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The Obama administration and civil war in Syria, 2011–2016: US presidential foreign policy making as political risk management

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Abstract

From 2011 to 2016, the Obama administration's Syria policy appeared to be in constant flux. Prominent accounts portray this as the result of foreign policy making in an arena with no good options, or the use of programs as smokescreens to conceal underlying goals. Both portrayals fit the foreign policy making literature, which views policy as crafted by a president who acts either as guardian of the national interest or as a consummate politician. But the record on Syria does not square with these accounts. The Obama administration neither tried to find solutions to the strategic problems that Syria posed in and of itself, in order to advance the national interest, nor exploited Syria as a political opportunity, to enhance domestic political power. I show, instead, that the trajectory of US Syria policy was consistent with efforts to minimize the risk that the crisis posed to President Obama's central foreign policy objectives and his domestic political capital and legacy. The Obama administration's Syria policy resulted from a distinct logic of political risk management.

Keywords US presidential foreign policy making · Syria · Civil war · Obama administration · Political risk management · The US presidency

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Introduction

During the nearly six-year period in which the Obama administration confronted civil war in Syria, US policy appeared muddled, inconsistent, and shifting.¹ Prominent accounts portray its oscillations and contradictions as the result of foreign policy making in an arena that lacked good choices²; or an administration deploying programs as a smokescreen to conceal an underlying set of goals.³

Theories of foreign policy making offer two potential explanations that fit those portrayals. According to a guardian of the national interest model, the president endeavors to solve the country's strategic problems; domestic politics constrain the president's ability to secure the desired foreign policy, which is based on maximizing the national interest.⁴ According to a consummate politician model, the president exploits opportunities in foreign affairs to enhance his political power,⁵ for example, using force internationally to divert public attention from domestic

¹ E.g., Kilic Kanat and Kadir Ustun, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria," *Middle East Policy* 22(4):88–97, 2015, p.91; Gideon Rose, "What Obama Gets Right," *Foreign Affairs* 94(5):2–12, 2015, p.10. Relatedly, Philippe Beauregard, Arsène Brice Bado, and Jonathan Paquin highlight significant shifts in France's stances toward the early Arab uprisings to motivate their study. See "The Boundaries of Acceptability: France's Positioning and Rhetorical Strategies during the Arab Uprisings," *Mediterranean Politics* 24(1):40–61, 2017.

² Andreas Krieg, "Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 92(1):97–113, 2016, pp.109–113; Hal Brands, "Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy," *Washington Quarterly* 39(4):101–125, 2016, p.106; Marc Lynch, "Obama and the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 94(5):18–27, 2015, pp.24–6.

³ Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention," *Survival* 55(1):35–41, 2013, p.37; Jülide Karakoç, "US Policy towards Syria since the Early 2000s," *Critique* 41(2):223–43, 2013. Steven Heydemann's study of the discrepancy between change-promoting rhetoric and stagnant US aid post-2011 provides a complementary explanation. See "America's Response to the Arab Uprisings: US Foreign Assistance in an Era of Ambivalence," *Mediterranean Politics* 19(3):299–317, 2014. On the effects of uncertainty regarding US policy and intentions towards the region, see Jordi Quero and Andrea Dessì, "Unpredictability in US Foreign Policy and the Regional Order in the Middle East: Reacting vis-à-vis a Volatile External Security-Provider," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48(2):311–30, 2021.

⁴ E.g. Amy Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). In one leading formulation, Donald E. Nuechterlein defines national interest as "the well-being of American citizens and American enterprise involved in international relations and affected by political forces beyond the administrative control of the United States government." This definition allows the treatment of national interest as distinct from "the public interest," which parallels it but within US territory; "strategic interests," which are "second-order and derive from" the national interest in that they are a product of "the political, economic, and military means of protecting the nation"; and "private interests," which are "the activities of U.S. citizens and companies abroad whose prosperity does not affect the security or economic well-being of the entire" country. See *United States National Interests in a Changing World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1973), pp.6–7.

⁵ E.g. Jussi Hanhimäki, "Global Visions and Parochial Politics: The Persistent Dilemma of the 'American Century'" *Diplomatic History* 27(4):423–47, 2003; Frederik Logevall, "Politics and Foreign Relations," *Journal of American History* 95(4):1074–78, 2009; William G. Howell and Jon C. Rogowski, "War, the Presidency, and Legislative Voting Behavior," *American Journal of Political Science* 57(1):150–166, 2013.



political failures.⁶ Each of the two images even accommodates competing views of the president, as paramount foreign policy actor or subject to considerable constraints imposed by Congress, interest groups, bureaucratic politics, media, and public opinion.⁷ To be sure, cognitive biases, group dynamics, personality traits, heuristics about foreign behavior, and health can also affect presidential decision making,⁸ but the two images emphasize that explanations should uncover a strategic rationale or domestic political calculus; issues are considered on their own terms and policy developed accordingly.⁹

But in contrast to prominent foreign policy making theories, the Obama administration appears not to have viewed Syria in and of itself as a strategic problem to be solved, per the guardian of the national interest model, nor a political opportunity, per the consummate politician model. This study grapples with that reality. I argue that administration responses followed a *political risk management* logic. President Obama characterized the Syrian crisis as a threat due to its ability to derail his principal foreign policy objectives and to undercut his political capital and legacy.¹⁰ The

⁶ Jonathan D. Caverley, “Explaining U.S. Military Strategy in Vietnam: Thinking Clearly about Causation,” *International Security* 35(3):124–43, 2010, for example, explains President Johnson’s decision to favor a capital-intensive military strategy in Vietnam instead of deploying more ground troops in these terms. See also Karl DeRouen, “Presidents and Diversionary Use of Force” *International Studies Quarterly* 44(2):317–28, 2000, on US presidents and the choice to use force internationally as a diversionary strategy.

⁷ Aaron Wildavsky, “The Two Presidencies,” *Trans-action* 4(2):7–14, 1966; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: HoughtonMifflin, 1973); William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, “Presidents, Congress, and the Use of Force,” *International Organization* 59(1):209–32, 2005; Douglas Kriner, *After the Rubicon: Congress, Presidents, and Politics of Waging War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Brandice Canes-Wrone, William Howell, and David Lewis, “Toward a Broader Understanding of Presidential Power: A Reevaluation of the Two Presidencies Thesis,” *Journal of Politics* 70(1):1–16, 2008; Matthew A. Baum, “How Public Opinion Constrains the Use of Force: The Case of Operation Restore Hope,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34(2): 187–226, 2004; Matthew Baum and Philip Potter, “Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11:39–65, 2008.

⁸ Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder: Westview, 1980); Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Irving Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision-Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1977); Irving L. Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982); Alex Mintz, “How Do Leaders Make Decisions? A Poliheuristic Perspective,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48(1):3–13, 2004; Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne, *The Polythink Syndrome: U.S. Foreign Policy Decisions on 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and ISIS* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Maryann Gallagher and Susan Allen, “Presidential Personality: Not Just a Nuisance,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10(1):1–21, 2014; Allen Dafoe and Devin Caughey, “Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation,” *World Politics* 68(2):341–81, 2016; Saunders; and McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁹ Foreign policy making outside the US may depart from the models discussed here. See, for example, Nicolas Blarel and Niels van Willigen, “How do Regional Parties Influence Foreign Policy? Insights from Multi-Level Coalitional Bargaining in India,” *European Journal of International Relations* 27(2):478–500, 2021, and Blarel and Avinash Paliwal, “Opening the Black Box – The Making of India’s Foreign Policy,” *India Review* 18(5):457–70, 2019.

¹⁰ By domestic political power, I mean the president’s ability to prevail in implementing his policy agenda while in office and to carry out and secure the longevity of policies and decisions that he views as constituting his legacy as president.



administration's Syria policy reflected the White House's efforts to create and shift policies in order to minimize political risk to the president.

Given presidential freedom of action in foreign policy compared to other policy arenas,¹¹ understanding presidential preferences is of crucial importance. But why should political threat create the possibility of a distinct logic of presidential decision making? Prospect theory argues that decision making consists of an initial phase of editing, in which the problem at hand is sized up and streamlined to facilitate choice. A decision maker then moves on to a subsequent phase of evaluation, in which she assesses the relative attractiveness of possible courses of action and selects one.¹² Following this element of prospect theory, I contend that before the strategic or domestic political calculus emphasized in the literature kicks in, the president sizes up a given foreign policy issue's nature, as political threat versus opportunity.

Only after this critical first step will a president act based on national interest- or domestic political power-based preferences. Should the president characterize the issue as pure opportunity (no political threat perceived), decision making proceeds as existing literature envisions. Should a president perceive a threat, however, two possibilities exist: he can still set strategic interests or domestic political power as the policy goal, or he may decide to treat the issue as pure threat and set that goal as minimizing the risk the issue poses. Choosing the latter results in foreign policy decision making as *political risk management*. Decision making will not attempt to maximize strategic objectives, nor to enhance the president's domestic political capital. Instead, the president will seek to have policy formulated and implemented, the sole goal of which is to minimize the political threat that action or inaction on the issue poses to him. Figure 1 illustrates the argument.

What counts as a political threat? From the president's perspective, a foreign policy issue poses a political threat if action or inaction on it has the potential to undermine significantly any one of three things: his foreign policy goals, his domestic political capital, or his legacy.

It is beyond this study's scope to develop an account of why some presidents might choose to engage in political risk management when confronting a politically

¹¹ Wildavsky; Schlesinger; Canes-Wrone et al.

¹² Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk," *Econometrica* 47(2):263–92, 1979. An especially helpful summary of prospect theory is Jack S. Levy, "An Introduction to Prospect Theory," *Political Psychology* 13(2):171–86, 1992, including pp.179–80 on the multiple dimensions of editing. Janice Gross Stein, "The Micro-Foundations of International Relations Theory: Psychology and Behavior Economics," *International Organization* 71(S1):S249–63, 2017, reviews the fruits of international relations scholarship's nearly four decades-long engagement with psychological theories, including prospect theory, and highlights ongoing research programs that resulted from it. McDermott's *Risk-Taking in International Politics* is an influential application of prospect theory to foreign policy decision making. Barbara Vis and Dieuwertje Kuijpers, "Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Decision-Making: Underexposed Issues, Advancements, and Ways Forward," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39(4):575–89, 2018, analyze key challenges of that research program and offer suggestions for progress. A distinct approach, which incorporates elements of prospect theory but goes beyond it, is the "Risk Explanation Framework" developed by William A. Boettcher, III, which incorporates "reference dependence, personal predispositions, and uncertainty and information accuracy." See *Presidential Risk Behavior in Foreign Policy: Prudence or Peril?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).



threatening foreign policy issue, while others might not. Another element of prospect theory provides a possible explanation: such a choice may be the result of the context of decision making, including whether the decision maker understands a problem as involving gains or as involving losses relative to a reference point, rather than being due to a decision maker's personal, intrinsic characteristics. But the reverse is also possible, and there could be a wide variety of other causes of such behavior. The point here is that political risk management can exist as a decision-making model and that it has altogether different predictions than standard approaches.

The article proceeds in four parts. The first and second parts review President Obama's priorities and describe Obama administration Syria policy between 2011 and 2016. The third part considers whether a common explanation of Obama administration foreign policy—that choices comported with the president's worldview—can account for Syria policy. Here, I show that important discrepancies exist between this account's expectations and the administration's Syria policy record. The fourth part provides the political risk management explanation of the policy trajectory. I show that President Obama singularly dominated the foreign policy making process, such that foreign policy was the White House's policy. I then analyze the turning points in the administration's Syria policy and connect them to political risk to the president. In addition, I consider how serial shifts in Syria policy appear to challenge the political risk management explanation, which proposes a single logic behind the policy trajectory. Using the example of debates on arms assistance to the Syrian opposition, I show that when executive branch or congressional actors voiced preferences distinct from those of the president, irrespective of whether these were for greater action or less US involvement, the policies adopted and implemented remained true to that singular purpose of minimizing political risk to the president. Finally, the conclusion considers implications of the findings.

President Obama's priorities, 2011–2016

Addressing Iran's nuclear weapons program was a foreign policy priority for candidate Obama. As president, he immediately pursued reconciliation with Iran.¹³ Emphasis on diplomacy stemmed from determination to mitigate the threat a nuclear Iran would pose to international security and to refocus the US in a so-called pivot toward Asia.¹⁴

Despite congressional opposition and Israeli diplomatic sabotage efforts, the Obama administration initiated diplomatic outreach to Iran. A face-to-face 2009

¹³ Trita Parsi, *Losing an Enemy: Obama, Iran, and the Triumph of Diplomacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 68.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016; Parsi, 63; Nicholas D. Anderson and Victor D. Cha, "The Case of the Pivot to Asia: System Effects and the Origins of Strategy," *Political Science Quarterly* 132(4):595–617, 2017; Niels Bjerre-Poulsen, "'Here, We See the Future': The Obama Administration's Pivot to Asia," in Edward Ashbee and John Dumbrell, eds., *The Obama Presidency and the Politics of Change* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 307–27; Chi Wang, *The Case of the Pivot to Asia: System Effects and the Origins of Strategy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).



meeting in Geneva was promising, but a second round of negotiations failed. Even as Obama pressed ahead with new sanctions against Iran, he did not abandon the diplomatic approach. That same year, a back channel was established through Oman, which paid off with an American-Iranian diplomatic meeting in Muscat in 2012, expanding possibilities for future talks.¹⁵

Prospects for diplomatic resolution improved significantly during Obama's second term. Years of sanctions had not halted Iran's nuclear program, and by 2013 advances in Iranian nuclear technology had rendered any possible military response ineffective.¹⁶ Yet alongside the resulting lack of US leverage, Obama faced less domestic pressure than in his first term, allowing him to make necessary negotiating concessions to Iran, accepting Iranian enrichment. Domestic and international obstacles to diplomacy were thus overcome, and visible progress made toward an agreement.

Domestically, economic recovery was Obama's priority in his first term, arguably his entire presidency. When he entered office, unemployment was 10 percent and automobile manufacturers and the banking sector verged on collapse. The administration's legislative solution, passed in 2009, was economic stimulus, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.¹⁷ Regulation of financial services and healthcare reform, via the Affordable Care Act (ACA), were also at the center of its legislative agenda.

But stimulus and healthcare reform proved politically costly; Republicans achieved a landslide victory in 2010 midterm elections. The administration and Democratic Party sought to regroup thereafter, setting sights on the 2012 presidential election. The midterms had changed the dynamic; Obama and the Democrats were now on the defensive, a shift that set the tone for the rest of Obama's presidency.¹⁸

This new reality forced Obama's second-term domestic agenda to be less ambitious. "Obama's lost year," 2013, epitomized the sheer level of obstacles the administration's domestic agenda faced.¹⁹ Despite bipartisan support, efforts to pass immigration reform died in the House. Responding to the December 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, the administration devoted attention to gun control, only to be stymied by Republican opposition. Setbacks piled up; on top of legislative defeats, Edward Snowden revealed highly classified NSA surveillance programs; Republicans conducted a grandstanding congressional investigation into the death of the US ambassador in Benghazi, Libya; alleged IRS targeting of conservative political non-profit organizations aroused conservatives' ire; and the rollout of the healthcare.gov website, a linchpin of the ACA, was disastrous.

¹⁵ Parsi, 72–9, 87, 98, 161–172.

¹⁶ Parsi, 181.

¹⁷ Jonathan Chait, *Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied His Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail* (New York: Custom House, 2017), 48.

¹⁸ Chuck Todd, *The Stranger: Barack Obama in the White House* (New York: Little, Brown, 2014).

¹⁹ Todd, 461.



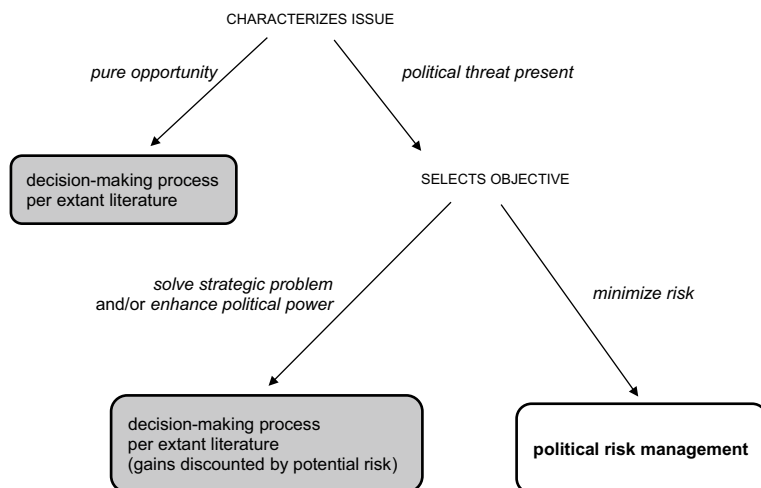


Fig. 1 President's decision process on a foreign policy issue

Obama's approval ratings dipped to 41% by August 2014, and Democratic candidates distanced themselves from him and his legislative accomplishments. Obama stopped mentioning his "policies [as] being on the ballot," reflecting their unpopularity.²⁰ By the 2014 midterms, the administration's domestic political strategy had become "do no harm."

Heading into his second term, Obama saw economic recovery and healthcare reform as his core domestic legacy²¹; efforts to transform US clean energy and education policy were additional high points. In foreign policy, legacy was staked on the Iran nuclear deal, which was important in itself and as a way to help shift the US out of the Middle East toward renewed attention to Asia, restoring US international standing by eschewing interventionism.²²

Evolution of Syria policy, 2011–2016

Four turning points in the Obama administration's Syria stand out: a shift from a starting point of trying to achieve stability through a political settlement, to pushing for the ouster of President Bashar al-Asad; to arming and organizing the opposition; to countering chemical weapons; and, finally, to counter-terrorism, an emphasis that held steady through the end of Obama's second term.²³

²⁰ CBS, 1/9/14; CNN, 4/11/14. News sources cited by organization followed by date due to space constraints. Online Supplementary Material contains full citations.

²¹ Todd, 90.

²² Goldberg.

²³ Insightful analyses of the war that pay close attention to its international dynamics include Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: IISS, 2013); Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016); Chris-



From political reform to ousting al-Asad

President Obama took office aiming to reduce US involvement in the Middle East. His administration viewed growing opposition to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad in spring 2011 in the context of the “Arab Spring” upheaval. Civil war in Libya, escalating violence in Yemen, and uncertainty about the stability of Egypt and Tunisia vividly illustrated what could happen if Syria was not managed carefully.

Before the crisis, al-Asad had been pursuing a slow, steady thaw in relations with the US. Public relations efforts touted him as a forward-thinking reformer, a reliable, reasonable partner for foreign governments.²⁴ The White House therefore began cautiously.

At the end of March 2011, top officials and Obama himself designated reform as the way forward,²⁵ even emphasizing that it remained realistic despite the violence.²⁶ By August, however, the administration concluded reform was a dead end. Still wanting an expedient resolution, the White House’s new tack was to effect a change in power in Syria. The US called for al-Asad’s ouster outright and leveled sanctions against top officials and al-Asad himself. On August 18, President Obama denounced regime attacks on civilians:

The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but...al-Asad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering [Syrians]. We have consistently said that [he] must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.²⁷

After this statement, the administration began to work covertly to get key officials to defect. Although policy’s public face throughout fall 2011 and winter 2012 was diplomatic pressure and sanctions, the US was now working to engineer a coup to end the crisis swiftly; a new Syrian government could then conclude a reform deal with the opposition.

Footnote 23 (continued)

topher Phillips, *Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); David S. Sorenson, *Syria in Ruins: The Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2016); Samer N. Abboud, *Syria*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); and Raymond Hinnebusch and Adham Saouli, eds., *The War for Syria: Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²⁴ Erik Mohns and Francesco Cavatorta, “‘Yes, He Can’: A Reappraisal of Syrian Foreign Policy under Bashar al-Asad,” *Mediterranean Politics* 15(2):289–98, 2010; WSJ, 31/1/11.

²⁵ US Department of State, “Remarks After International Conference on Libyan Crisis.” Secretary Clinton, 29 March 2011; CBS, 27/3/11.

²⁶ *In Mezz’Ora*, 6/5/11.

²⁷ WH, 18/8/11.



Arming and organizing the opposition

By spring 2012, the Obama administration judged that rhetorical support for the opposition combined with attempts to resolve the crisis without providing military support was insufficient. The White House now worked to build the Syrian opposition militarily and politically. A caveat was that US assistance would not aim to build an opposition able to achieve total military victory and overthrow al-Asad by force. Rather, assistance was intended to build leverage that would force the regime into a negotiated settlement, presumably one removing al-Asad from power. Thus, this second policy shift emphasized the end goals of al-Asad's ouster and political settlement, but rested on providing military support to the opposition to arrive at them. This phase lasted until August 2013.²⁸

US covert military support to the Syrian opposition began in early 2012.²⁹ The US facilitated arms transfers organized by regional allies,³⁰ who, along with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, provided the bulk of financial support to the opposition, including for arms, and helped to establish logistical infrastructure.³¹ Publicly, administration officials were adamant that the US was not arming the opposition, but acknowledged that the US communicated with it and helped regional allies assess “rebel credibility and...infrastructure.”³² CIA officers in southern Turkey even helped allies determine which armed groups to support.

By late July, direct US arms transfers were still off limits, but the administration stood ready to enhance “nonlethal” aid to “improve [opposition] combat effectiveness” and contribute “intelligence support.”³³ From late 2012 through spring 2013, the US-facilitated arms transfers increased. Finally, in mid-June 2013, in what was billed “a major policy shift” away from directly providing only “nonlethal” aid, the administration announced the president had “authorized” the CIA “to provide arms.”³⁴

Tracking military assistance, the US bolstered opposition political capacity. In fall 2012, the administration pushed to amalgamate numerous independent opposition political organizations into a single body representing all forces active in Syria. An early November meeting in Qatar produced the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Gulf Arab states, the UK, France, and Turkey recognized the Coalition as the “sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people” shortly after its formation; the US followed suit on December 11.³⁵

²⁸ Jonathan Stevenson, “The Syrian Tragedy and Precedent,” *Survival* 56(3):121–40, 2014. Stevenson was NSC Director for Political–Military Affairs, Middle East and North Africa, for much of this period (November 2011–May 2013).

²⁹ *NYT*, 24/3/13.

³⁰ Principally Saudi Arabia, Qatar, also Jordan, Turkey, UAE.

³¹ *NYT*, 1/4/12, 21/6/12.

³² *WP* 15/5/12.

³³ *NYT*, 21/7/12, 25/3/12, 1/4/12, 14/10/12; *Reuters*, 18/6/13.

³⁴ *WSJ*, 14/6/13; *NYT*, 22/10/13.

³⁵ *NYT*, 11/11/12; *Reuters*, 31/10/12, 22/11/12, 12/12/12.



Countering al-Asad's chemical weapons

US concerns about Syria's chemical weapons arsenal due to the civil war existed from the outset, but a greater sense of urgency developed after July 23, 2012, Syrian statement that the regime would only use chemical weapons “in the event of external aggression,” Damascus' first public admission to possessing chemical weapons.³⁶ A month later, President Obama delivered his “red line” ultimatum to the Syrian regime over chemical weapons use. In December, after the Syrian military engaged in activities consistent with chemical weapons preparation, the US and allies again warned the regime.³⁷

Warnings and the July statement notwithstanding, the regime reportedly used chemical weapons on several occasions starting as early as December 24, 2012.³⁸ In mid-June 2013, the Obama administration publicly declared its assessment that this had occurred, “including [the use of] the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year.”³⁹ But US Syria policy did not shift to a counter-chemical weapons focus until two months later.

On August 21, reports emerged of a large-scale chemical attack on sites in and around Damascus.⁴⁰ Estimated fatalities ranged from several hundred to over one thousand.⁴¹ Médecins Sans Frontières reported “approximately 3,600 patients displaying neurotoxic symptoms in less than 3 hours” the morning of the attacks.⁴² Analysis by France, the UK, US, and human rights organizations held the Syrian regime responsible.⁴³

In the immediate aftermath, the Obama administration seemed to gear up to use force against the Syrian regime.⁴⁴ The attack's scale and visibility, its timing after the administration had earlier that year indicated that al-Asad had crossed the “red line,” and brazenness—UN inspectors were in Damascus—all factored into the response. Secretary of State John Kerry explained, “History will judge us all extraordinarily harshly if we turn a blind eye to a dictator's wanton use of weapons of mass destruction.”⁴⁵ Press reports judged action to be imminent: “[The] White House press secretary...left little doubt that the president [was going to] use military force against Syria in the coming days....the president was consulting with his

³⁶ Coming after an 18 July bomb attack that killed top al-Asad security advisors and began an opposition military offensive, the statement may have attempted to deter foreign intervention. *NYT*, 23/7/12, 18/7/12.

³⁷ *NYT* 3/12/13; *Guardian*, 8/12/12.

³⁸ *Reuters*, 24/12/12; *Independent*, 26/12/12; *FP*, 15/1/13; *Le Monde*, 27/5/13; *Guardian* 13/12/13.

³⁹ *WH*, 13/6/13.

⁴⁰ *NYT*, 21/8/13.

⁴¹ Local Syrian sources put the death toll at 1,338, with at least one hundred additional fatalities from conventional weapons. See LCC, “Syria Today 21-8-2013,” 21 August 2013.

⁴² MSF, “Syria: Thousands Suffering Neurotoxic Symptoms Treated in Hospitals,” 24 August 2013.

⁴³ *WH*, 30/8/13; *Guardian*, 17/9/13; *BBC*, 24/9/13.

⁴⁴ *CNN*, 30/8/13.

⁴⁵ *Guardian*, 31/8/13.



national security team and...would make a statement to the American public in the days ahead.”⁴⁶

The administration tried to build an international coalition to act against Syria, but Russian opposition blocked a UN Security Council Resolution.⁴⁷ UK Prime Minister David Cameron called a parliamentary vote to approve military action against Syria to prevent future use of chemical weapons, but not in order to topple al-Asad.⁴⁸ The vote failed narrowly (272 to 285), prompting Cameron to rule out UK participation in any action; the Canadian government followed suit.⁴⁹ Though isolated, the Obama administration still appeared set to move forward, albeit with a more limited military response than previously envisioned. “[P]rivately and publicly, administration officials continued to portray Obama as edging closer to a decision to launch a limited cruise-missile strike on Syrian military targets.”⁵⁰ The White House explained that Obama “believes...core [US] interests [are] at stake... and that countries who [sic] violate international norms regarding chemical weapons need to be held accountable.”⁵¹

On August 31, President Obama announced his decision to strike Syria, but to seek congressional authorization to do so.⁵² Congressional approval dominated the next week’s discussions. On September 4, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved a compromise resolution authorizing military intervention.⁵³ But winning a congressional vote would be tough; even were approval to prevail in the Senate, a challenging enough hurdle, it was unlikely in the Republican-dominated House of Representatives.

A final twist: Kerry’s seemingly impromptu remark at a London press conference on September 9. Asked if al-Asad could do anything to avoid US military action, Kerry responded, “Sure, he could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week...without delay and allow...full and total accounting..., but he isn’t about to do it and it can’t be done, obviously.”⁵⁴ Russia and Syria seized on Kerry’s statement and indicated such a deal was possible. Addressing the American public the following evening, Obama made the case for using force against the Syrian regime and explained his request for congressional authorization. But, calling developments following Kerry’s remarks “encouraging,” Obama explained

⁴⁶ *WT*, 26/8/13.

⁴⁷ *LAT*, 28/8/13.

⁴⁸ *Independent*, 27/8/13.

⁴⁹ *CBC*, 29/8/13. On the debate and vote in the House of Commons, see James Strong, “Interpreting the Syria Vote: Parliament and British Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 91(5):1123–39, 2015, and Juliet Kaarbo and Daniel Kenealy, “No, Prime Minister: Explaining the House of Commons’ Vote on Intervention in Syria,” *European Security*, 25(1):28–48, 2016.

⁵⁰ *WSJ*, 30/8/13; *WP*, 30/8/13.

⁵¹ *Reuters*, 29/8/13.

⁵² *NYT*, 31/8/13; *WH*, 31/8/13.

⁵³ *Reuters*, 6/9/13; *WP*, 6/9/13.

⁵⁴ *Reuters*, 9/9/13; *WSJ*, 9/9/13; US Department of State, “Remarks with United Kingdom Foreign Secretary Hague,” Secretary Kerry, 9 September 2013.



he had asked congressional leaders to postpone the authorization-for-force vote so that the US could pursue the “diplomatic path.”⁵⁵

Negotiating in Geneva, the administration and Russia soon reached an agreement on destroying Syria’s chemical weapons. The Syrian regime was to declare chemical weapons stockpiles, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons would conduct inspections and supervise destruction of equipment, and declared stockpiles would be transported abroad and destroyed under OPCW’s supervision. The ambitious timetable—inspections and equipment destruction scheduled for late fall, removal of stockpiles before summer 2014—was met in June 2014.⁵⁶

Chemical weapons dominated Washington discussions on Syria from fall 2013 onwards; the civil war’s internal politics drew less attention. The Obama administration emphasized the chemical weapons agreement as a regional security achievement. It continued the policy of supporting regime-opposition negotiations while providing the opposition some military support in order to pressure the regime into a settlement.

Counter-terrorism

As the war in Syria ground on, through fall 2013 and winter 2014, US officials grew increasingly concerned over the dominance of Islamist opposition groups. But this did not prompt a shift in Obama administration Syria policy. Rather, that shift, to counter-terrorism, occurred only in late summer to early fall 2014.

During the second half of 2013 and early 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL) slowly but steadily consolidated territorial control in Syria, at the same time expanding its existing presence in western Iraq. Foreign fighters in Syria, including European and American passport holders, already presented a counter-terrorism concern for the US and allies. ISIS’ growth amplified this concern. However, having decided against military intervention after the August 2013 chemical attacks, the administration did not view ISIS’ emerging prominence and growing strength in Syria as necessitating policy change; the focus remained the counter-chemical weapons mission.

In June 2014, ISIS’ leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the founding of the Islamic State. IS easily wrested Mosul from Iraqi security forces, seized vast amounts of military matériel, and, using revenue from Syrian oil fields it controlled, continued expanding within Syria and Iraq. In opposition-controlled areas of Syria, it dominated the battlefield, but fought Syrian opposition groups and not al-Asad regime forces.⁵⁷

IS’ threat to the Iraqi government pushed the administration into direct military action against the group, in the process altering Syria policy. IS appeared to pose an

⁵⁵ WH, 10/9/13.

⁵⁶ NYT, 14/9/13; WSJ, 23/6/14.

⁵⁷ On the causes of fighting between armed groups that were aligned on the same side of the civil war in Syria, see Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, “On-Side Fighting in Civil War: The Logic of Mortal Alignment in Syria,” *Rationality and Society* 32(4):402–60, 2020.



existential threat to Iraq's government, via direct military conformation or because pressure from the military threat could catalyze the government's collapse and the country's fragmentation. IS threatened the Kurdistan Regional Government, taking positions within 25 miles of Erbil.⁵⁸ In its swift expansion, IS also targeted Iraqi minority groups, particularly Yazidis and Christians, raising the specter of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Washington debates thus turned to possible direct US action against IS in Iraq and its core territories in Syria. Policymakers weighed how to counter-IS' threat to Iraq's stability and existential threat to minority groups.⁵⁹ The US and European news coverage was fixated on IS in summer 2014, and IS' highly visible murder of two American hostages that it held in Syria, in mid-August⁶⁰ in retaliation for the US airstrikes against it in northern Iraq, pushed public calls for action into overdrive.⁶¹ On September 10, President Obama announced that the US had formed a coalition to strike IS in Iraq and in Syria.

The nature of US airstrikes in Syria made clear counter-terrorism's primacy in the administration's Syria policy. Operations targeted opposition groups if they were deemed a terrorism threat. This included Jebhat al-Nusra (JN), even though it was at the forefront of the fight against al-Asad. The Obama administration stuck single-mindedly to counter-terrorism, rather than using the air campaign to rally the opposition. Assistance to the opposition also narrowed; the priority now was not how effective these forces could be against al-Asad, but only whether they could advance the mission to "degrade and destroy" IS.⁶²

Counter-terrorism/counter-IS took priority through the end of Obama's second term. As a result, the administration discarded its previous determination to oust al-Asad; he was now a necessary counterweight to IS.⁶³ This included eventual US acquiescence to Russian intervention in August 2015, even though Russian forces, in nominally pursuing the same counter-IS mission as the US, instead attacked non-IS opposition groups in air strikes and a ground offensive coordinated with regime forces, paramilitaries, Iranian-sponsored militias, and Hezbollah.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ *Al-Arabiya*, 6/8/14; *NYT*, 7/8/14.

⁵⁹ *NYT*, 3/8/14; George Packer, "A Friend Flees the Horror of ISIS." *New Yorker*, 6 August 2014.

⁶⁰ Videos of the killings released 19 August, 2 September.

⁶¹ *CNN*, 20/8/14; *NYT*, 2/9/14.

⁶² *WH*, 9/9/14.

⁶³ *BBC*, 15/3/15; *CBS*, 15/3/15. For a critical discussion of this argument, see Lionel Beehner and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, "3 Flaws in Pro-Assad Support," *USA Today* 17 February 2015, p.7A.

⁶⁴ Phillips, 213–14, 217, 225. On pro-regime forces, see Reinoud Leenders and Antonio Giustozzi, "Outsourcing State Violence: The National Defence Force, 'Stateness' and Regime Resilience in the Syrian War," *Mediterranean Politics* 24(2):157–80, 2019, and Leenders and Giustozzi, "Foreign Sponsorship of Pro-Government Militias Fighting Syria's Insurgency: Whither Proxy Wars?" *Mediterranean Politics*, Forthcoming, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1839235>. On the Russian intervention, see Lawrence Freedman, *Ukraine and the Art of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 128–31; Dimitri Trenin, *What is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* (London: Polity, 2017); Sanu Kainikara, *In the Bear's Shadow: Russian Intervention in Syria* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, Royal Australian Air Force, 2018).



An existing explanation: the Obama foreign policy outlook

One potential explanation of Syria policy is that the administration's foreign policy outlook is responsible for the record. A review of that outlook, though, shows discrepancies between it and the Syria policy trajectory.

On a spectrum from engagement with the world to isolationism,⁶⁵ President Obama favored retrenchment, foreign policy that pulled the US back from commitments abroad. Obama “still [gave] notional credence to...human rights and democracy [promotion] abroad, but the real focus of his foreign policy [was] to get the troops home, reduce foreign entanglements, and concentrate on nation-building at home.” In other words, a “doctrine of restraint.”⁶⁶

Despite accusations, the administration's approach stopped short of isolationism.⁶⁷ It maintained that US involvement in developments overseas was important, but that “sometimes the world has problems without the tools to fix them.”⁶⁸ Based on “a real understanding of the limits [of US] power,” Obama was adamant that it was not possible to simply “manipulate precise outcomes” to crises.⁶⁹ Given limits on what the US could accomplish abroad, avoiding international entanglements appeared all the more prudent. Obama pushed his administration to “focus on rebuilding its own nation at home, rather than other countries overseas.”⁷⁰

Alongside retrenchment came efforts to significantly decrease US reliance on military force as a foreign policy tool. The Iraq experience was central here. Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security advisor and close presidential advisor, called Iraq “the defining issue.” Intensive involvement over 10 years, including military action and a 1 trillion USD price tag, seemed to have accomplished little there, and possibly made things worse.⁷¹

The Obama administration's foreign policy outlook also favored a cautious, incremental approach to problem solving. This went hand-in-hand with retrenchment—the US should be deliberate in whatever action it took. Clear evidence would be needed to support engaging in anything other than the status quo, and such evidence was a high bar. President Obama explained that “the goal was to avoid errors. Foreign policy progress” would be achieved by being “cautious and incremental,” by viewing “military intervention as the last, not the first resort.”⁷²

⁶⁵ Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁶⁶ Michael Ignatieff, “Are the Authoritarians Winning?” *New York Review of Books*, 10 July 2014.

⁶⁷ Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶⁸ Anne-Marie Slaughter, Clinton's policy-planning director. Quoted in David Remnick, “Going the Distance: On and Off the Road with Barack Obama,” *New Yorker*, 27 January 2014.

⁶⁹ Remnick.

⁷⁰ James Mann, *The Obamians: The Struggle Inside the White House to Redefine American Power* (New York: Penguin, 2012), xviii.

⁷¹ Remnick.

⁷² *Independent*, 30/4/14.



The final element of the outlook was bias toward inaction. In an evocative but inelegant turn of phrase, Obama dubbed this the “don’t do stupid shit” doctrine. The doctrine incorporated the incremental approach, the need to avoid errors and proceed cautiously. But its core idea was that taking positive action would make the US responsible for outcomes. Iraq, and to some extent Afghanistan, made the administration loathe to act abroad because, by doing so, it would take the blame for anything that ultimately might go wrong as events played out.⁷³

Where doctrine met the real world in Syria, Obama administration policy choices clashed with the outlook described above. The starting point was cautious enough—a desire to promote a modified status quo by encouraging al-Asad to reform. But this soon turned to aggressive rhetoric and limited military action, both of which belied restraint. As policy evolved further, the use of military tools increased, and a direct US military role grew. None of this was consistent with a desire to pull the US out of engagement with the Middle East, nor an emphasis on diplomacy over military force. Overall, policy choices on Syria were dissonant with Obama’s foreign policy vision.⁷⁴ Rather than following that vision, they appear to have been designed to limit political fallout from Syria-related pressure on the president.

Explaining the Obama administration’s Syria policy: political risk management

In what follows, as necessary background, I show that policies adopted by the Obama White House were those preferred by the president, the result of centralization and the influence of close advisors and the president himself in decision making, in line with existing research.⁷⁵ I then show that policy evolved through the turning points described in the second part of the article due to the importance the administration placed on how Syria could present a political risk to President Obama, either by undermining his paramount foreign policy goal—the Iran nuclear agreement—or by undercutting his domestic political capital and legacy. In addition, opposition from within the executive branch and Congress prompted the Obama administration to make small changes to the policy, in different directions. But these moves were consistent attempts to manage political risk, not indications that a different underlying logic was at work.

⁷³ Goldberg.

⁷⁴ Marina Calcutti explains the Obama administration’s stance towards the Middle East as “leadership by stealth,” highlighting the contradictions between its public emphasis on “retrenchment and disengagement” from the region and its simultaneous pursuit of clandestine action in Syria. See “Mirage of Retrenchment: Obama and the Syrian Conflict,” in Marco Clementi, Matteo Dian, and Barbara Pisciotto, eds., *US Foreign Policy in a Challenging World: Building Order on Shifting Foundations* (Cham: Springer, 2018), 279–96.

⁷⁵ James Pfiffner, “Decision Making in the Obama White House,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 41(2):244–62, 2011.



The White House's policy

The key figures who shaped the administration's Syria policy were President Obama and the members of his national security team within the Executive Office of the President (EOP). At the head of this group of officials, which for the sake of clarity I label the *inside national security team*, were the White House Chief of Staff and the National Security Advisor, along with other top National Security Council members whose official positions existed solely within EOP.⁷⁶ Table 1 lists these key figures.

In contrast to the *inside national security team*, the “national security team” referred to in the press and by the White House itself⁷⁷ typically connoted a larger, institutionalized group of top executive branch advisors, usually the NSC principals committee, comprised of the National Security Advisor and White House Chief of Staff, the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Director of National Intelligence, the US Ambassador to the UN, and other cabinet and cabinet-level officials.⁷⁸

The distinction between the informally organized *inside national security team* and formal, institutionalized national security decision-making structures is important. Decision making in the Obama administration was kept within a small circle of trusted presidential advisors. Obama favored “centralization, careful deliberation, and personal control of the details of policy”; his top aides accentuated these characteristics.⁷⁹

Foreign policy decision making was no exception. The president played a crucial role,⁸⁰ and key advisors “did not hold cabinet-level positions.” Obama relied on individuals who had “worked closely with him during his 2008 presidential campaign” but lacked national security bureaucracy experience, though some had worked on foreign policy in Congress. He placed them mostly in NSC positions, collaborating with them “in formulating ideas,” and in “dealing with the foreign policy bureaucracies [of the executive branch].” This inner circle comprised individuals who “most closely share[d] Obama’s views, and were most involved in explaining his reasoning and enforcing his decisions”; meanwhile, the president acted as the “main strategist.”⁸¹

Centralization and Obama’s reliance on himself and the “informal network of aides” in foreign policy decision making sidelined formal institutions. This included the NSC, and through it, formal participation by the Vice President, and Cabinet officials including the Secretaries of State and Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence. These individuals and the institutions they headed remained important in policy implementation and some decision making. But EOP exercised the greatest

⁷⁶ Nancy Kassop, “Rivals for Influence on Counterterrorism Policy: White House Political Staff versus Executive Branch Legal Advisors,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 43(2):252–73, 2013; Mann, 211.

⁷⁷ CNN, 14/12/08, 28/4/11; WH, 5/6/13.

⁷⁸ Barack Obama, “Organization of the National Security Council,” Presidential Policy Directive 1, 13 February 2009.

⁷⁹ Pfiffner, 260.

⁸⁰ WP, 30/10/14; NYT, 24/11/14.

⁸¹ Mann, xx.



Table 1 Inside National Security Team**The White House Chief of Staff**

William M. Daley, 2011 (13 Jan.)–2012 (27 Jan.)

Jacob J. Lew, 2012 (27 Jan.)–2013 (25 Jan.)

Denis R. McDonough, 2013 (25 Jan.)–2017 (20 Jan.)

The National Security Advisor

Thomas E. Donilon, 2010 (8 Oct.)–2013 (1 Jul.)

Susan E. Rice, 2013 (1 Jul.)–2017 (20 Jan.) (US Representative to the UN, 2009–2013 [1 Jul.])

Other Senior White House Staff

Valerie B. Jarrett, as Senior Advisor and Assistant to the President for Public Engagement and Intergovernmental Affairs, 2009–2017 (20 Jan.)

John O. Brennan, as Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counter-terrorism, and Assistant to the President, 2009–2013 (8 Mar.)

Benjamin J. Rhodes, as Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting, 2009–2017 (20 Jan.)

influence over policy, and, specifically, officials who had the closest working relationships with the president.⁸²

Political risk management and the trajectory of Syria policy

As shown in the second part of the article, a series of reactions to developments in the crisis comprised the Obama administration's Syria policy. Although the administration attempted to maintain a hands-off approach to Syria, at times it was compelled to alter policy.⁸³ The points at which Syria policy shifted and the directions of the shifts strongly suggest that the administration's main concern was to minimize political risk to the president, defined in terms of his international priority of the Iran deal, his domestic political capital, and his legacy. Political risk management accounts for the Obama administration's Syria policy.

⁸² Mann; *NYT*, 20/7/12. As Martha Joynt Kumar has shown, the centrality of the president to White House organization, the use of campaign personnel as staff, and the infusion of the president's views and priorities throughout the White House via staffing are themes that carry across multiple administrations. See "The White House World: Start Up, Organization, and the Pressures of Work Life," Report No. 6, The White House 2001 Project, 2000, especially pp.11–14. The Obama White House thus reflects a broader pattern. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

⁸³ Policy shifts in response to political pressure may be compatible with elements of Jeffrey S. Lantis' argument regarding the effects of competition between "rival advocacy coalitions." However, the political risk management account differs in a key respect: it argues that the administration selected policies in order to minimize political risk to the president. The advocacy coalitions argument, in contrast, holds that changes in policy constituted a response to Syria as a foreign policy problem in and of itself and were the outcome of contestation between coalitions regarding what was the correct solution to that problem. See "Advocacy Coalitions and Foreign Policy Change: Understanding US Responses to the Syrian Civil War," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6(1):ogaa016, 2021.



Consider, first, the shift from calling for reform to calling for al-Asad's ouster. Having been criticized for not clearly supporting protestors during the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings until no alternative existed but for the dictator in each case to step down or be forced out,⁸⁴ the Obama administration moved to express solidarity with the "legitimate" demands of the Syrian people (against the al-Asad regime). At the same time, the White House backed what it saw as the safe solution: reform of the existing Syrian regime. Thus, the administration *voiced support* for the opposition, but *restricted action* to supporting reform to avert the budding crisis.

Only after al-Asad's repression thoroughly alienated large segments of the Syrian population, and only after he had spurned every reform opportunity did the administration call for him to step down. From that point (fall 2011) through late spring 2012, administration Syria policy consisted of multi-pronged efforts—diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and covert encouragement of defection—to produce al-Asad's ouster from within. The approach stemmed from a consensus that al-Asad would fall quickly: "Apart from a couple of holdouts, the president's entire foreign policy brain trust was convinced...that Assad would be out by the holiday season; there was only bickering about just how soon."⁸⁵ But like reform, ouster from within did not come about.

The contradiction between rhetoric calling for al-Asad's removal and policies during this period reflected the administration's desire to limit the political risk of appearing unconcerned about the fate of Syria, while at the same time preventing direct US involvement in a conflict, involvement that would have its own, higher, political risk. Ironically, this ambivalent policy only strengthened al-Asad's determination to pursue violent repression, which further escalated Syria's budding civil war.

Next, consider arming the opposition. Despite calling for al-Asad's ouster in August 2011, the administration prioritized a negotiated settlement. Its public statements supported the opposition and pushed to organize it politically; increased covert military assistance began only in the aftermath of failed diplomatic initiatives in 2012. Domestically, the administration postponed any additional action on Syria until after the November 2012 presidential election. Whatever the merits of the summer 2012 military assistance plan spearheaded by CIA director Petraeus, the possibility it could lead to unfavorable outcomes or revelations in the run-up to the election likely undermined whatever small chance of approval it had. Indeed, the White House was dominated by senior campaign staff, who bristled at the foreign policy establishment and sought to minimize the political risk of increased involvement in Syria.

The more consequential shift, to public military support for the opposition, occurred in June 2013. Although chronologically this appeared to be a response to the opposition's eroding military position and the regime's chemical weapons use,

⁸⁴ Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist," *New Yorker*, 2 May 2011; *HP*, 28/1/11; *NYDN*, 29/1/11; *CNN*, 30/1/11.

⁸⁵ *McClatchey*, 13/8/15.



the administration's choice constituted the political move that best allowed it to stave off greater involvement in Syria.

Calls for military intervention in Syria had been increasing as of summer 2013. British and French support for aiding the opposition was growing, and the regime's chemical attacks in early 2013 had attracted increasing international attention. The administration, then, was being painted into a corner by Obama's "red line" ultimatum and the need to pay attention to its allies. Announcing that it would arm the opposition "afforded the administration the cover it needed to resist pressure for military intervention and continue the search for a negotiated political solution."⁸⁶ More importantly, it left the administration free to pursue vigorously Obama's foreign policy priority—a nuclear deal with Iran—without fear that action in Syria, where Iran backed the regime, could undermine negotiations. The Obama administration's unarticulated goal was to manage the political risk of inaction through strong rhetoric and minor support for the opposition, without actually committing the White House to concrete involvement.

Next, consider Syria's chemical weapons. Evidence that the regime was using chemical munitions in attacks on the opposition had mounted by winter 2013. Yet the administration avoided publicly accusing the regime; doing so would have brought up the president's "red line" statement of that summer. When, in June 2013, the administration announced that it had evidence the regime used chemical weapons, it did so while under pressure to increase support to the opposition due to British and French diplomatic efforts and opposition military setbacks. Pointing to the regime's chemical weapons use was a convenient way politically to justify a policy shift.

The administration's reaction to the August 2013 chemical attacks underscores that political risk management drove policy. Domestically, Obama was contending with the consequences of having set the chemical weapons "red line." Republican congressional opponents used the prospect of no punitive action against Syria to reinforce a narrative that Obama was weak and indecisive on foreign policy. At the same time, domestic public opinion overwhelmingly rejected US military involvement: 60% of Americans opposed intervention and 89% opposed arming the opposition.⁸⁷ Obama skillfully charted a course between these two critiques. He moved slowly, partially to build international support for action, but also to move American public opinion.⁸⁸ The unexpected decision to ask for congressional approval provided much-needed political cover. If Congress had failed to approve military action, he would have been able to back out of the need to strike Syria created by his "red line" ultimatum. If Congress had approved military action, it would have shared responsibility for the outcome.

Although foreign policy experts criticized Obama heavily for prevarication, his decision effectively limited congressional and public criticism. During 2013, the

⁸⁶ Stevenson, 132.

⁸⁷ *Reuters*, 24/8/13. *Pew*, 14/6/13 covers polling before the attack.

⁸⁸ *WT*, 26/8/13.



White House was already hemorrhaging political capital on battles more important to it than the crisis in Syria (see the first part of the article).

Internationally, the August chemical attack came amidst important developments in US-Iran negotiations. Diplomacy over the nuclear program had stalled in April, but the June election of a new Iranian president revived prospects for progress; Hassan Rouhani, seen by the US as a potential reformer, took office in early August, announcing that he intended negotiations to proceed seriously.⁸⁹ Thus, President Obama's decision about how to respond to the chemical attack occurred just when a window of opportunity for progress toward his top foreign policy goal had opened. Military action against al-Asad, Iran's ally, might scuttle chances of reaching a nuclear deal.

Finally, the administration's shift to a counter-terrorism focus appears to have been motivated by domestic political circumstances that made inaction potentially costly to the president. IS' swift territorial gains in the summer of 2014 and threat to the Iraqi government forced a response in Iraq, and IS' prominent presence in Syria made it difficult to rule out striking targets there. But from June to early September, the administration dragged its feet.

Mid-August 2014 opinion polling showed that 54% of Americans favored US intervention to deal with IS.⁹⁰ This was a dramatic reversal in public opinion about involvement in the Middle East given how Americans had responded to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons one year earlier. Polls in September 2013 that had asked about intervening against al-Asad showed that 60% opposed that prospect.⁹¹ The new polls asked a different question, whether to do something about IS, and about a different country, Iraq. Nevertheless, the administration understood the new poll as indicative of public pressure.

IS' murder of American hostages galvanized public opinion in support of military action. On August 19, IS released a video of the beheading of James Foley, and on September 2, one of the beheading of Steven Sotloff. Both had been held by IS in Syria.

In the public eye, President Obama was caught flat-footed. Emotions ran high after the release of the videos of the murders of Foley and Sotloff. Obama was already on record as having called IS' predecessor in Iraq the junior varsity team of terrorism at the beginning of the year. And in an August 28 press conference, when asked whether the US would extend military action into Syria, he said, "I don't want to put the cart before the horse. We don't have a strategy yet."⁹²

Early September polling confirmed that American public opinion had also shifted about US action in Syria. Journalists judged the beheadings to have featured prominently in respondents' thinking about what the US should do.⁹³ Now, CNN reported

⁸⁹ *ACA*, 18/5/18.

⁹⁰ *Pew*, 15/9/14, p.13. The poll was conducted from August 14 to 17, 2014. Respondents were asked whether they approve of "U.S. airstrikes against militants in Iraq in response to violence against civilians."

⁹¹ *Reuters*, 24/8/13.

⁹² *WH*, 28/8/14.

⁹³ *NBC*, 10/9/14; *WP*, 22/9/14;



that 76% of respondents in its joint poll with ORC supported “military air strikes against ISIS forces in Syria.” An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll found that 61% of respondents agreed that “taking military action against ISIS in Iraq and Syria [is] in our national interest.” An ABC/Washington Post poll found that 65% of respondents supported “expanding U.S. airstrikes against the Sunni insurgents into Syria.”⁹⁴

The sea-change in public opinion came at a bad time for a president who wanted to avoid US action in Syria: the midterm congressional elections were two months away. Still worse for President Obama, the polls showed significant public discontent with him—overall, with his performance on foreign policy, and specifically with his response to IS. The ABC/Washington Post poll results, announced on September 9, ran with the heading “The President and the Midterms.” The headline for the poll’s press release read, “Obama Hits a New Low for Leadership, With Criticism on ISIS & Immigration Alike.” It painted a grim picture for the president, hitting him hard right from the first sentence: “Barack Obama’s rating for strong leadership has dropped to a new low..., hammered by criticism of his work on international crises and a stalled domestic agenda alike. With the midterm elections looming, Americans by a 10-point margin, 52–42 percent, see his presidency more as a failure than a success.” Obama’s approval rating on foreign policy stood at “a career low,” with the ignominious achievement of majority disapproval “for the first time.” The verdict on Syria was clear: “Fifty-two percent say he’s been too cautious in dealing with Islamic insurgents in Iraq and Syria. And the public is ahead of Obama in support for a military response to that crisis.”⁹⁵

On September 10, the day after the ABC/Washington Post poll was released, President Obama spoke to the country. He acknowledged public alarm and tried to allay it by explaining what the US was *already* doing to combat IS.⁹⁶ He highlighted existing US measures in Iraq, including airstrikes, and military aid to the Syrian opposition. He also emphasized that the US could not solve such a problem unilaterally and needed local partners on the ground and a coalition of governments from the region to effectively tackle IS. In a deft turn of phrase, he promised action without specifying anything concrete: “I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq.”⁹⁷

Polling following Obama’s speech confirmed Americans’ support for the use of force against IS in Syria. For the first time, it also showed the public to be more concerned that military action would not go far enough, rather than that it would go too far.⁹⁸ A CBS/New York Times poll found that 57% of respondents did not think

⁹⁴ CNN, 8/9/14; NBC/WSJ, 9/9/14; ABC/WP, 9/9/14. The ABC/Washington Post poll also found that 71% of respondents supported “U.S. airstrikes against the Sunni insurgents in Iraq.” In mid-August that support had been 54%, in mid-June, 45%.

⁹⁵ ABC/WP, 9/9/14.

⁹⁶ “I know many Americans are concerned about these threats. Tonight, I want you to know that the United States of America is meeting them with strength and resolve,” WH, 10/9/14.

⁹⁷ WH, 10/9/14.

⁹⁸ Pew, 15/9/14.



that Obama was “being tough enough in dealing with ISIS militants,” and 69% supported “U.S. airstrikes against ISIS militants in Syria.”⁹⁹

Action came late in the evening of September 22, with press reports in full on September 23. The US and Arab allies conducted airstrikes in Syria, which the Department of Defense characterized as “only the beginning of a prolonged campaign.”¹⁰⁰

The administration’s shift on Syria appeared designed to maximize the public perception that the US was dealing with the terrorist threat from IS, while minimizing US action in Syria. The start of the air campaign seemed timed to generate media coverage the day before President Obama’s speech to the UN General Assembly. When he gave that speech, on September 24, Obama had a literal world stage to showcase the US effort. The public relations aside, US efforts in Syria were limited. The tempo of air operations was slow, and air strikes that would place military pressure on the al-Asad regime explicitly ruled out.

This approach is difficult to explain with reference to Obama’s foreign policy outlook. If the US was to avoid entanglement in the Middle East, and Syria in particular, leading an international air campaign that included targets in Syria was hardly the way to do so, however limited the operational goals were in Syria. Indeed, the anti-IS military campaign in Syria was ongoing as of the time of writing of this manuscript.¹⁰¹

Instead, political risk of not acting against IS in Syria proved difficult for the Obama administration to ignore. The shift in public opinion by early September 2014 and the gap between it and the administration’s policy on Syria threatened to further erode President Obama’s political capital. In the presence of midterm elections, such a threat to political capital was worse, since the Democratic Party could lose seats in Congress as a result. The president’s legacy was also at stake. Congressional losses in the midterms for his party could put his legislative accomplishments at risk, and pose further obstacles to any chance for such accomplishments for the remainder of his second term.¹⁰²

In response to the political risk to the president, the Obama administration acted. Airstrikes against IS targets in Syria and Iraq would help to counter the criticism of the president and the risk that this also posed to the Democratic Party, which did not want to appear weak on security and especially counter-terrorism heading into the midterm elections. But the administration acted minimally when it came to Syria.

⁹⁹ CBS, 17/9/14.

¹⁰⁰ NYT, 22/9/14; WP, 23/9/14.

¹⁰¹ US Government, “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020,” 31 July 2020.

¹⁰² George C. Edwards, III describes this period in relation to public opinion. See *Predicting the Presidency: The Potential of Persuasive Leadership* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp.149–53.



Political risk management and the treatment of dissent and disagreement on Syria policy

Serial changes to Syria policy appear to challenge the political risk management account: it posits a singularity of purpose behind decision making, but competing factions appear to have pushed and pulled policy in different directions. Yet, as described below, not only did policy develop under President Obama's firm control, but even when departments and agencies voiced distinct preferences, the policies adopted and implemented remained true to the goal of minimizing political risk to the president.

This section provides additional support for the political risk management account through the lens of debate over arming the opposition. That debate illustrates the dynamics of executive branch and congressional opposition to the Syria policy. Key figures staked out positions concerning the extent to which the US should actively promote change within Syria, on both ends of the inaction-action spectrum. Some criticized the lack of sufficiently robust action, others criticized the same policy for embodying too activist a foreign policy. Below, I review critics' arguments within this debate both for more robust action and for greater restraint, and then analyze the Obama administration response.

Arguments for robust action

One of the single largest pushes to change policy on arming the opposition came in summer 2012. Various proposals had been made since the beginning of the year but had been consistently overruled by Obama.¹⁰³ Now, the Secretaries of State and Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff supported and recommended a plan developed by the CIA director to provide arms and equipment to moderate Syrian rebels,¹⁰⁴ a rare, unified position among these top foreign policy and national security officials. Yet Obama overruled even this unified advice.¹⁰⁵

The White House emphatically rejected that assistance recommended by dissenters would have altered the course of events. After criticism in 2014 from former officials like Panetta and Clinton, who blamed a lack of action in Syria for creating a vacuum that allowed Islamist terrorist groups to flourish and contributed to the rise of IS, President Obama called it "fantasy."¹⁰⁶

The plan to arm and train rebels was revised and reformulated but kept on the back burner until April 2013, when Obama "authorized the C.I.A. to begin a program to arm the rebels at a base in Jordan." Subsequently, the administration decided

¹⁰³ *Reuters*, 9/10/14.

¹⁰⁴ *NYT*, 7/2/14; *WSJ*, 12/2/13; Frederic Hof, "Saving Syria is No 'Fantasy,'" *Politico*, 11 August 2014.

¹⁰⁵ *WSJ*, 7/4/14.

¹⁰⁶ Goldberg, "Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS," *Atlantic*, 10 August 2014; *CNN*, 22/9/14.



to expand assistance through a Defense Department-led program in Saudi Arabia “to train ‘vetted’ rebels to battle [IS] fighters.”¹⁰⁷

Still, doubts remain about whether these programs were undertaken seriously. Despite a rhetorical shift, US assistance to the opposition stopped short of following the plan advocates of a more robust US role favored. A public disagreement between Secretary of State Kerry and DOD in 2014 regarding arming the rebels illustrated that high-ranking officials were not convinced that ongoing efforts were sufficient. Reporting on Syrian opposition groups also clearly established a lack of follow-through on US assistance.¹⁰⁸ The Syria advisor to then-Secretary of State Clinton pointed out that even the way in which the White House put requests to Congress signaled a lack of commitment.¹⁰⁹ The administration’s plans to train opposition fighters to combat IS proceeded painstakingly; the program trained few fighters, and those who re-entered Syria to fight IS were captured by JN.

This record produced pragmatist and humanitarian criticisms of the administration’s failure to act more robustly. Foreign policy pragmatists argued that the US needed to do more to support the Syrian opposition following three separate logics. First, the US would not be able to influence the opposition without providing significant support. As Panetta noted, “All of us [Clinton, Dempsey, Panetta, Petraeus] believed that withholding weapons was impeding our ability to develop sway with those groups.”¹¹⁰ Members of Congress concurred. Mike Rogers, a Republican who chaired the House Intelligence Committee, commented that the “trickling pipeline of supplies drove some US allies into the arms of Islamists. ‘We didn’t commit to them, so why should we expect them to commit to us?’” Eliot Engle, the highest-ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, echoed Rogers’ concerns.¹¹¹

Second, the US would not be able to hasten a diplomatic resolution without military pressure on al-Asad. Kerry and US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, for example, “argued for a ‘military intervention’ to change Mr. Assad’s calculation and try to push him back to peace talks.”¹¹² Similarly, Petraeus contended additional support to the opposition was necessary to have any chance of exerting military pressure on the regime.¹¹³

Third, the US would lose credibility—with al-Asad, the opposition, and internationally—if it failed to deliver on rhetorical commitments made throughout the crisis. Kerry, in discussions prior to the decision to publicly announce arms support for the opposition, noted that policy and action on Syria could not be separated from other US diplomatic and security priorities. Emphasizing the need to respond to al-Asad’s violation of the chemical weapons “red line,” Kerry stated that “risks of inaction [included] the message [it] might send to Iran about the administration’s seriousness about the

¹⁰⁷ NYT, 14/10/14.

¹⁰⁸ WSJ, 7/4/14.

¹⁰⁹ For example, by submitting the request perfunctorily via e-mail, Hof.

¹¹⁰ Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 449–50.

¹¹¹ WSJ, 26/1/15.

¹¹² WSJ, 7/4/2014.

¹¹³ Aspen, 30/6/14.



‘red lines’ it has set on preventing that regime from building a nuclear bomb.” Panetta broadened the point. The lack of US military response, particularly after the administration had geared up to strike Syria “was a blow to American credibility...[US] power rests on its word....by failing to respond, it sent the wrong message to the world.”¹¹⁴

Foreign policy humanitarians argued that the US was obligated to use military power to alleviate Syrian civilians’ suffering. Force could range from the creation of protected zones or safe havens via an anti-regime no-fly zone, to arms assistance so that residents of opposition-controlled areas could defend themselves against the regime, and even direct military action to topple the regime.

Arguments for restraint

Arguments for greater caution and restraint were several. First, increased pro-opposition military support might risk greater US involvement down the line. In 2014, for example, the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff both argued against intervention: “From Gen. Dempsey’s perspective, even a limited military operation could embroil the US in a broader regional conflict [more] than advocates realize.... ‘If it weren’t for the chairman, you would be right back in Iraq or Afghanistan,’ a senior defense official said.” Proponents referred to Iraq and Afghanistan as foreboding harbingers of what Syria could become should the US support the opposition more actively. One former official explained, “the President and those around him fear[ed] that taking some kind of a step might put them on [a] ‘slippery slope.’ ... take one step, and in the fullness of time you’ll be obliged to occupy the country.”¹¹⁵

Second, many, including members of Congress, opposed any action whatsoever, on the grounds that no US interests were at stake. They saw the slippery slope objection as wrong-headed. The point was that there simply was no case for even the smallest US action.

Third, escalation might put US interests at risk. Officials who viewed the chemical weapons deal as paramount worried that pro-opposition support could jeopardize al-Asad’s implementation of it. Direct US intervention, for example enforcing a no-fly zone, could have negative consequences beyond Syria, potentially angering Russia: “Pentagon officials cited concerns Moscow could interfere with ...[Afghanistan] supply lines.”¹¹⁶ DOD was also leery of intervention because it did not want to use “war-fighting assets” in Syria which might be needed to confront Iran over nuclear weapons, and because it risked depleting “political capital” necessary for doing so. Some members of Congress used similar logic in opposing a US strike after the August 2013 chemical attacks.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Panetta, 450.

¹¹⁵ Hof, *BBC*, 29/5/13.

¹¹⁶ *WSJ*, 12/2/13.

¹¹⁷ Stevenson, 124.



The political risk management pattern

At first glance, dissent from opposite directions underscores the characterization of Syria as “a wicked problem,” as Clinton labeled it; the administration appeared to have no good options.¹¹⁸ Indeed, its policy choices frequently appeared to split the difference in the debate, failing to satisfy proponents of either side.

Such middle of the road positions and shifts in them could be seen as emblematic of the problem Clinton identified. However, the timing and antecedents of shifts in the policy reveal the administration’s decision-making calculus. The administration did not hold to a course of limited action, nor pursue one of increasingly robust action; we might expect either of these trajectories if no good policy choices existed. Instead, policy shifted in response to political pressures on the president. Thus, simultaneous criticism from opposite sides of the debate was due to the administration’s selection of policy in order to minimize the president’s own political risk.

Conclusion

The Obama administration’s record on the civil war in Syria, often criticized for oscillation between hasty involvement and inaction, appears consistent and logical when understood as political risk management. Time and again, the policy evolved. But it did not shift so that President Obama could better address the crisis from the standpoint of national interest, nor for him to use it to his advantage and that of the Democratic Party in struggles over domestic legislation or electoral politics. Instead, the administration crafted Syria policy to minimize political risk to the president.

Reluctant to become involved in the crisis from the outset, the administration defined as narrow a role as possible whenever it considered taking action. It eagerly pursued any option it believed could swiftly alleviate Syria-related political pressure on President Obama.

Critics faulted the administration for doing too little, or for doing too much; indeed Syria policy often split the difference between opposite ends of debates, pleasing proponents of neither side. But the extensive control that President Obama and close advisors exercised over foreign policy making casts Syria policy in sharp relief. Its contours were deliberate responses to unfolding events, but with the overarching objective of reducing political risk to the president. The policy endeavored to prevent any aspect of the crisis from interfering with

¹¹⁸ Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 389. The term, as Clinton explained, had been coined by “planning experts to describe particularly complex challenges that confound standard solutions and approaches. Wicked problems rarely have a right answer; in fact, part of what makes them wicked is that every option appears worse than the next.” I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing the original source of the term to my attention. Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber conceptualize wicked problems and enumerate their distinguishing characteristics—which are not identical to Clinton’s description—in “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” *Policy Sciences* 4(2):155–69, 1973.



Obama's foreign policy priority of a nuclear agreement with Iran, from draining his domestic political capital, or from marring what he viewed as his legacy.

As a way of understanding US presidential foreign policy making, the political risk management logic has several implications. First, for research on foreign policy, it may be fruitful to explore how a given decision maker's time horizon can vary. Scholars often conceive of time horizons as a dispositional attribute for which the meaningful variation is across individuals, less so within an individual over time or across issues. For example, studies distinguish between politicians in democracies, whose time horizons are short and linked to election cycles, and politicians in non-democracies, whose time horizons are assumed to be longer. But this study of US policy on Syria shows that for a given area of foreign policy, the president's time horizons can oscillate based on the nature of the political threats that arise at a particular point in time. One pattern could be differences in time horizons according to whether the threat is to the president's legacy or to his political capital, with the former generating longer time horizons than the latter. The link to time horizons may also be more complex and vary within those categories of threat, since it matters how the president interprets, subjectively, how his legacy or political capital could be affected. Here, the switch to the bombing campaign against ISIS is informative—President Obama's concern was tied not only to the midterm elections, but perhaps even to polling and news cycles that were varying on a weekly basis.

Second, the Obama administration's response to dissent and disagreement on Syria policy indicates that opponents of a president's policy, both within the executive branch and in Congress, should develop long-term plans to influence policy that strategically anticipate the political risk management response. It may be possible to nudge an administration's hand to deviate in concrete, small ways from its preferred policy. But opponents should be circumspect about whether such changes will matter in the final analysis. The account provided here suggests that if the administration acquiesces out of a political risk management logic, changes are likely to add up to an inconsistent policy that fails to satisfy policy opponents, rather than adding up to meaningful change and influence over the policy area.

Third, and relatedly, US allies, particularly NATO members, should be aware of how political risk management by a president can constitute an obstacle to their efforts to advance national interests. If the president understands a policy question as a political threat, then allies' efforts to influence US policy via interaction with the executive branch bureaucracy or Congress are likely, at best, to lead to a Frankenstein-ish result. If allies aim to change a policy, the incremental, persistent efforts that comprise diplomacy and other forms of regular government-to-government interaction may be counterproductive. Allies should be wary of going after small, seemingly realistic changes to a policy through regular channels. Interaction with a president via the *inside national security team*, and which targets the big picture and emphasizes how an ally's preferred change to policy operates on political risk to the president himself, may have the best chance of achieving meaningful gains, even if that chance is quite a small one.



Understanding the Obama administration's Syria policy as political risk management should be palatable to politicians for whom self-preservation is a noble art. But the lesson may be bitter for bureaucrats, legislators, diplomats, and soldiers who labored to secure US interests connected to Syria's civil war. It may be bitter, too, for Democratic Party politicians who saw the crisis as an opportunity to make domestic political headway. For Syrian activists who engaged with the administration, first to forge their country's new future, then, with increasing despair, simply to staunch the human suffering, the tragedy may not be apparent lack of good policy options. Rather, it may be an altogether less bearable one—that Syria in its own right did not factor into the Obama administration's decision-making logic. But there is a sliver of redemption in this knowledge. Policy may be influenced through a narrow, difficult, but direct path: the considered, strategic creation of political risk to a president.

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