

Obama's 'red line' is not so much being tested as ignored completely

The warning could not have been clearer. Exactly a year ago, President Barack Obama declared that if Syria's regime were to unleash its chemical weapons - or even move them - America's "red line" would be crossed and the whole "calculus" would change.



Syrian activists inspect the bodies of people they say were killed by nerve gas in the Ghouta region, in the Duma neighbourhood of Damascus Photo: REUTERS

By David Blair

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If hundreds of people were indeed gassed near Damascus yesterday, President Bashar al-Assad will have marked the first anniversary of that warning by stepping straight over Mr Obama's "red line".

What price the credibility of a superpower? In truth, it has been clear for a while that Mr Obama's words meant little in reality. Britain, France and the US have all concluded that Syria's regime has used poison gas many times during the last year.

In response, America quietly redrew its "red line". The original threat that everything would change if Mr Assad simply moved his chemical weapons - never mind used them in anger - was quickly forgotten. Implicitly, it became clear that if the dictator restricted himself to gassing his enemies on a small scale, then America and its allies would stay their hand.

The language used by US and British officials has subtly reflected this shift. They always say that chemical attacks have taken place, but carefully add how localised the effect has been. So Ben Rhodes, the US deputy national security adviser, said in June that Mr Assad had used gas “on a small scale against the opposition multiple times in the last year”.

Last month, William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, told the foreign affairs select committee: “I believe that the Assad regime, given the pattern of events, has at some stage over the last six months or a year given authority for the use of chemical weapons in a small-scale, localised way.”

Well, if the latest reports are true, Mr Assad has now used gas on a bigger scale than anyone else since Saddam Hussein. If so, he is not so much testing America’s “red line” as ignoring it completely and daring his enemies to do their worst.

As Senator John McCain observed, Mr Assad has suffered “no consequence” for using chemical weapons in the past, so “we shouldn’t be surprised he’s using them again”.

How will the West respond? Mr Hague’s words betrayed the wrenching dilemma. All the efforts of the Western powers to build an international coalition against Mr Assad have been thwarted by Russia and China. The Foreign Secretary ruefully noted that “whenever we’ve tried to pass strong resolutions in the past,” they have run into the vetoes of Moscow and Beijing.

Without any hope of unity in the Security Council, military intervention remains highly unlikely. The dangers attached to arming the rebels are so great that America and Britain continually shy away from this option.

And so they fall back on summoning emergency meetings, urging UN experts to find the truth about chemical weapons and calling for a political solution, while knowing that none of this will make any difference where the killing is taking place. Their policy on Syria has become a counsel of despair. If hundreds of people have now been poisoned, the credibility of Mr Obama’s “red line” will be another casualty.