Mr. President, the decision

on whether to authorize the

President of the United States to use

the military might of our great Nation

against another country is the most

significant vote a Senator can cast.

The Constitution vests this responsibility

in Congress—a duty that rests

heavily on the shoulders of each and

every Member.

We are now engaged in a serious debate

about what the appropriate response

should be to the horrific use of

chemical weapons by the regime of

Syrian President Asad who killed his

own people using chemical weapons on

August 21. This was not the first use of

chemical weapons by President Asad.

He launched several smaller scale attacks,

murdering his citizens, and, notably,

many, if not all, of those attacks

occurred after the President drew his

redline a year ago. But it was not until

the large-scale August 21 attack of this

year, which resulted in the deaths of

approximately 1,400 people, that President

Obama decided a military strike

against Syria was warranted. The fact

is Asad violated the international convention

prohibiting the use of chemical

weapons and crossed President

Obama’s redline many times during the

past year.

Deciding whether to grant the President

this authority is a very difficult

decision. I have participated in numerous

discussions with the President, the

Vice President, and experts in and out

of government. I have attended many

classified briefings as a member of the

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,

and I have carefully weighed

the assessments of the intelligence

community and military and State Department

officials. My constituents

have also provided me with valuable

insights that have helped to guide my

decision. After much deliberation and

thought, I have decided I cannot support

the resolution that was approved

by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

last week.

One of the criteria for the use of military

force is surely whether the adversary

poses an imminent threat to the

American people. More than once

President Obama has stated Syria’s

chemical weapons and delivery systems

do not pose a direct imminent threat

to the United States. Neither the

United States nor any of our allies

have been attacked with chemical

weapons. Instead, President Obama justifies

the attack he is proposing as a

response to the violation of international

norms, despite the fact that

we currently lack international partners

to enforce the Convention on

Chemical Weapons through military

means.

Although the term ‘‘limited air

strikes’’ sounds less threatening, the

fact is even limited air strikes constitute

an act of war. If bombs were

dropped from the air or cruise missiles

were launched into an American city,

we would certainly consider that to be

an act of war, and that is why this decision

is fraught with consequences.

American military strikes against

the Asad regime, in my judgment, risk

entangling the United States in the

middle of a protracted, dangerous, and

ugly civil war. GEN Martin Dempsey,

the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, has warned us that the use of

U.S. military force ‘‘cannot resolve the

underlying and historic ethnic, religious,

and tribal issues that are fueling

this conflict.’’

The introduction of American Armed

Forces into this violent conflict could

escalate to the point where we are perceived

to be, or actually are, involved

in a Syrian civil war or a proxy war

with Hezbollah or Iran.

In this complex conflict, it is also becoming

increasingly difficult to sort

out the good guys from the bad. There

is no doubt that Asad is a brutal, ruthless

dictator who murders his own citizens

and who is supported by thousands

of Hezbollah terrorist fighters. The opposition,

however, is not pure. It has

now been infiltrated by not one but

two affiliates of Al Qaeda as well as by

criminal gangs. Caught in the middle

are millions of Syrians who simply

want to lead peaceful lives. The tragic

result has been more than 100,000 people

killed, 4 million displaced internally,

and 2 million refugees.

We do not know how Asad or his allies

would respond to a U.S. military

attack, but an asymmetric attack by

Hezbollah aimed at one of our bases or

at other American interests abroad

certainly is one potential response. My

concern is that reprisals, followed by

subsequent retaliations, followed by

still more reprisals could lead to an escalation

of violence which never was

intended by the President but which

may well be the result of the first

strike.

I have raised this issue directly with

administration officials since the ‘‘one

and done’’ strike, as retired GEN Michael

Hayden puts it, may well not

work. I have asked the administration

what they would do if Asad waits until

the 91st day, when the authorization

for the use of military force expires,

and then conducts an attack using

chemical weapons that kills a much

smaller number of people. What will we

do then? In each case where I have

raised this question, I have been told

that we would likely launch another

military strike.

In addition to my concern about

being dragged into the Syrian civil

war, I question whether the proposed

military response would be more effective

in achieving the goal of eliminating

Asad’s stockpile of chemical

weapons than a diplomatic approach

would be.

Let’s be clear. The strikes proposed

by the President would not eliminate

Asad’s chemical weapons, nor his

means of delivering them. In the President’s

own words, the purpose of these

strikes is ‘‘to degrade Asad’s capabilities

to deliver chemical weapons.’’ Indeed,

you will not find any military or

intelligence official who believes that

the strike contemplated by the administration

would eliminate Syria’s

chemical weapons stockpile or all of

the delivery systems. General Dempsey

wrote to Armed Services Committee

Chairman CARL LEVIN that even if an

explicit military mission to secure

Syria’s chemical weapons were undertaken,

it would result in the control of

‘‘some, but not all’’ chemical weapons

in Syria, and that is not what is being

discussed because that would undoubtedly

involve boots on the ground.

According to the President, the purpose

of his more narrow objective is to

deliver a calculated message to convince

Asad not to use his remaining

chemical weapons and delivery systems

ever again. But would such a strike be

effective in preventing Asad from using

these weapons again on a small scale

after he has absorbed the strike just to

deliver his own message that he retains

the capability to do so? Asad would retain

a sufficient quantity of chemical

weapons, and he knows that we did not

respond to smaller chemical weapons

attacks that he undertook before the

August 21, 2013, event.

So on the one hand, the President is

seeking to conduct a precision military

strike that is sufficient to deter Asad

from using any chemical weapons

again. On the other hand, he wants to

narrow the scope of a military strike

so that Asad does not perceive this act

of war as a threat to his regime. Yet

the President has previously stated

that U.S. policy is the removal of Asad.

While administration officials have

gone out of their way to state that the

military strikes are only to deter and

degrade Asad’s chemical weapons use

and are not intended to pick sides in

the civil war, the text of the resolution

before us is at odds with the administration’s

representations. The text

states that it is the policy of the

United States to ‘‘change the momentum

on the battlefield in Syria so as to

create favorable conditions for a negotiated

settlement that ends the conflict

and leads to a democratic government

in Syria.’’ Well, no one could ever

consider the Asad dictatorship to be a

democratic government in Syria.

Furthermore, on September 3 Secretary

of State John Kerry testified

that ‘‘it is not insignificant that to deprive

[Asad] of the capacity to use

chemical weapons or to degrade the capacity

to use those chemical weapons

actually deprives him of a lethal weapon

in this ongoing civil war, and that

has an impact.’’

That is a very mixed message from

this administration about the purpose

of these strikes.

All of us want to see a peaceful

Syria, no longer led by Asad, nor controlled

by the radical Islamic extremists

who are part of his opposition. But

is military action that could well get

us involved in Syria’s civil war the

right answer?

When I think about the proper response

to Asad’s abhorrent use of

chemical weapons, I am mindful of the

suffering and death that has occurred

as well as the international conventions

banning chemical weapons. Since

this is an international norm, however,

where are our international partners—

the United Nations, NATO, the Arab

League?

I have grave reservations about undertaking

an act of war to enforce an

international convention without the

international support we have previously

had when undertaking similar

action in the past, such as in Kosovo,

Afghanistan, and even Iraq. While

NATO’s Secretary General has expressed

support for consequences,

NATO’s North Atlantic Council, which

is the body that approves military action

for NATO, has not approved this

military action. The Arab League has

condemned with words the use of chemical

weapons, but there is yet to be any

Arab League statement that explicitly

endorses military action or promises to

be engaged in that action. Even our

ally who has been most supportive,

France, has asked for a delay to allow

the U.N. inspectors to deliver their report

next week.

Let me add that I believe that report

early next week will verify that it was

the Asad regime that used sarin gas.

That is my expectation.

A military strike may well enforce

the international norm with respect to

chemical weapons, but at the same

time it would weaken the international

norm of limiting military action to instances

of self-defense or those cases

where we have the support of the international

community or at least our allies

in NATO or the Arab League.

In addressing this difficult and tragic

crisis in Syria, the administration initially

presented us with only two

choices: Take military action or make

no response at all. I reject and have rejected

from the start the notion that

the United States has only two

choices—undertaking an act of war or

doing nothing in response to President

Asad’s attack on his citizens. There are

a variety of nonmilitary responses to

consider that may well be more effective.

The most promising of these options,

proposed by the Russians—one of

Asad’s strongest allies—would place

Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile in

the custody of the international community

before they would ultimately

be destroyed.

I am not naive about ‘‘trusting’’ the

Russians. My point is that this option

may well be in Russia’s own interests,

would be more effective in securing the

stockpile of chemical weapons in

Syria, and would involve the international

community. This diplomatic

alternative would put Syria’s chemical

weapons under verified international

control and would once and for all prevent

Asad or anyone else in Syria from

using those weapons. A risk of attacking

Asad’s facilities is that the chemical

weapons could fall into the hands

of terrorist elements in the country.

That risk would be eliminated if the

weapons were removed completely

from Syria.

One of the arguments advanced by

proponents of the authorization for the

use of military force resolution is that

America’s credibility is on the line.

This is a legitimate concern. To be

sure, it was unfortunate that the President

drew a line in the sand without

first having a well-vetted plan, consulting

with Congress, and obtaining

the necessary support for doing so. I

would maintain, however, that the

credibility of our great Nation is beyond

that of just one statement by the

President, even in his important capacity

as Commander in Chief. The credibility

of the United States is backed by

a military that is the most advanced

and capable in the world. The strength

of our military sends the clear, unmistakable

message that the United

States is capable of exerting overwhelming

force whenever we decide it

is the right thing to do and it is necessary

to do so. It would be a mistake

for our adversaries to interpret a single

vote regarding a military response to

Syria’s chemical weapons program as

having ramifications for our willingness

to use force when our country or

our allies face direct imminent threats,

especially with regard to the proliferation

of nuclear weapons and intercontinental

ballistic missile capabilities.

At the very least we have an obligation

to pursue all nonmilitary options

that may well be more effective in preventing

the future use of Asad’s chemical

weapons than the military option

the President has proposed to undertake.

For these reasons, should the authorization

for the use of military force approved

by the Senate Foreign Relations

Committee come to the Senate

floor, I shall cast my vote in opposition.

My hope, however, is that the negotiations

underway with the Russians

will pave the way for the removal of

chemical stockpiles from Syria and for

their verified ultimate destruction.

That is the best outcome for this crisis.

That would lead to a safer world.