



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 29, 2014

Obama Chides Critics for Eagerness to Use Force

President Barack Obama, who began his Asian tour last week by declaring U.S. readiness to defend Japan in its conflict with China over islands in the East China Sea, ended it Monday by rebuking his foreign policy critics for being “so eager to use military force.” At a joint press conference with Philippine President Benigno Aquino in Manila, Obama cited the “disastrous decision to go into Iraq,” and claimed his critics at home “haven’t really learned the lesson of the last decade.”



“Typically, criticism of our foreign policy has been directed at the failure to use military force,” Obama said. “And the question I think I would have is, why is it that everybody is so eager to use military force after we’ve just gone through a decade of war at enormous costs to our troops and to our budget?” The president noted he has been criticized for not taking military action against Syria over charges that the Damascus regime had crossed what Obama had said was a “red line” forbidding the use of chemical weapons in the war against insurgents attempting to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad.

“Well, perhaps you should have taken a strike in Syria to get chemical weapons out of Syria,” Obama said describing the action urged by some Senate Republicans and media commentators. “Well, it turns out we’re getting chemical weapons out of Syria without having initiated a strike. So what else are you talking about? And at that point it kind of trails off.” The United States last year joined Russian efforts to persuade Assad to get rid of his chemical weapons, and as of last week, Obama said, the Syrian president had reduced his inventory by 87 percent. “The fact that we didn’t have to fire a missile to get that accomplished is not a failure to uphold those international norms, it’s a success,” the president said, adding, “It’s not a complete success until we have the last 13 percent out.”

Obama appears to be giving himself too much credit, however, for averting military action against Syria. The administration was poised for a military strike before opposition in Congress and in public opinion surveys showed the unpopularity of such a move, and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s diplomatic initiative offered a way out. Concerning Russia, Obama said his administration has succeeded in efforts “to mobilize the international community” to join in applying both economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure with the goal of forcing Putin to remove Russian troops from Ukraine.

“Russia has never been more isolated,” Obama said, claiming the Eurasian giant is “having to engage in activities that have been rejected uniformly around the world.” Noting that no one is calling for the sending of U.S. or NATO troops into Ukraine, Obama rejected the argument that “we should be arming the Ukrainians more. Do people actually think that somehow us sending some additional arms into Ukraine could potentially deter the Russian army?” he asked. “Or are we more likely to deter them by applying the sort of international pressure, diplomatic pressure and economic pressure that we’re applying?” His approach to international conflicts “may not always be sexy,” the president said, and “may not always attract a lot of attention, and it doesn’t make for good argument on Sunday morning



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shows. But it avoids errors.”

Obama did not name his detractors, referring only to critics “in an office in Washington or New York.” Republicans John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina have been among the most vocal advocates in the U.S. Senate of military action against Syria, having issued calls last year for strikes against Assad’s air force and the establishment of a “no-fly zone” in Syria, as well as a “safe zone” for both rebels and refugees from the fighting in a three-year-old civil war that has so far cost more than 150,000 lives. McCain, Obama’s foe in the 2008 election, has also voiced his criticisms of administration policies as a frequent guest on Sunday morning programs and other network TV talk shows. He engaged in a sharp and sometimes heated exchange with Secretary of State John Kerry over arms to Ukraine and other issues during a recent Foreign Relations Committee hearing. In an interview on CNN in February, McCain called Obama “the most naïve president in history,” claiming: “The naïveté of Barack Obama and John Kerry is stunning.”

“If we took all of the actions that our critics have demanded, we’d lose count of the number of military conflicts that America would be engaged in,” Benjamin J. Rhodes, a deputy national security advisor to the president, told the *New York Times* Monday. Yet Obama has shown his willingness to take military action without congressional authority in conflicts that have no apparent bearing on U.S. security. In 2011, he authorized, in conjunction with NATO allies, air strikes to defend both rebel forces and civilians in Libya’s civil war, and to bring about the overthrow of Libyan ruler Moammar Gadhafi. The U.S. supply of weapons to the insurgents was viewed with bitter irony after militants attacked a U.S. outpost in Benghazi, killing four Americans, including the U.S. ambassador to Libya. U.S. drone attacks continue to kill civilians as well as alleged terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, increasing hatred of the United States in the Near and Middle East. The recent dispatch of a destroyer to the Black Sea and U.S. troops to Eastern Europe in response to the Russian presence in Ukraine increases the possibility of a U.S.-Russian conflict over a nation that until the 1990s had been a part of Russia since the days of Catherine the Great.

The president claimed progress in trade negotiations with Asian nations, signed a new defense agreement with the Philippines and, according to the *New York Times*, “Mr. Obama managed to reassure America’s treaty allies without antagonizing China.” The *Times* editors must have missed the report of a clearly antagonized China that appeared in last Thursday’s [South China Morning Post](#).

“US President Barack Obama has angered Beijing by saying the uninhabited Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, which are claimed by China and Japan, would be covered by the US-Japan security treaty,” the *Post* reported, adding that Obama is the first U.S. president to claim the disputed islands — called Senkaku by Japan — are covered by America’s 62-year-old security treaty with Japan.

“The policy of the United States is clear — the Senkaku Islands are administered by Japan and therefore fall within the scope of Article 5 of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Co-operation and Security,” Obama said during last week’s visit to Japan. “And we oppose any unilateral attempts to undermine Japan’s administration of these islands.” China maintains any agreement between the United States and Japan has no bearing on the Chinese claim to those same islands.

“The so-called US-Japan alliance is a bilateral arrangement from the Cold War and ought not to harm China’s territorial sovereignty and reasonable rights,” said Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang. According to the *Morning Post*, a U.S. military cruiser in the South China Sea last December had to take evasive action to avoid hitting a warship supporting China’s first aircraft carrier.



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“The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are not a vital U.S. interest. The dispute over them between Japan and China has nothing to do with Americans,” wrote John Glaser at [Antiwar.com](#). “But Obama just promised the world he’ll go to war over a bunch of rocks in the East China Sea, if he has to.”

Obama may be less eager to use military force than some in Congress, with John McCain foremost among them. But his threats and military actions have taken frequent detours into lands and conflicts unrelated to U.S. national security. It is in many ways a remarkable record for the winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.



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