

Loose Talk about Red Lines May Give Iran a Green Light

✘ For the mullahs in Iran, the light may have just turned green.

When he was running for president in 2012, President Obama drew a red line in the sand and said if the Syrian regime crossed that line, by using chemical weapons on its own people, there would be a price to pay. They've done just that several times since the President spoke and so far there has been no price to pay.

Now President Obama tells us that he wants to use force against the Assad regime, but wants Congress to get on board before he takes action.

"This menace must be confronted," Mr. Obama said, as he argued for using force to punish the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Not acting, he said, "risks making a mockery of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons."

"I'm ready to act in the face of this outrage," the president said. "Today I am asking Congress to send a message to the world that we are ready to move forward together as one nation."

This may be the right thing to do, but on the Arab street caution may look like dithering; it may look like weakness. Could it be, they must be wondering, that the American president never wanted to get involved in Syria in the first place and is now hoping Congress gets him off the hook by withholding authorization for the use of military force against the Assad regime.

Staying out of this mess may also be the right thing to do. After all, no one knows how things would turn out if we launch

missiles into Syria. Will they retaliate by attacking Israel? And what happens when the Israelis retaliate?

How could the president look at those pictures of so many dead children, victims of poison gas, and then do nothing – especially after he warned the Syrian regime that there would be consequences for their actions? But what if an American attack leads to a wider war and other civilians, including even more children, are killed in the maelstrom? No one can know what will happen if we introduce missiles into a neighborhood that's already unstable.

No, there are no good answers.

But this president is aware that most Americans are weary of war, especially if it involves attacking a country that poses no direct threat to the United States. So the president brings Congress in. If it votes no on war, the president is off the hook. If it votes yes and things go badly, he can say, I didn't do this alone.

This brings us to the mullahs in Iran. They see what we all see: an American president who said he wouldn't let Syria cross a red line, but before this is over, may wind up doing nothing, despite his warning. So why, they must be wondering, should we take seriously his warning, repeated many times, that he would never allow Iran to possess a nuclear weapon?

Just one day before the president spoke, Secretary of State John Kerry, sounding more presidential than the president, made the moral case for punishing the Syrian regime.

“It is directly related to our credibility, and whether countries still believe the United States when it says something. They are watching to see if Syria can get away with it, because then maybe they, too, can put the world at greater risk..

“It is about whether Iran, which itself has been a victim of

chemical-weapons attacks, will now feel emboldened, in the absence of action, to obtain nuclear weapons. It is about Hezbollah and North Korea and every other terrorist group or dictator that might ever again contemplate the use of weapons of mass destruction. Will they remember that the Assad regime was stopped from those weapons' current or future use? Or will they remember that the world stood aside and created impunity?"

Mr. Kerry, understandably, didn't bother mentioning that it is President Obama, with his campaign talk about "red lines" and "game changers" that has put U.S. credibility into question. It is President Obama's loose talk during his re-election campaign that puts into question "whether countries will believe the United States when it says something."

There is no easy way out for the president. Not now anyway. He should never have made off-the-cuff remarks about red lines in the first place. But it's too late now to do anything about that.