syrian regime’s actions risk eroding the longstanding international norm against the use of chemical weapons – a norm that has helped protect the United States homeland and American forces operating across the globe from these terrible weapons.

The weakening of this norm has grave consequences for our troops, our country’s future security, and for global stability. These weapons are profoundly destabilizing and have rightfully been rejected by the international community.

Syria’s use of chemical weapons also threatens our friends and partners along its borders – including Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. It increases the risks that terrorist groups like Hezbollah, which has forces in Syria supporting the Assad regime, could acquire chemical weapons. We must do all we can to prevent Hezbollah or any terrorist group determined to strike the United States from acquiring chemical weapons. And we cannot allow terrorist groups and authoritarian regimes to mistakenly believe that they can use chemical weapons against U.S. troops or America’s friends and partners in the region without consequences.

Our allies throughout the world must be assured that the United States will stand by its security commitments and stand by its word. Our adversaries must not believe that they can develop and use weapons of mass destruction without consequences. A world where these adversaries are emboldened, instead of deterred, is not the world that we want to live in, as President Obama said last week.

For example, North Korea, with its massive stockpile of chemical weapons, threatens our treaty ally, the Republic of Korea, and the 28,000 U.S. troops stationed there. During my trip to Asia two weeks ago, I had a very serious and long conversation with South Korea’s Defense Minister about the real threat that North Korea’s chemical weapons presents to them and our troops.

## **2. U.S. Military Objectives**

Given these threats to our national security, the United States must demonstrate through our actions that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable.

The President has made clear that our military objectives in Syria would be to hold the Assad regime accountable for its chemical weapons attack, degrade its ability to carry out these kinds of attacks, and deter the regime from further use of chemical weapons.

The Department of Defense has developed military options to achieve these objectives, and we have positioned U.S. assets throughout the region to successfully execute this mission. We believe we can achieve them with a military action that would be targeted, consequential, and limited.

General Dempsey and I have assured the President that U.S. forces will be ready to act whenever the President gives the order. We are working to build broad international support for this effort. Last week at the G20, the leaders of a number of countries condemned this atrocity and called for a strong international response. In the days since, a number of other nations have also signed on to this statement.

In defining our military objectives, we have made clear that we are not seeking to resolve the underlying conflict in Syria through direct military force.

We will not send America's sons and daughters to fight another country's civil war. We are not contemplating any kind of open-ended intervention, or an operation involving ground forces.

A political solution created by the Syrian people is the only way to ultimately end the violence in Syria, and Secretary Kerry is helping lead international efforts to help the parties in Syria move towards a negotiated transition. We have also expanded our assistance to the moderate Syrian opposition.

The military action we are contemplating will reinforce this larger strategy – strengthening diplomatic efforts and making clear to Assad that he cannot achieve victory through further violence.

## **3. Risks of Inaction**

Having defined America's interests and our military objectives, we also must examine the risks and consequences.

There are always risks in taking action, but there are also significant risks with inaction.

The Assad regime, under increasing pressure from the Syrian opposition and with a massive arsenal of chemical weapons, could feel empowered to carry out even more devastating chemical weapons attacks. This would deepen the refugee crisis faced by Syria's neighbors, and further destabilize the region.

A refusal to act would undermine the credibility of the United States – including the credibility of the President’s commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

The word of the United States must mean something. It is vital currency in foreign relations and international and allied commitments.

Every witness here today – Secretary Kerry, General Dempsey, and myself – has served in uniform, fought in war, and seen its ugly realities up close. We understand that a country faces few decisions as grave as using military force. We are not unaware of the costs and ravages of war. But we also understand that America must protect its people and its national interests. That is our highest responsibility.

All of us who have the privilege and responsibility of serving this great nation owe the American people, and especially those wearing the uniform of our country, a vigorous debate on how America should respond to the horrific chemical weapons attack in Syria.

I know everyone on this committee agrees, and takes their responsibility of office just as seriously as the President and everyone at this table.

Thank you.

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