Analyzing President Obama’s Crisis Rhetoric: The Case of Syria

This article explores President Obama’s handling of the Syrian crisis between April 2011 and September 2014. Set in the context of Obama’s philosophy and its underlying principles and values, the article examines continuity and shifts in the president’s approach to the situation in Syria, identifies the rhetorical devices deployed to communicate the way he wanted to handle the conflict as it unfolded, and ascertains the implications of his foreign policy course and discourse regarding the Syrian crisis for his public persona.

Key words: Barack Obama, Crisis Rhetoric, Syria, Political Philosophy, US Foreign Policy

Barack Obamas Krieserhetorik. Analyse. Syrienfrage

Untersucht wird die Entwicklung in Obamas Strategie gegenüber der sich ändernden Lage in Syrien anhand der außenpolitischen Haltung des Präsidenten; es werden die rethorischen Ausdrucksmittel dieser Strategie beschrieben und der Einfluss des umgesetzten Kurses und des politischen Diskurses auf die Wahrnehmung des Präsidenten in der Gesellschaft bewertet.

Schlüsselwörter: Barack Obama, Krisenrhetorik, Syrien, Philosophie der Politik, Außenpolitik der USA

Analiza retoryki kryzysu Baracka Obamy: sprawa Syrii

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia analizę polityki i retoryki Prezydenta Baracka Obamy wobec Syrii w okresie od kwietnia 2011 do września 2014. W oparciu o poglądy dotyczące polityki zagranicznej Obamy, artykuł bada rozwój podejścia prezydenta wobec zmieniającej się sytuacji w Syrii, opisuje narzędzia retoryczne, które to podejście wyrażały i ocenia wpływ realizowanego kursu i dyskursu politycznego na odbiór społeczny prezydenta.

Słowa kluczowe: Barack Obama, retoryka kryzysu, Syria, filozofia polityczna, polityka zagraniczna Stanów Zjednoczonych
1. Introduction

A growing body of communication research regarding foreign crisis rhetoric demonstrates that investigating the subject is a continuing concern for a wide circle of communication scholars. In crisis rhetoric studies, research primarily focuses on the nature of crisis rhetoric. A key question is whether crisis rhetoric is a rhetorical construction or whether it is situation-constructed. Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., (1987: 126), for example, describes crisis as primarily rhetorical. He argues that it is a “political event rhetorically created by the President.” “Situations rarely create crises,” Windt (1990: 5) maintains. “Rather, presidents’ perceptions of situations and the rhetoric they use to describe them mark events as crises.” Windt (1973: 9–12) suggests three basic characteristics of crisis rhetoric. First, crisis discourse asserts that the president is in possession of new facts. Second, it interprets the facts as a struggle between the forces of good and evil. Third, it appeals for support framed as a moral issue. Amos Kiewe (1994:xvii) offers a similar definition of crisis rhetoric as “the discourse initiated by decision makers in an attempt to communicate to various constituents that a certain development is critical and to suggest a certain course of action to remedy the critical situation.” He (Kiewe 1994: xxiii) understands crisis rhetoric as discourse which “occurs when the president chooses to speak on an issue of critical dimensions, whether to promote or to minimize the perception of a crisis.” Kiewe (1994: xviii) describes crisis rhetoric as discourse requiring “immediacy and urgency” and involving expectation of “strong leadership qualities.”

Richard A. Cherwitz and Kenneth S. Zagacki (1986: 307) agree that crisis is primarily rhetorical, holding that “events become crises, not because of unique sets of situational exigencies, but by virtue of discourse used to describe them.” They suggest, however, that presidential responses are of two types. The authors (Cherwitz/Zagacki 1986: 307–319) differentiate between consummatory responses which constitute the government’s official reply to a state of emergency and justificatory responses which represent part of a larger military retaliation planned or implemented by the government. While both types of responses affect the perception of a situation as critical, seek resolution which would prevent counteraction, and argue from a high moral ground – one where American principles and commitments are presented as superior to the enemy’s – they differ in purpose, tone, and focus. Consummatory rhetoric serves to warn and threaten the enemy that force will be used if acts of aggression continue, while justificatory rhetoric is designed to rationalize the decision to use force in response to an attack. In addition, consummatory rhetoric is cautious and restrained in tone, while the tone of justificatory rhetoric is irreversible and definitive. Lastly, consummatory rhetoric is addressed to the American public and the adversary and
concentrates on the reasons of the crisis and those responsible for it, while in jus-
tificatory rhetoric the addressee is the international community and the focus is on
the details of counteraction and appropriateness of the responses to the situation.

Building on these findings, Bonnie J. Dow (1989: 295) extends the view that
crisis rhetoric is a wholly rhetorical construction and argues that it is situation-
constructed because it functions in response to situations and is shaped by con-
text. The author (Dow 1989: 303) draws a distinction between crisis rhetoric
which defines and justifies events as critical and crisis rhetoric which responds
to events already seen as critical. She (Dow 1989: 301) suggests that the former
is deliberate in purpose and is designed to win policy approval. It is intended to
demonstrate that policies adopted to handle a crisis are “expedient, reasoned and
prudent.” The latter type of crisis rhetoric fulfills epideictic functions and serves
to “promote continuity, restore communal feeling, and . . . reconcile the audience
to a new situation.” In keeping with Windt’s argumentation, Dow (1989: 294)
proposes that epideictic crisis speeches have three features. They provide evi-
dence that there is a crisis, juxtapose good motives of the US with evil motives of
the enemy, and advance solutions of moral and ethical value.

D. Ray Heisey grounds crisis rhetoric in culture and history via moving away
from a generic classification. He (Heisey 1997:13) holds that “[c]ulture is a trans-
formative force in the construction of political communication.” Leaders who
want to handle crisis successfully must frame it in a narrative of “acceptable im-
ages of political reality” (Heisey 1986: 333). They need to stabilize and modify
“values, attitudes, and behaviors in a constructive manner” (Heisey 1994). Com-
munication scholars who share this approach examine crisis rhetoric premised
on a meta-narrative which describes crisis in terms of the Good/Evil struggle or
the Us/Them distinction. Mark A. Pollock’s study of presidential crisis rhetoric
exemplifies the impact of history on rhetoric and illustrates the transformation of
a historical event into a rhetorical one. As another example, Thomas Kane (1988:
144) offers his study in which he conceptualizes historical events as “rhetorical
enterprises” and traces their meaning to “the collective set of assumptions and
perceptions about them that have been handed down from previous discourse,
arguments, experiences and interpretations.” Advancing crisis rhetoric studies
which capitalize on the meta-narrative, Jim A. Kuypers (1997: 29) describes crisis
rhetoric as “an inter-animation of text and context” placed in a given situation and
designed to shape public perception of the situation. In this mode of understand-
ing, responses to a crisis are placed in a context of facts and events which provide
a frame in reference to which a given conception of the situation is presented.

A yet broader perspective on crisis is offered by Martin J. Medhurst and
James W. Pratt who take the position that crisis rhetoric is shaped by presiden-
tial personality and style. Explaining that “crises, by definition, bring into play
matters of personal values, political philosophy, strategic theory, and psychological predisposition, not to mention the peculiar exigencies of the historical moment,” Medhurst (1994: 41) puts forward an argument that crisis rhetoric is part of a president’s rhetorical biography. Pratt (1970: 202) argues along the same line, indicating that “the speaking characteristics of the president involved and the specific nature for the crisis setting combine to determine the type of speech which will result and that this contention is more important than the simple presence or absence of the crisis.”

This article aims to contribute to the broad area of research which considers crisis rhetoric to be determined by and illustrative of a president’s worldview. It explores President Barack Obama’s handling of the Syrian crisis during a three-year period between April 2011 and September 2014 to trace continuity and shifts in the president’s approach to the situation in Syria, identify the rhetorical devices deployed to communicate the way he wanted to handle the conflict as it unfolded, and ascertain the implications of his foreign policy course and discourse regarding the Syrian crisis for his public persona. Specifically, the article seeks to discover how Obama’s approach towards the Syrian crisis shifted over time in an effort to rhetorically justify his refusal to act and then, after redirecting his course, to defend taking action. In doing so, this article focuses on Obama’s rhetorical choices in which he acted. These choices are examined within the contexts in which the language is used, the audiences addressed, the constraints which determine their effectiveness, and the exigencies which define their form and content to identify factors which shape the president’s responses. On a more general level, the article serves to show an example of how presidents try to maneuver and balance between their political views and the circumstances under which they operate. It addresses the problem concerned to demonstrate how presidents’ thinking and understanding of a crisis, political goals and rhetorical means of reaching them, affect the perception of their public persona. In the pages that follow, the article analyzes Obama’s crisis rhetoric and asks the following questions: Did the president have consistent political views on the Syrian crisis or did he change his political stances? Did his crisis rhetoric have a consistent structure or did it change? How did his thinking and understanding of the crisis, and political goals and rhetorical means of reaching them, affect the perception of their public persona? The idea suggested in this article hypothesizes that Obama held consistent political views on the Syrian crisis. He did not adapt his views to the circumstances and did not bend the circumstances to fit his stances either. Instead, he used rhetoric to maneuver and balance between his views and reality to address the problems concerned. The way he handled the Syrian crisis shaped the perception of his public persona. His Syrian rhetoric and policy, it can be argued, were likely the defining aspects of his public personality.
2. Background

There is no single public document that clearly articulates Obama’s philosophy and its underlying principles and values that inform about his foreign policy making. A series of statements form a set of references for the president’s worldview. At the heart of this worldview is a belief in the importance of respect for and observance of fundamental human rights and freedoms (Murray 2013: 150). Remarks from 4 June 2009 delivered in Cairo, Egypt, reflect Obama’s conviction that governments “of the people and by the people” must protect “the ability to speak your mind,” show “confidence in the rule of law,” and ensure “the equal administration of justice” and “the freedom to live as you choose.” To provide stability, success, and security, governments “must maintain . . . power through consent, not coercion . . . respect the rights of minorities and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise . . . place the interests of . . . people and the legitimate workings of the political process above . . . party.”

An additional aspect of the president’s approach relates to measures for managing nascent conflict situations (Murray 2013: 150). Obama details his understanding of counter-crisis means in remarks on accepting the Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December 2009 in Oslo, Norway. He justifies the use of force in dealing with crises on humanitarian grounds and for reasons of self-defense or the defense of one nation against an aggressor. “Regimes that break the rules must be held accountable,” he states. “The same principle applies to those who violate international laws by brutalizing their own people.” “When there is genocide . . . systematic rape . . . repression . . . there must be consequences.” At the same time, he asks for restraint in military action and urges to “develop alternatives to violence that are tough enough to actually change behavior.” Admitting that “there’s no simple formula,” he advocates balancing “isolation and engagement, pressure and incentives.” He points out that “sanctions without outreach, condemnation without discussion, can carry forward only a crippling status quo” and indicates that protection of “civil and political rights” and bringing of “economic security and opportunity” are the preferred means to help to fulfill the aspirations expressed by those who were denied these.

Key to this is recognition that US reaction to a crisis situation must be planned on a case-by-case basis (Murray 2013: 155). In an interview on 29 March 2011 for NBC’s Brian Williams, the president explains that “when you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you’re going to get yourself into trouble.” He continues that “it’s important not to take [one] particular situation and then try to project some sort of Obama doctrine that we’re going to apply in a cookie cutter fashion across the board. Each country in this region is different.” Of importance is also that US reaction must be planned
in the long run (Murray 2013: 158). Acknowledging the challenges posed by long-term planning, the president cautions in remarks on 19 May 2011 at the Department of State in Washington, D.C., that “[n]ot every country will follow [one] particular form of representative democracy, and there will be times when our short-term interests don’t align perfectly with our long-term vision for the region.” “Change,” he continues, “does not come easily” and transformation is not “a matter of weeks. But it will be years before [it] reaches its end. Along the way, there will be good days and there will be bad days. In some places, change will be swift; in others, gradual.”

A final aspect of Obama’s approach recognizes the importance of international cooperation (Lynch 2015: 18; Murray 2013: 155–156). Tied to this is a new concept of US world leadership and a new course at the UN. Details of a new global role of the US come in a 2 April 2009 news conference in London, England, when the president explains: “America is a critical actor and leader on the world stage” but its leadership is best exercised “when we recognize that the world is a complicated place and that we are going to have to act in partnership with other countries; when we lead by example.” “In a world that is as complex as it is,” he clarifies, “it is very important for us to be able to forge partnerships as opposed to simply dictating solutions.” By wielding shared rather than sole power, Obama upholds the crucial role of the US in the world without requiring it to assume responsibility alone. The preferred course in a crisis context is to act within an integrated UN approach. In remarks on the situation in Libya delivered on 18 March 2011 in Washington, D.C., the president stresses: “the United States is prepared to act as part of an international coalition. American leadership is essential, but that does not mean acting alone. It means shaping the conditions for the international community to act together.” Ten days later in a 28 March 2011 address to the nation on the developments in Libya delivered from the National Defense University at Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C., he reemphasizes the insistence on international action in the face of a crisis: “we know that the United States . . . will . . . be called upon to help” and “we should not be afraid to act, but the burden of action should not be America’s alone. . . . our task is instead to mobilize the international community for collective action. Because contrary to the claims of some, American leadership is not simply a matter of going it alone and bearing all of the burden ourselves. Real leadership creates the conditions and coalitions for others to step up as well, to work with allies and partners so that they bear their share of the burden and pay their share of the costs, and to see that the principles of justice and human dignity are upheld by all.”
3. Analysis

This philosophy provides a context for Obama’s rhetoric on the Syrian crisis. The president’s discourse is analyzed in four chronological sections from April 2011 through September 2014 to highlight the developmental phases of Obama’s response over the three-year period. The first section examines the president’s reaction to the crisis from April 2011 to August 2013, in which Obama rejects a US military intervention in Syria and insists on pursuing a political solution. The second section focuses on the president’s first recognition of a possibility of a military attack on 31 August 2013, in which his language hints at the need for a more aggressive response on the part of the US. The third section looks at Obama’s statement on 10 September 2013, in which the president backtracks on the use-of-force option and continues to promote a diplomatic solution of the crisis. The fourth section concentrates on a major shift in Obama’s stance and his order from 23 September 2014 to take military action.

3.1. April 2011-August 2013: The Rhetoric of Rejection of the Use of Force

As anti-government demonstrations began in March 2011 in Damascus, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad used force to strike back. Armed opposition groups fought back and civil war broke out. President Obama responded to unrest in Syria in written statements on 8 and 22 April condemning “the abhorrent violence committed against peaceful protesters by the Syrian Government” and “any use of violence by protesters.” He called upon the Syrian authorities to “refrain from any further violence” and urged President Assad “to change course now and heed the calls of his own people.” As the campaign of violence continued, Obama first assessed in the 19 May 2011 speech that Assad “can lead that transition or get out of the way” and then wrote explicitly in a statement on 18 August 2011 that “the time has come for President Asad to step aside.” To put more pressure on the Syrian president, Obama blocked property of Syrian officials and the Syrian government and prohibited certain transactions with respect to Syria. He also issued presidential orders which blocked the property and suspended entry into the US of certain Syrian persons and prohibited certain transactions with and suspended entry into the US of Syrian sanctions evaders.

A year later, at a 20 August 2012 news conference in Washington, D.C., the president referred to Syria’s potential “movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons” as “a red line” that would have “enormous consequences” and would change his “equation” and “calculations” on US military intervention in Syria “significantly.” Moreover, in an exclusive interview for
ABC News’ Barbara Walters on 11 December 2012, he recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition to be “inclusive,” “reflective and representative enough of the Syrian population” to be considered “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people in opposition to the Assad regime.” This recognition did not entail the use of force, however. As Obama explained in a 27 January 2013 interview for New Republic: “In a situation like Syria, I have to ask, can we make a difference in that situation? Would a military intervention have an impact? . . . What would be the aftermath of our involvement on the ground?” It did, however, involve the delivery of humanitarian aid and commodities and services as foreign assistance.

This early discourse on the Syrian uprising explicitly communicated the basic tenets underlying Obama’s worldview (Medhurst 1994): the belief that every government has the obligation to respect fundamental human rights and freedoms, the conviction that political and economic reforms are the most effective means to address people’s aspirations, the resolve to place US actions within a broader international community approach, and, finally, the resistance of using force to manage conflict situations or impose rule transition. The choice of forms of communication conveyed Obama’s view on military intervention in particular. Written statements, letters to congressional leaders, messages to Congress, executive orders, memorandums, and notices dominated. Spoken communication was less common. The president’s early response had the characteristics of consummatory rhetoric. It constituted an official reply to a state of emergency, concentrated on the reasons of the crisis, was addressed to the American public and the adversary, served to warn the enemy, and was cautious and restrained in tone (Cherwitz/Zagacki 1986). No major presidential address dedicated specifically to the question of military intervention was offered. Assuming that considerations on the use of force in response to a foreign policy crisis are presented in a major address, absence of such an address was an indication that such an option was not considered. A lack of a major address was also a sign that the president was minimizing rather than promoting the perception of the situation in Syria as critical (Kiewe 1994).

In this early phase, Obama’s rhetoric was determined by a uniquely constrained situation and exigent audiences. The president needed to react to unrest in Syria, having already reacted to the Libyan uprising under similar circumstances, but rejected the options set before him. He rationalized that getting involved in the emerging Syrian civil war posed the risk of a failed occupation of the state, that coordinating the efforts of US allies and partners in the Middle East to fight the Syrian regime or leaving the war to regional actors meant providing US intelligence assistance and military resources, that working on a peace plan with the international community involved persuading UN Security Council members to remove the Syrian president from power, and finally that arming the
Syrian opposition to oust Assad entailed supplying weapons to extremist groups (Lynch 2015: 24–26; Saunders 2016: 5–7). Obama needed to speak to political communities at home – advocates for the exercise of US power in the Middle East and opponents of a resurgence of the US as a force shaping events in the region. He needed to speak to the American people who were less and less satisfied with the way he was handling foreign affairs. As Gallup polls administered between 12 and 15 May 2011 and between 7 and 11 August 2013 demonstrated, over the course of over two years, approval ratings of the president’s handling of foreign policy issues declined from 51 percent in May 2011 to 40 percent in August 2013. Finally, Obama needed to speak to members of the global community, including Arab League and UN Security Council members who supported a diplomatic and peaceful resolution of the conflict but opposed holding the Syrian president accountable; NATO which ruled out intervening in Syria without a UN Security Council resolution; and the Syrian opposition which initially rejected foreign intervention but, as the country descended into civil war, escalated its armed campaign in the hope of attracting a US-led operation, and called for more intensive material assistance.

The way the president met these dynamic conditions and divergent audiences’ expectations influenced the perception of his public persona. In this early phase, at least three contrasting views emerged. One held that Obama used rhetorical resources necessary for strategic and direct control of the Syrian policy course, employed language required to manipulate political beliefs and determine foreign policy desires (Bentley 2014: 1038), provided arguments which rationalized his approach, and grounded his political choices in logic and history (Kaplan 2016: 51). Another view assumed that the president constructed discourse which was devoid of meaning and substance (Guiora 2012: 267) and lacked coherence and common sense (West 2013: 20). Still another suggested that while Obama had a sense of direction of US policy towards Syria, it did not seem enough to set the course right (Saunders 2016: 8); he had a strategic vision but struggled to communicate it effectively (Lynch 2015: 18).

3.2. 31 August 2013: The Rhetoric of Recognition of the Possibility of the Use of Force

When American intelligence agencies reported on chemical weapons use by the Assad regime, the option of military intervention opened. Although in an interview on 17 June 2013 for PBS’ Charlie Rose the president did not specify exactly the form of US reaction, he stated that he “will preserve every option available.” More details came on 31 August 2013 in remarks delivered in the Rose Garden at the White House, when the president shifted his tone away from
his earlier no-use-of-force response, introducing two new developments into his Syrian rhetoric. The first new development was a decision to “take military action against Syrian regime targets.” The second was an announcement to “seek authorization for the use of force from the American people’s representatives in Congress.” Justifications for both decisions emerged in a three-step process. A narrative was provided from which an argument was extracted and implications were drawn. By arriving at the decision to use force in Syria, the president chronicled the events: “Ten days ago, the world watched in horror as men, women and children were massacred in Syria in the worst chemical weapons attack of the 21st century. Yesterday the United States presented a powerful case that the Syrian Government was responsible for this attack on its own people.” Next, he made an argument which claimed that “this attack is an assault on human dignity. It also presents a serious danger to our national security. It risks making a mockery of the global prohibition on the use of chemical weapons. It endangers our friends and our partners along Syria’s borders, including Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq.” By taking action “we can hold the Asad regime accountable for their use of chemical weapons, deter this kind of behavior, and degrade their capacity to carry it out.” Working against the decision to use force was the president’s announcement to go to Congress. Obama set the stage for securing congressional consent with a causal story which explained his decision: “Over the last several days, we’ve heard from Members of Congress who want their voices to be heard.” He put forward an argument that debate and vote were necessary “because the issues are too big for business as usual” and “all of us should be accountable as we move forward.” The conclusion of collective action was that “our democracy is stronger when the President and the people’s representatives stand together.” In presenting the case for his decision to go to Congress, Obama explicitly upheld the use-of-force stance. His line of argument was to work upon a basic sense of responsibility. Addressing members of Congress, the American people, and the global community he warned: “if we really do want to turn away from taking appropriate action in the face of such an unspeakable outrage, then we must acknowledge the costs of doing nothing.”

When hit by a wave of criticism over his decision to depart from unilateral action – a decision generally understood as a reversal of the plan drawn a year ago to intervene in Syria in case of chemical weapons use – the president insisted at a 4 September 2013 news conference in Stockholm, Sweden, that he “didn’t set a red line . . . . The world set a red line when governments representing 98 percent of the world’s population said the use of chemical weapons are abhorrent and passed a treaty forbidding their use even when countries are engaged in war,” he explained. “Congress set a red line when it indicated that . . . some of the horrendous things that are happening on the ground there need to be answered for.”
The developing discourse on the situation in Syria continued to represent Obama’s conviction in the protection of human dignity and the promotion of meaningful reforms but it shifted on the president’s insistence for a non-military resolution of conflicts and international cooperation. The language was defined primarily in relation to the possibility of unilateral action and the use of force focused on chemical weapons and not the Syrian regime. The president’s response showed the characteristics of justificatory rhetoric. It was part of a larger military retaliation planned by the president, focused on the reasons for and the details of the military action, was addressed to the American public and the international community, and was definitive in tone (Cherwitz/Zagacki 1986). Yet, the fact that Obama pivoted rhetorically was not to say that he reoriented his stance on the use of force or collective action but rather that he recognized and talked about the need to fit his perspective appropriately within the circumstances. The call for congressional authorization for the use of force and appeal to the international community to stand publicly behind US actions indicated that the president continued to frame his understanding of the measures designed to deal with the situation in Syria within his political vision. The choice of spoken communication seemed to have relevance there (Kiewe 1994). Well-constructed narratives laid out in a television address served to attract attention, build confidence in the proposed policy course, stimulate the desire to support the direction, stress the urgency for a decision, and seek a positive response.

Obama’s rhetorical shifts were shaped by a unique set of circumstances. The president considered taking action in response to the Syrian military use of chemical weapons in an attack against civilians to prevent further use of such weapons and protect the US and its allies against the threat posed by such weapons. Yet, political communities at home and abroad were unclear on whether they would support his proposal. Congress was unlikely to vote for authorizing an attack. Public opinion ran against any Syrian airstrikes as well. A Gallup poll taken between 28 and 29 May 2013 on the question of Syria found that 68 percent of Americans opposed the US using military action to attempt to end the conflict even though 58 percent doubted that diplomatic and economic efforts would bring peace. Arab and NATO nations – except for France – refused to endorse an intervention and two UN Security Council members – Russia and China – declared they would veto a use-of-force resolution.

Scholarly response to the president’s Syrian policy making in this phase was not clear-cut. While examples of definitive opinions could be found – for example, Douglas L. Kriner (2014: 325) maintained that the president’s performance was a reflection of cold calculation and careful consideration, just unlike Kenneth R. Mayer (2014: 836) who held that Obama’s approach was a show of vacillation and indecisiveness – views offering a more balanced assessment
dominated. Marc Lynch (2015: 25–26) noted that the president made a mistake in giving his red-line ultimatum but he made a wise decision to back down and walk away. He resisted the pressure to get militarily involved in Syria even though he knew his choice would certainly generate criticism and hurt him politically. Fred Kaplan (2016: 52–53) also observed that Obama used inadequate rhetorical tools for dealing with the situation—tools which needlessly created a mismatch between his words and deeds—but he consistently adhered to his view on the use-of-force philosophy. He refused to take action thus remaining true to his non-interventionist strategy. Michelle Bentley (2014: 1038–1039) explained that by drawing the red line the president entrapped himself within a certain narrative but he also sought to subsequently employ it for his own strategic purposes. He reconstructed the language and understanding of his message so as to control decision-making and shape the Syrian policy process.

3.3. 10 September 2013: The Rhetoric of Reversal on the Use-of-Force Option

The opportunity for military intervention closed with Syria’s declaration to surrender its chemical weapons and join the international treaty banning chemical weapons. In a 10 September 2013 address to the nation on the situation in Syria delivered from Washington, D.C., to a large extent, the president reiterated earlier statements. Using nearly identical language, he offered two narratives in which he repeated why he had initially insisted on a political solution of the Syrian crisis and why he had then moved towards a military attack provided it received congressional approval. Placed against these accounts was a third narrative designed to explain and justify another rhetorical shift in which the president backtracked on the option of a military intervention and opted for a diplomatic resolution. Obama first characterized the circumstances observing that “Over the last few days, we’ve seen some encouraging signs” and ascribed the new developments to “the credible threat of U.S. military action” and to “constructive talks” that he had had with President Putin, as a result of which “the Russian Government has indicated a willingness to join with the international community in pushing Asad to give up his chemical weapons.” He then made an argument that “It’s too early to tell whether this offer will succeed, and any agreement must verify that the Asad regime keeps its commitments. But this initiative has the potential to remove the threat of chemical weapons without the use of force, particularly because Russia is one of Asad’s strongest allies.” In the resulting decisions, the president asked “the leaders of Congress to postpone a vote to authorize the use of force while . . . this diplomatic path” was pursued, but, at the same time, ordered the “military to maintain their current posture to keep the pressure on Asad and to be in a position
to respond if diplomacy fails.” In what followed, a framework agreement on the elimination of chemical weapons in Syria between Russia and the United States was signed and authorization of the provision of defense articles and services to prevent the use or proliferation of chemical weapons and related materials was issued.

With the agreement in place, the threat of American military attack was eased. The president continued to insist on solving the Syrian problem in a non-military way. At an 11 February 2014 press conference in Washington, D.C., and at a 14 February 2014 press conference in California, he maintained that “we have to find a political solution” and “try to move forward on a diplomatic solution.” Yet, in view of little political progress on the ongoing crisis and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) as an actor in Syria, the president announced in a 28 May 2014 address delivered in West Point, New York, that the US “will step up our efforts to support Syria’s neighbors” and “ramp up support for those in the Syrian opposition.” At a 5 September 2014 news conference in Newport, Wales, he explained that “our goal is to act with urgency, but also to make sure that we’re doing it right: that we have the right targets; that there’s support on the ground if we take an airstrike.”

In this phase, the president’s discourse on the Syrian crisis shifted emphasis away from the narrative of the use of force and unilateral action to an interpretation that stressed peaceful crisis management and broad international cooperation. The language continued to concentrate on chemical weapons and not the Syrian regime. Mentions of the need for observance of human rights and implementation of effective reforms were brief and rare. While the discourse did not entirely exclude military intervention or independent action, it no longer promoted forceful solutions implemented alone by the US. The president’s response carried the characteristics of both consummatory and justificatory rhetoric. It served to threaten the enemy that force could still be used and to explain to the general public why force had not been used so far. It restated the reasons of the situation in Syria and reaffirmed the appropriateness of the president’s responses to the crisis. It was delivered in tone expressing the president’s determination to resolve the conflict in a non-military way as well as his concern about the effectiveness of political and diplomatic solutions (Cherwitz/Zagacki 1986). In backtracking on the use-of-force option and unilateral action, the president deviated rhetorically but he did not stray from his rule of avoiding military intervention and challenging the perception of American leadership. The shift did not sway his thinking, rather, it reflected his understanding of the use of force and joint action generally.

The form in which the shift was communicated – a prime-time address to the nation delivered from the White House East Room – conveyed the president’s insistence on informing public opinion where he stood on the question of military
intervention and why he changed course again (Pratt 1970). A televised speech aimed to stress the importance of the message, marshal facts, strengthen arguments, and win understanding and support for the recommended action.

The shift was largely driven by a comment made by US Secretary of State John Kerry at a 9 September 2013 press conference in London, England, at which Kerry suggested that US strikes could be averted if the Syrian president surrendered his chemical weapons for destruction. When Russia unexpectedly backed the US proposal and called on Assad to put all chemical weapons under international control, and then, shortly after, Assad welcomed the Russian offer, Obama decided to put off an American-led attack and explore this new diplomatic opportunity. National sentiment seemed to justify his decision. Chances for a congressional vote for military action remained very low. Unofficial vote counts showed that House members were overwhelmingly against an attack and a majority of Senate members were against and undecided (Mayer 2014: 829). According to data collected from a 3–4 September 2013 Gallup poll on Americans’ view on proposed US military strikes against the Syrian government, most Americans were against (51 percent) and unsure of (13 percent) any military involvement. Opposition and skepticism arose from the perceptions that the Syrian crisis was not a US concern (24 percent), that the US needed to stop policing the world (19 percent), that the action was not well planned out (10 percent), that it would add to national debt (10 percent), that there were more pressing issues at home that needed to be dealt with (9 percent), and that the action could lead to negative consequences (8 percent). There was little likelihood of the international community supporting military intervention either. Nations either openly opposed an attack or demanded a collective answer by the UN or called for an assessment of all steps taken ahead of a strike before stating their position.

A scholarly perspective offered a fairly unified assessment of the president’s performance in this phase. The general opinion seemed to be that Obama’s policymaking looked less like an act of strategic diplomacy, which the president envisioned and planned all along, than a case where he was saved from defeat or even impeachment by an unexpected set of events (Mayer 2014: 831; Kaplan 2016: 53). Scholars appeared to agree that in view of the inconsiderable likelihood of congressional authorization for an attack and presidential decision to move forward without it, Obama was lucky to enjoy a reprieve (Mayer 2014: 832; Kaplan 2016: 54). He miscalculated and blundered, but avoided being seen as indecisive and weak (Mayer 2014: 830; Kriner 2014: 325). He defied militarized responses prescribed by the foreign-policy establishment in Washington and refused to meet the demands of US allies in the Middle East and instead decided to shape conditions for negotiations and challenge allies to take greater
responsibility for the security in the region (Mayer 2014: 841; Lynch 2015: 18; Goldberg 2016: 76–78).

3.4. 23 September 2014: The Rhetoric of Acceptance of the Use of Force

In a 10 September 2014 address to the nation on the US strategy to combat ISIL, the president called on Congress to give “authorities and resources to train and equip” the Syrian opposition and nearly two weeks later, in remarks delivered on 23 September 2014 on the South Lawn at the White House he announced that “America’s Armed Forces began strikes against ISIL targets in Syria.” In a somewhat different narrative that followed, the president explained that the attack was part of the administration’s campaign to “confront the threat posed by the terrorist group.” He clarified that the strikes were taken “against targets in both Iraq and Syria so that these terrorists can’t find safe haven anywhere” and against “anyone who would plot against America and try to do Americans harm.” The attack was justified on the grounds that the US acted “as part of a broad coalition” joined by friends and partners “rejecting ISIL and standing up for the peace and security.” In presenting the case, no mention of the Syrian crisis was made and no causal story for the strikes in relation to the Syrian government was offered. The rhetorical focus was on the terrorist organization, with a passing reference to the Assad regime as a force combating the Syrian opposition.

In this phase, the president’s discourse on the Syrian crisis shifted dramatically. It represented the first time that Obama agreed to take military action in Syria and went forward without the approval of Congress or the resolution of the UN Security Council. The second defining concept of this phase was the language which was constructed primarily in relation to the use of force against the threat posed by ISIL and not the Syrian authorities or chemical weapons (Pratt 1970). As a result, demands for the Syrian government to protect human rights and introduce political and economic reforms were not made. The third important element was the continued emphasis on US actions as part of a broad international coalition and not as America’s effort alone. Reflective of this was in particular the fact that the decision to intervene in Syria was delivered hours before the president’s scheduled arrival in New York for the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly where a pitch for countries to join the US-led campaign was planned to be made. The president’s response had the characteristics of justificatory rhetoric. It represented part of a larger military retaliation implemented by the president, provided the rationale for and the details of the decision to use force, was addressed to the American public and the international community, and was irreversible in tone (Cherwitz/Zagacki 1986). The shift in rhetoric clearly entailed a shift in the
president’s stance on the use of force, though considerations whether it fell outside of the president’s view on the use of military power in general should force a reflection on the context in which it occurred (Medhurst 1994).

Over a year after the US and Russia signed the framework for the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons, President Assad completed the surrender of the declared chemical stockpile. He continued, however, holding office and kept refusing to step down and allow the transition of power. The civil war went on, creating the environment in which radical jihadist groups like ISIL could gain a foothold and grow. Although airstrikes against ISIL fighters in neighboring Iraq began in June, it was not until September that Obama recognized that the US campaign needed to be extended to Syria. The recognition came after ISIL fighters captured vast areas of Syria and beheaded two American citizens. In the fight against ISIL, it appeared that Congress expressed strong bipartisan approval, voting for the president’s plan to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels. American public opinion rallied behind Obama’s initiative as well. A Gallup poll conducted between 20 and 21 of September 2014 – so after the president announced his intention to use military force against ISIL in Syria and before he ordered the military action to begin – showed that 60 percent of Americans shared the president’s perception of the situation (Kuypers 1997) and embraced military intervention in Syria. International reaction was mixed, with Russia, Iran, and Syria condemning the president’s military campaign; China, France, and Britain offering a cautious response to the call to fight against ISIL in Syria; Turkey and Germany ruling out participation in combat operations; and America’s Arab and Gulf allies and partners agreeing to do their share in the fight.

The complexities of the political context, the related actors, constraints, and pressures all informed the scholarly view of the president’s decision to intervene in Syria. It was generally agreed that Obama’s performance upset the old state of affairs and offered new patterns of response to a foreign policy crisis (Lynch 2015: 27; Kaplan 2016: 61) but there was little consensus on how to evaluate his behavior. Some scholars held that the president’s handling of the Syrian case reflected his ability to look broadly and keep a larger vision (Lynch 2015: 27). It conveyed his sense of understanding of how incautious short-term decisions and actions led to unwanted long-term consequences (Kaplan 2016: 62). Others maintained that his dealing with the situation in Syria added to the mess and chaos produced by years of shifts and led to a longer war and higher associated costs (Saunders 2016: 8). It exposed the controversy about his standards and posed a real challenge to his worldview (Goldberg 2016: 90). On the question of language, scholars argued that Obama used rhetoric to define his goals and manipulate the perception of whether or not they were realized (Bentley 2014: 1048). He constructed discourse to describe his positions and reconcile them with his risky policies (Kaplan 2016: 57).
This article has explored President Barack Obama’s handling of the Syrian crisis during a three-year period between April 2011 and September 2014. It has argued that Obama held consistent political views regarding the situation in Syria. He did not adapt his views to the circumstances and did not bend the circumstances to fit his stances either. Instead, he used rhetoric to maneuver and balance between his views and reality to address the problems concerned. The way he dealt with the Syrian crisis shaped the perception of his public persona – his Syrian rhetoric and policy were likely the defining aspects of his public personality.

Obama’s handling of the Syrian crisis suggests that the president generally stayed true to the basic tenets underlying his worldview. He did not stray from the beliefs that the Syrian government had the obligation to respect human rights and that reforms were the most effective means to address its people’s aspirations. He adhered to the rule that the US should not act unilaterally in Syria and consistently sought congressional authorization and/or international support for an attack. He rejected interventionist strategy and refused to use force to manage the Syrian conflict. The decision to order airstrikes was part of a campaign against ISIL and not against the Syrian regime. It was made contingent on the emergence of a new threat posed by the group and was not taken because of the pressure from opponents at home and allies abroad to take action. It may have encouraged the logic for future military escalation but it did not imply an assurance of direct deployment of ground forces.

The president’s discourse on the situation in Syria has indicated a rhetorical failure on the president’s part. Consistent choice of tools – forms of communication, location and timing, employment of narrative, cause-and-effect reasoning, question-and-answer format, problem-solution structure – did not seem enough to create bases around which he could shape his policy-making. Obama’s Syrian rhetoric was largely defined by turns, detours, and U-turns which implied little sense of direction. The use of different categories of rhetoric only added to the confusion about the next course of action. Although the rhetorical shifts followed from a complex range of political and situational factors, they did not seem to serve the president well.

Obama’s response to the Syrian crisis represents a case in which some saw it as a form of passivity and avoidance of executing presidential power; others saw it as an expression of rational reasoning and a method of exercising restraint militarily and diplomatically; some judged that the president acted in a way which reduced US global influence and constrained presidential war powers; others withheld judgment, waiting to see whether and how Obama’s successor corrects his alleged mishandlings. Obama himself defends the way he dealt with the situation...
in Syria. He recognizes the costs of his rhetorical shifts but believes that they were worth the price. He considers keeping the US out of the Syrian civil war and offering only a limited military response to be a major accomplishment and hopes that historians will one day share this judgment (Goldberg 2016: 76, 90).

These findings fall into the strand of research which focuses on crisis rhetoric as part of a president’s biography. They support previous studies in that presidential crisis rhetoric is not only a matter of the presence or absence of a crisis but, more importantly, a matter of personal beliefs, political philosophy, and unique contextual constraints and exigencies (Medhurst 1994). They provide an enhanced understanding of how a president’s worldview and the nature of a crisis shape presidential discourse and how the discourse designed to reflect a president’s thinking and understanding of a specific crisis affects the perception of his public persona (Pratt 1970).

An issue that has not been addressed in this study is how Obama’s handling of the Syrian crisis affected his legacy or the presidency in general. Yet, defining how the president’s dealing with the situation in Syria influenced the perception of his years in office or executive power is beyond the scope of this analysis. The article has not attempted to make any definite claims or judgments about Obama’s presidency, instead, it has meant to provide an analysis of a case in crisis management to highlight how the related discourse and policy developed and impacted the president in office. Drawing more general conclusions for President Obama and the executive office requires further analysis set in a longer-term perspective and in the light of the next president’s response to the problem at issue.

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