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Posted By John Hudson ■ Monday, August 26, 2013 - 6:29 PM ■ Share



The United States appears to be closer than ever to deploying a series of surgical strikes on Syrian targets. But a key architect of that strategy is seriously and publicly questioning the wisdom of carrying it out.

In the last 48 hours, U.S. officials leaked plans to **several media outlets** to fire cruise missiles at Syrian military installations as a warning to the Syrian government not to use its chemical weapons stockpiles again. On Sunday, Sen. Bob Corker, who was briefed by administration officials twice over the weekend, said a U.S. "response is imminent" in Syria. "I think we will respond in a surgical way," he said. On Monday, Secretary of State John Kerry appeared to **set the groundwork** for a U.S. military incursion.

Now, a former U.S. Navy planner responsible for outlining an influential and highly-detailed proposal for surgical strikes tells *The Cable* he has serious misgivings about the plan. He says too much faith is being put into the effectiveness of surgical strikes on Assad's forces with little discussion of what wider goals such attacks are supposed to achieve.

"Tactical actions in the absence of strategic objectives is usually pointless and often counterproductive," Chris Harmer, a senior naval analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, said. "I never intended my analysis of a cruise missile strike option to be advocacy even though some people took it as that."

"I made it clear that this is a low cost option, but the broader issue is that low cost options don't do

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John Hudson reports on national security and foreign policy from the Pentagon to Foggy Bottom, the White House to Embassy Row, for *The Cable*.

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any good unless they are tied to strategic priorities and objectives," he added. "Any ship officer can launch 30 or 40 Tomahawks. It's not difficult. The difficulty is explaining to strategic planners how this advances U.S. interests."

In July, Harmer authored a widely-circulated **study** showing how the U.S. could degrade key Syrian military installations on the cheap with virtually no risk to U.S. personnel. "It could be done quickly, easily, with no risk whatsoever to American personnel, and a relatively minor cost," said Harmer. One of the study's proposals was cruise missile strikes from what are known as TLAMs (Tomahawk land attack missiles) fired from naval vessels in the Mediterranean.

The study immediately struck a chord with hawkish lawmakers on the Hill who were frustrated with the **options** outlined by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey that required a major commitment by U.S. military forces with a pricetag in the billions.

"For a serious accounting of a realistic limited military option in Syria, I would strongly recommend a new study that is being released today by the Institute for the Study of War," **Sen. John McCain said in July**, referring to Harmer's study. "This new study confirms what I and many others have long argued: That it is militarily feasible for the United States and our friends and allies to significantly degrade Assad's air power at relatively low cost, low risk to our personnel, and in very short order."

Not all surgical strikes are created equal, of course. And there's no guarantee that the Obama administration's strike plan would look like Harmer's. Regardless, Harmer doubted that any surgical strikes would produce the desired results -- especially if the goal is to punish the Assad regime for its alleged use of chemical weapons.

"Punitive action is the dumbest of all actions," he said. "The Assad regime has shown an incredible capacity to endure pain and I don't think we have the stomach to deploy enough punitive action that would serve as a deterrent."

He also doubted the effectiveness of taking out Assad's chemical weapons capabilities. "If we start picking off chemical weapons targets in Syria, the logical response is if any weapons are left in the warehouses, he's going to start dispersing them among his forces if he hasn't already," he continued. "So you're too late to the fight."

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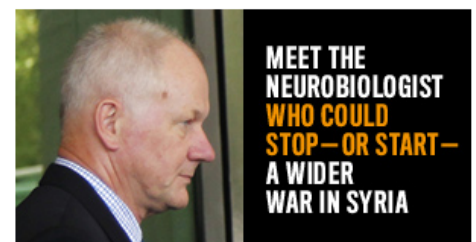
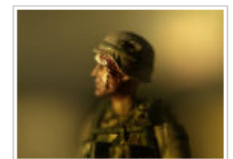


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