



PERSPECTIVES

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Discouraging the Use of Chemical Weapons Is Valuable Unto Itself

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The attack on Syria's chemical weapons (CW) sites wasn't intended to influence the outcome of the war; it was designed to prevent the future use of CW. This won't save many lives, because regular bombs can kill as many people as CW. But ending the horrors of chemical warfare is a worthwhile and feasible international goal. The way we react to the attack on Assad's CW assets can affect the possibility of future use. We should applaud the international actions against Assad's CW instead of complaining about what the attacks didn't accomplish.

Paradoxically, one reason we can prevent the use of Chemical Weapons (CW) in the future is that in doing so we won't save many lives. People are naturally horrified by a vision of being killed in a gas attack, but generally speaking, CW are not much more effective at killing people than are ordinary high explosive (HE) weapons. Anyone killed by an HE bomb is just as dead as someone killed by CW.

On the one hand, the limited killing power of CW means that preventing Assad or the next Assad from using CW will not save many lives (hundreds or perhaps thousands; certainly not millions). But this also means the Assads of the world won't lose much if they give up their CW. It is therefore relatively easy for the world to impose costs on anyone who uses CW that would outweigh the small gains they might get from using CW.

It is possible to get the world to enforce moral values when it can do so without incurring large costs. In cases like Syria, the world cannot stop the killing without a military force stronger than the local forces, and nobody is willing to sacrifice their soldiers. But the world can support the ban on CW by using only missile attacks from a distance.

There is no way the US-British-French attack on Assad's CW facilities could have a major influence on the struggle for control of Syria, or stop the killing of civilians. The purpose of the attack was not to change the outcome of the war in Syria; the purpose was to make sure Assad and his successors understand that he loses more from his use of CW than he gains – which is certainly true.

The dictators of the world don't use CW because they are cruel; they use them because CW are a slightly easier and cheaper way to kill and frighten their enemies. But they have other ways of killing and frightening people. So if the example of what happened to Assad convinces them that they would lose more from international retaliation for using CW than they might gain from their use, they will not use their CW. Others might decide it is a mistake to build or buy CW in the first place. Why spend money on weapons you can't use?

CW are officially classed as "weapons of mass destruction," along with nuclear weapons (NW) and biological weapons (BW). But this is misleading. Nuclear or biological weapons have an entirely different potential than CW. NW or BW can kill millions of people.¹ The politics of any conflict are changed if one side or both sides might use NW or BW. The world will not be very different if many countries have CW and sometimes use them (terrible though that would be), but it will be radically different – and much worse – if many countries have, and some countries use, NW or BW.

Does the limited harm from CW mean it is not worthwhile to enforce the ban on CW or reinforce the taboo against their use? Not at all. We should make small improvements in the world even if we cannot yet make bigger ones. A world in which CW are not used is better than a world in which they are – even if there is only a small reduction in the number of people killed. Perhaps a world in which international agreement achieves some moral goals, even modest ones, is better than a world in which nations cannot succeed in enforcing any moral values at all.

We should applaud the governments that acted in Syria to support the world's rejection of CW, not weaken the precedent they created by complaining that the attack didn't stop the killing in Syria or end the rule of the dictator. Our reaction to the attack should be designed to convince potential users of CW that international hatred of CW is so strong that anyone who uses them will be punished enough so that he will regret having used them.

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¹ Some will point out that not all NW or BW would kill millions of people; there are also "small" forms of these weapons, especially BW. But the goal is to rule out the whole class of NW and BW because some forms are so massively deadly.