

**SECRETARY OF DEFENSE CHUCK HAGEL
OPENING STATEMENT ON SYRIA
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2013**

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Corker, thank you for convening this hearing.

In the coming days, Congress will debate how to respond to the most recent chemical weapons attack in Syria – a large-scale, and heinous, sarin gas assault perpetrated by the Syrian government against its own people.

As a former Senator and member of this committee, I welcome this debate and I strongly support President Obama’s decision to seek congressional authorization for the use of force in Syria.

As each of us knows, committing the country to using military force is the most difficult decision America’s leaders can make. All of those who are privileged to serve our nation have a responsibility to ask tough questions before that commitment is made. The American people must be assured that their leaders are acting according to U.S. national interests, with well-defined military objectives, and with an understanding of the risks and consequences involved.

The President, along with his entire national security team, asked those tough questions before we concluded that the United States should take military action against Syrian regime targets. I want to address how we reached this decision by clarifying the U.S. interests at stake, our military objectives, and the risks of not acting at this critical juncture.

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

The Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons poses grave risks to our friends and partners along Syria’s borders – including Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. If Assad is prepared to use chemical weapons against his own people, we have to be concerned that terrorist groups like Hezbollah, which has forces in Syria supporting the Assad regime, could acquire them. This risk of chemical weapons proliferation poses a direct threat to our friends and partners, and to U.S. personnel in the region. We cannot afford for Hezbollah or any terrorist group determined to strike the United States to have incentives to acquire or use chemical weapons.

The Syrian regime’s actions risk eroding the nearly century-old international norm against the use of chemical weapons – a norm that has helped protect the United States homeland and American forces operating across the globe from these terrible weapons. Weakening this norm could embolden other regimes to acquire or use chemical weapons. For example, North Korea maintains a massive stockpile of chemical weapons that threatens our treaty ally, the Republic of Korea, and the 28,000 U.S. troops stationed there. I have just returned from Asia, where I had a very serious and long conversation with South Korea’s Defense Minister about the threat that North Korea’s stockpile of chemical weapons presents to them. Our allies throughout the world must be assured that the United States will fulfill its security commitments.

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

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

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

General Dempsey and I have assured the President that U.S. forces will be ready to act whenever the President gives the order. We are also working with our allies and partners in this effort. Key partners, including France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other friends in the region, have assured us of their strong support for U.S. action.

In defining our military objectives, we have made clear that we are not seeking to resolve the underlying conflict in Syria through direct military force. Instead we are contemplating actions that are tailored to respond to the use of chemical weapons. A political solution created by the Syrian people is the only way to ultimately end the violence in Syria, and Secretary Kerry is leading international efforts to help the parties in Syria move towards a negotiated transition. We are also committed to doing more to assist the Syrian opposition. But Assad must be held accountable for using these weapons in defiance of the international community.

Having defined America's interests and our military objectives, we also must examine the risks and consequences of action, as well as the consequences of inaction.

There are always risks in taking action, but there are also risks with inaction. The Assad regime, under increasing pressure by the Syrian opposition, could feel empowered to carry out even more devastating chemical weapons attacks. Chemical weapons make no distinction between combatants and innocent civilians, and inflict the worst kind of indiscriminate suffering, as we have recently seen.

A refusal to act would undermine the credibility of America's other security commitments – including the President's commitment to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The word of the United States must mean something. It is vital currency in foreign relations and international and allied commitments.

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

All of us who have the privilege and responsibility of serving this great nation owe the American people, and especially those wearing the uniform of our country, a vigorous debate on how America should respond to the horrific chemical weapons attack in Syria. I know everyone on this committee agrees, and takes their responsibility of office just as seriously as the President and everyone at this table.

Thank you.

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