Lesson Plan: Connecting Syria’s allies and enemies

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“Kosovo battle larger, different strategic situation, but still teaches to expect unexpected.”

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Once again, the United States appears poised to strike with its military forces in the Middle East, this time to punish Syria’s regime for deploying chemical weapons against its own citizens. Some have cited NATO’s 1999 Kosovo campaign that I directed against Serbian forces as a precedent. That effort was a successful one that saved lives. But how comparable is it to possible strikes against Syria’s regime?

First, Kosovo was a much larger effort. In terms of scope, a more analogous precedent to a strike on Syria would be President Clinton’s strike against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s intelligence center in Baghdad with cruise missiles in 1993, in punishment for Saddam’s alleged plot to assassinate former president George H. W. Bush.

Second, in the 1990s, the U.S. had more leverage on the global stage than it does today. Russia was struggling to regain its footing after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and China was less than 20 years into its remarkable economic rise. The U.S. was the world’s sole indisputable superpower.

But the Kosovo campaign can still be instructive in other respects because it offers lessons on expecting the unexpected and on improvising in the midst of a confrontation.
As in the case of Syria today, there was no United Nations resolution explicitly authorizing NATO to bomb Serbia. But NATO nations found other ways, including an earlier U.N. Security Council Resolution page 105, to legally justify what had to be done. In Syria, the violation of the 1925 Geneva prohibition against the use of chemical weapons is probably sufficient justification. (The fact that Russia used chemical weapons in Afghanistan in the 1980s should be used to undercut Russian objections to strikes against Syria today.)

Kosovo also reminds us that it isn't imperative to strike back immediately after a "red line" is crossed. In 1998, NATO had established a red line against Serb ethnic cleansing; the Serbs crossed that line with the massacre of at least 40 farmers at Racak in January 1999. But NATO didn't strike immediately. Instead, France took the lead for a negotiated NATO presence. This strengthened NATO's diplomatic leverage and legitimacy, even though the talks failed.

The Kosovo campaign was also less tidily packaged at the time than it appears in retrospect. When the bombing began, NATO had not yet formulated its political conditions for halting the bombing. NATO nations hardened their views when the Serbs retaliated against the civilian population of Kosovo and neighboring Macedonia. These episodes are always fluid, but so long as your political coalition is well organized — and NATO was — objectives can be modified and clarified during the course of military action. Not every "i" has to be dotted or "t" crossed before initiating a strike.

Finally, Kosovo taught us that diplomacy can smooth over hostilities with nations that oppose your policy. At the outset of the Kosovo campaign, Russia pulled its liaison personnel out of NATO HQ, sent a representative into Belgrade, and belligerently threatened to send out its Black Sea fleet to interfere with NATO operations. Intensive diplomacy, including repeated visits to Moscow by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, eventually brought the Russians into co-leading a diplomatic mission that culminated in Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic's acceptance of NATO conditions. Heated protests aren't insurmountable if there is persistent diplomacy before and after hostilities commence.

At a time when the U.S. faces many other security threats, not to mention economic and political challenges at home, it is tempting to view action against Syria's regime as a significant distraction. Certainly, it also carries risks. A year after Saddam was bombed in 1993, he deployed Republican Guard Divisions to Iraq's southern border into the same sort of attack positions they had occupied before the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. A few years later, the Republican Congress passed, with Democratic support, a resolution advocating "regime change." You can't always control the script after you decide to launch a limited, measured attack.

But President Obama has rightly drawn a line at the use of chemical weapons. Some weapons are simply too inhuman to be used. And, as many of us learned during 1990s, in the words of President Clinton, "Where we can make a difference, we must act."