

## Critics see contradictions in Obama administration's Syria claims

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WASHINGTON — The planned military strikes on Syria would be “targeted, limited” and wouldn’t seek to topple the government of President Bashar Assad or even force it to peace talks.

They would also be punishing and “consequential” and would so scare Assad that he would never use chemical weapons again.

U.S. airstrikes would change the momentum on the battlefield of the Syrian civil war. But the war will grind on, unchanged, perhaps for years.

As administration officials lay out their case in favor of a punitive attack on Syria, they have been making all of these seemingly contradictory contentions, confusing supporters and providing rhetorical weapons to their opponents.

The contradictions stem from the basic challenge the White House faces: how to reassure the large anti-war contingent in the Democratic Party, as well as conservative opponents of overseas intervention, that strikes won’t open the way to another war, while convincing hawks and more militant internationalists that the strikes will do enough to make the mission worthwhile.

It’s possible to square most of the administration’s arguments – if one believes that a military strike can be so precisely calibrated as to harm the Assad government just enough, but not too much. But as a political case, the effort has so far proven hard to sell.

If officials lean too far in one direction, they risk losing supporters on one side or the other. But when they voice both sides of their case, they risk presenting an argument that is incoherent.

Former House Speaker New Gingrich said on “Meet the Press” that Obama was promising to punch Assad a little bit, but not too much, and such a goal was too nebulous to sell to the public.

When the administration is talking to Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), a leader of the hawks, “the emphasis is on degrade. When talking to Democrats, the emphasis is on limited,” said Michael Doran, a White House official in the Bush administration and a supporter of strikes.

“And it leave us with a big question: What is our overall strategy on Syria, and how does this fit into it?” asked Doran, now with the Brookings Institution.

The sometimes-tortured quality of the argument was apparent over the weekend as some officials claimed that the strikes would shift the momentum of the Syrian war, and others said it would largely be unchanged.

Denis McDonough, the White House chief of staff, said on “Meet the Press” that “there is no doubt that momentum on the battlefield will be changed by a targeted, limited effort.”

But the day before, a senior administration official briefing reporters on Secretary of State John Kerry’s airplane predicted the war will “grind on” after the strikes.

“I think it will grind on without the use of chemical weapons, but I think it will grind on,” said the official, who the State Department insisted must remain unidentified because of the sensitivity of the subject.

At the same time, the official said other U.S. efforts to help the rebels – presumably U.S. overt and covert training, military supplies and medical help – did have the objective of changing the “balance on the ground.”

“This is an objective the administration has long supported,” the official said.

As administration officials make their arguments, different members of the audience are taking away different points.

McCain came away from a private meeting with Obama on Tuesday convinced that the president had shifted his goals and now intended to do more to “degrade” the Syrian military machine. He offered an amendment to a proposed Senate resolution authorizing a strike to say that the strike’s objective was to “change the momentum on the battlefield.”

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee accepted the language. But that change alarmed Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), who warned it could drive away House lawmakers.

It is difficult for the administration to argue that the strikes would help topple Assad because officials have been arguing for some time – and Obama repeated Friday -- that only a massive military intervention could force an end to the 2 ½-year-old civil war.