

A Matter of Balance: A French Perspective on Limited Strikes

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The just war category of *jus ad vim*¹—a just use of force short of war—includes diverse practices of what Micah Zenko calls “Discrete Military Operations,” which he defines as “a single or serial physical use of kinetic military force to achieve a defined military and political goal by inflicting casualties or causing destruction, without seeking to conquer an opposing army or to capture or control territory.”² These operations include targeted killings, special forces operations, no-fly zones, and isolated missile strikes. This article will focus on the latter form, the so-called limited strikes that use cruise missiles and are limited in their objectives, duration, and intensity. Their goal is to send a complex signal: firm enough to reflect the gravity of the situation (at the risk of an escalation to war) but, at the same time, restrained enough to make it clear that the objective is not to threaten the regime existentially and that a return to the status quo ante is still possible. Limited strikes are, by definition, a matter of finding a delicate balance.

What are the philosophical arguments justifying these limited strikes? To understand the answer to this question, this essay will adopt a French perspective both because France is, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, one of the states that launched such limited strikes in Syria in 2017 and 2018, and because it developed a limited warfare ethos, making it particularly receptive to the *jus ad vim* framework.

To illustrate this philosophical perspective, we will examine the use (or threat) of limited force in Syria as a response to the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime. This case is interesting because, contrary to most of the other recent examples of measures short of war, it has nothing to do with the so-called war

Ethics & International Affairs, 34, no. 2 (2020), pp. 201–215.

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doi:10.1017/S0892679420000258

on terror and little to do with a “humanitarian intervention” framework, the two main justifications for such actions. Presented as a way to “punish” the Syrian regime as much as to “deter” it from using chemical weapons again, these limited strikes are a good illustration of the traditional retributive/preventive dichotomy of penal philosophy.

Finally, this essay argues that prevention is a better justification than retribution and concludes by assessing the efficacy of limited strikes. To what extent do they actually work? I argue that, as part of any philosophical examination of international affairs, the consequentialist approach matters.

FRENCH INTERVENTIONISM AND MILITARY ETHICS

In just the last decade, France has intervened militarily in Libya (Operation Harmattan, 2011), Mali (Operation Serval, 2013–2014), and the Central African Republic (Operation Sangaris, 2013–2016); extended its operation in Mali to five countries of the Sahel region (Operation Barkhane in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, since 2014); and intervened in Iraq and Syria against the so-called Islamic State (Operation Chammal, since 2014 in Iraq and 2015 in Syria), and then in Syria again with limited strikes against the regime (Operation Hamilton, 2018), after having almost intervened against Assad in 2013. France also participated—and still does—in several UN, EU, and NATO operations. The French, mocked under the George W. Bush administration as “cheese-eating surrender monkeys” because of their refusal to participate in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, turned into “frogs of war.”³ Why?

One answer is that there has not actually been any change. France can use, and always has used, military measures. Part of an exclusive club of military powers capable of deploying first into a theater of operations and projecting power globally, France has always been interventionist.⁴ The 2003 opposition to the U.S.-Iraq war is an exception that proves the rule: France refrained from intervention not because of a pacific streak but because it saw intervention as not only illegal but also illegitimate and potentially counterproductive—a doubt subsequently proven justified.

Another answer is that French military interventionism also has to do with its ethos, or the moral image France has of itself as a great nation—“the country of human rights”—and bearer and defender of universal values; hence the doctrines of the *intervention d’humanité* (humanitarian intervention) developed in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and of the *droit d'ingérence* (right to intervene) of the 1980s and 1990s.⁵

In the French case, this policy of *grandeur* and the interventionist doctrines are, some might say, problematically linked to what one scholar calls “a sense of post-colonial responsibility” that motivates “France’s willingness to maintain political and moral leadership over its former colonies.”⁶ However, haunted by its excessive use of force in the Algerian war as well as a feeling of guilt for allowing the Rwandan genocide to occur, the French ethos includes an aspect of self-restraint grounded in the belief that human rights are an important part of French history and identity and should therefore be an important part of its foreign policy.

Finally, the intensification of French military operations in the last decade can be explained as having less to do with French domestic politics—the political left and right share a similar perspective on foreign affairs—than with changes in international affairs. These include a proliferation of international crises, greater instability in areas of French strategic influence such as the Sahel, and terrorist attacks in France.

Despite this challenging context, France retains the notion of restraint and a limited use of force at the center of its strategic culture.⁷ The use of force is limited both in the numbers of soldiers deployed in its operations and in the way they fight. In terms of troop levels, Operation Serval, which has been presented as “a model for designing and operating an expeditionary force,”⁸ topped out at 4,000 troops; Operation Sangaris at 2,000; Operation Barkhane at 5,100; and Operation Chammal at 1,000.

In terms of the force used by these soldiers, French military ethics has at its core the notion of mastered or controlled force (*force maîtrisée*). “Master of his strength, he respects the adversary and takes care to spare the populations” is one of the eleven commandments of the Soldier’s Code⁹ issued by the French army in 2000. “The French soldier bases his action on an ethics of force marked by prudence, temperance and justice.”¹⁰ This means that the use of force, “rigorously sufficient and proportional to the effects to be obtained, must be strictly adapted to the aim pursued, which is always the restoration of peace.”¹¹ In other words, the ultimate goal is less to destroy the adversary than to discourage its aggression and reduce tensions, with the knowledge that this adversary will likely be needed in the future to find a political end to the crisis and to build the peace.¹² Such a military philosophy also helps to explain why France is less susceptible to perversions of the just war doctrine, such as those put forth by

the United States under George W. Bush, whose administration famously rejected the limited force outlook of the Clinton era to pursue a “shock and awe” tactic in Iraq.¹³

This notion of *force maîtrisée*, at the heart of the French army’s soldiers deontology, has variants in other branches of the French armed forces. The French Air Force speaks of a “precision revolution” (*révolution de la précision*); its goal is to obtain maximum political effects while creating minimal destruction, which is opposed to the doctrine of strategic bombing that deliberately targets civilians. During NATO’s 1999 Kosovo bombing campaign, the French Air Force disagreed with some of the proposed targets because they were part of the civilian infrastructure.¹⁴

France had not undertaken limited strikes until recently, and never alone—precisely because its ethos also implies a multilateral approach. French planes participated in NATO’s Operation Deny Flight in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993, which included a few limited strikes. In 1995, during the Yugoslav wars, UN secretary-general Boutros Boutros-Ghali delegated his powers to the French general commanding the UN protection force, giving him the authority to conduct “limited” or “tactical” strikes (as opposed to “massive” raids, also called “strategic strikes”). Later, in September 1998, NATO authorized both limited strikes against specific Serbian targets in Kosovo and a gradual aerial campaign to destroy Serbian aerial defense everywhere.

While France has not, historically, undertaken limited strikes on its own, we can gather some insight on the country’s position based on how its authorities have reacted to the numerous U.S. unilateral limited strikes over the years. They have not condemned them when they agreed with the threat assessment, as was the case with Operation El Dorado Canyon against Libya in 1986; the cruise missile strikes on Iraq in 1993; and Operation Infinite Reach in Afghanistan and Sudan in 1998. Interestingly, when French authorities denied the American planes access to French airspace on their way to Libya in 1986, it was not because of a different ethos (“We have always supported the American position because we are in the same family and we defend the same values of democracy,” said Prime Minister Jacques Chirac)¹⁵ but, quite on the contrary, because they considered the American operation *too limited*. They instead defended a policy of regime change, considering that “anything short of an overthrow of Colonel Qaddafi would have negative consequences, including incitement of Arab extremism and the weakening of moderate Arab countries.”¹⁶ More recently, France also

supported the 2017 U.S. missile strike on Shayrat, Syria (see below), with then-president François Hollande declaring in a joint statement with Angela Merkel that “President Assad bears sole responsibility for this development.”¹⁷

On the other hand, they have condemned limited strikes by the United States when they did not share the American threat assessment, such as in the Desert Strike (1996) and Desert Fox (1998) operations in Iraq, both because of the potential humanitarian consequences and because they believed the use of force was not chosen as a last resort; diplomatic measures were still possible. What these historical cases show us is that far from being fully against limited strikes, the French ethos sees a particular role for them. The question is, under what circumstances?

PREFERRING THE RHETORIC OF PREVENTION TO THAT OF PUNISHMENT

Limited strikes are typically justified in two ways. The first is as a *punitive* measure: to “punish” the target in response to, as retaliation for, or in retribution after a terrorist attack, an attempted assassination, a military offensive, the non-compliance of the target state with UNSC resolutions, or the use of chemical weapons, among other possibilities. The second is as a *preventive* measure: to deter or compel the target state to stop specific activities, such as the use of chemical weapons. Or sometimes as a mixture of both.

This duality—retribution and prevention—has been at the heart of the search in penal philosophy for the purpose of punishment. According to the proponents of retribution, *punitur quia peccatum est*, or, in other words, punishment is to be inflicted because a crime has been committed. “Retributivism” is therefore a theory according to which criminals should be punished because they deserve it for what they did. This backward-looking approach was dominant from the time of Roman law through the eighteenth-century criminal law reform. Even after such reforms, it was still defended by deontologists such as Kant, who stated that punishment must always be inflicted upon the criminal “because he has committed a crime” and that “the principle of punishment is a categorical imperative.”¹⁸ On the other hand, proponents of prevention argued *nemo prudens punit quia peccatum est, sed ne peccetur*. In other words, nobody who is wise punishes because an offense has been committed; they punish so that none will be committed. “Preventivism” is therefore a theory according to which criminals should be punished because doing so will yield better results for a given society

than not punishing them. This progressive idea entailed a more forward-looking approach and was developed during the European Enlightenment by the founding fathers of modern criminal law; for instance, by Cesare Beccaria in *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764). Today, such a view dominates the penal philosophy of liberal democracies.

But what about in the context of limited strikes? The retributive justification is tempting because it taps into a universal sentiment that often jibes with public opinion and satisfies a desire to react to a perceived wrong. I argue it should nevertheless be avoided because it is argumentatively weaker, for at least two reasons.

First, retribution is associated with armed reprisals, which are now largely denounced as unlawful.¹⁹ Reprisals are criticized in part because they “typically are taken in situations where the individuals personally responsible for the breach are either unknown or out of reach”: they can therefore target “individuals or groups who may not even have any degree of solidarity with the presumed authors of the initial violation.”²⁰ As the International Committee of the Red Cross explains, “In international humanitarian law there is a trend to outlaw belligerent reprisals altogether. Those that may still be lawful are subject to the stringent conditions.”²¹ As a matter of fact, most limited strikes are illegal because they are not justified by one of the three exceptions to the prohibition of the use of force in the UN Charter: UNSC authorization under Chapter VII, individual self-defense, or collective self-defense (intervention by invitation). And, most of the time, states do not even try to justify them legally. In general, they use words like “legitimate” and “proportionate,” employing the grey zone between legality and legitimacy that was famously articulated by the Independent International Commission on Kosovo, labeling NATO’s intervention “illegal but legitimate.”²² All of this is to say that when explaining the legitimacy of a strike, it is more convincing to avoid a retributive argument (using terms like “punitive strikes,” “punishment,” and “retaliation”) that would make it look like there was a “return of reprisals.”²³

Second, the retributive terminology of punishment can seem paternalistic (in the sense that one typically punishes children) or even neocolonialist. It thus risks reducing not only public support for a military intervention (it “attracted criticism within the Hollande government itself, since it could not convince French public opinion of the legitimacy of the reprisals”)²⁴ but also support abroad, especially in the Global South where the postcolonial discourse is widespread. For these reasons, the rhetoric of prevention is preferable to that of

retribution and, by extension, to that of punishment, because punishment is often reduced to its retributive component.

THE SYRIAN CASE (2013–2018)

There were two successive episodes of limited strikes against the Syrian regime in reaction to its use of chemical weapons: the April 7, 2017, American strikes against the Shayrat airbase in response to the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack three days earlier, and the April 14, 2018, U.S.-France-U.K. strikes against a research center in Damascus and two military storage facilities near Homs in response to the Douma chemical attack one week earlier. These two episodes followed an aborted attempt in 2013 where, after the Ghouta chemical attack of August 21, 2013, the United States, France, and the U.K. expressed their intention to strike Damascus. This strike never ultimately took place due to the reluctance of the U.K. parliament and U.S. congress, respectively, and a surprise Russian plan to eliminate Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. This plan gave President Obama a reason to postpone and, eventually, decide to not launch the planned operation that had left him feeling "trapped."²⁵ France, by contrast, was ready to go, its Dassault Rafale bombers loaded up, when President Hollande, not willing to strike alone, also renounced.

This 2013 episode is important in several respects, not only because its philosophical justifications are similar to the subsequent ones. First, it shows a difference in strategic cultures between the three countries considering strikes; in France, defense is the "reserved domain" (*domaine réservé*) of the president, who can authorize the use of force with very little parliamentary control.²⁶ This allows for a faster response, as was seen at the beginning of Operation Serval, in which the French were able to deploy troops to Mali in a matter of hours. It also explains why President Hollande did not have to await a legislative vote to initiate limited strikes, contrary to his U.K. and U.S. counterparts.

Second, the 2013 nonintervention is also exceptional in that it is linked to the most lethal chemical attack of the Syrian war, which killed at least hundreds of people (estimates vary between 281 and 1,729), while, in comparison, the 2017 and 2018 attacks killed around ninety and fifty people, respectively. And yet, it was also the only one out of the three occurrences in which the initial attack remained unanswered by an international strike. That disproportion between the crime and the (absence of) response made the 2013 nonintervention the

explanatory factor of the rest: not only of the 2017 and 2018 strikes against the Syrian government, which were largely motivated by the desire of the administrations in France, the U.K., and the United States to take decisive action where their predecessors had failed to, but even, perhaps, of the 2014 Russian offensive in Ukraine, resulting in the annexation of Crimea and war in Donbass. Indeed, it is possible that the offensive would not have taken place if “the West” had not shown weakness the year before in Syria by making empty threats. In other words, the “red line” turned out to be a “green light.”²⁷

In all three episodes, the same justifications were produced. The first—which is often the first justification offered in such scenarios—was retribution. Days after the 2013 Ghouta chemical attacks, President Hollande declared that “France is ready to *punish* those who made the decision to gas innocent people.”²⁸ Thomas M. Nichols called Hollande’s position “a fundamentally moralist position, eschewing any talk of long-term outcomes and seeking instead to inflict punishment directly on Assad for his sins.”²⁹ Moralism seems indeed to be a constant among French justifications for the use of force. This is, again, due to the French ethos, and the way the French political elite sees a somewhat messianic moral role for France in world affairs, as a vital protector of human rights. In the case of Syria, however, declarations using punitive language were also made by Germany,³⁰ the U.K.,³¹ and the United States,³² among others. As it turned out, these were empty threats. Nevertheless, French president Emmanuel Macron used the same justification in 2018, two days before launching strikes: “We cannot allow regimes that believe they can act with impunity to violate international law in the worst possible way.”³³ The paradox here being that limited strikes as a response are often denounced as themselves being illegal, as explored by Heinze and Neilsen in their essay for this roundtable.³⁴ The symmetry is dubious, however, as the use of chemical weapons is a much clearer (and some would say grave) violation of international law.

The second justification—which often follows retribution but is usually the one that is stronger and more widely accepted—is prevention. In 2018, France, like others, insisted that the goal was “to dissuade the Syrian regime from continuing such criminal acts.”³⁵ It would, however, be a mistake to reduce this preventive dimension to deterrence. As Thomas Schelling explained, deterrence “involves setting the stage—by announcement, by rigging the trip-wire, by incurring the obligation—and *waiting*.”³⁶ Therefore, the strike itself is not the deterrent. If anything, it is an acknowledgment of the failure of the earlier declarations that

supposedly acted as deterrents, in this case the red-line rhetoric introduced by presidents Obama and Hollande in the summer of 2012, which they failed to enforce a year later. When he took office in May 2017, President Macron stated that “a very clear red line existed on our side . . . any use of chemical weapons will be the subject of reprisals, and of an immediate response, in any case from the French.”³⁷ This rhetoric continued with a joint communiqué in March 2018, only one month before the Douma chemical attack, in which Macron and President Trump warned again that there would be “no impunity” in the event of the use of chemical weapons in Syria.³⁸ These announcements were supposed to be deterrents. They were not.

Rather than simply deterrence, the preventive dimension is actually a threefold measure: deterrence; incapacitation (“the destruction of the Syrian regime’s chemical facilities in order to stop it committing further chemical massacres”);³⁹ and “compellence”—a word coined by Schelling in *Arms and Influence* (1966)—as a counterpart to deterrence. While deterrence is about dissuading another state from doing something it has not yet done (to prevent it from taking action), compellence is about coercing the state to stop doing what it is already doing (to incite it to act); in our case, to stop Syria from using chemical weapons.

Limited strikes are a case of “demonstrative compellence,” defined as “a limited use of force coupled with the threat of escalating violence to come if demands are not met.”⁴⁰ This is an example of coercive diplomacy, which means “to back one’s demand on an adversary with a threat of punishment for noncompliance that he will consider credible and potent enough to persuade him to comply with the demand.”⁴¹ Schelling called it “the diplomacy of violence”: “the power to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy—vicious diplomacy, but diplomacy.”⁴²

A third justification offered for these limited strikes was credibility. In 2018, the French minister of foreign affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, explained that France had to act not only for the two reasons outlined above but also “to show that when President Macron made commitments, he respected them, he kept them.”⁴³ It was even more important for the president to keep his word this time because Syria had a history of not heeding red lines. Macron (and Trump) had to avoid making the Obama-Hollande mistake of drawing a line and then doing nothing when it was crossed.⁴⁴ “We showed that the red line was being enforced. Which was not done in 2013–2014,” reflected Macron in November 2019.⁴⁵ The message was: no more empty threats. This was a personal issue for both

leaders, who wanted to avoid the “reputational cost” of not following through on threats and the risk of being perceived as lacking not only resolve but also honesty.⁴⁶ But not only that: credibility plays a core role in the deterrence theory, as no threat can be deterrent if it is not credible. This third justification is therefore a corollary of the previous one.

A CONSEQUENTIALIST ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF LIMITED STRIKES

The retributivism-preventivism debate in philosophy of law arguably parallels the deontologism-consequentialism debate in normative ethics. Insofar as this is the case, we can surmise that preferring the rhetoric of prevention to that of punishment to justify limited strikes amounts to preferring a consequentialist approach to a deontological one. This means relying on a moral system of decision-making based on a calculation of benefits and harms, with the aim of producing the best consequences for most of the people affected. While an analysis of the official French discourse justifying limited strikes shows that officials and pundits produce both deontological (retributivist) and consequentialist (preventivist) arguments—the strikes are supposed to both “punish” and “deter”—it is important to explore which takes priority.

My personal position is that the retributivist (deontological) part of the justifications for limited strikes should be abandoned. What matters from a consequentialist perspective are the results. As Raymond Aron determined, “A good policy is defined by its effectiveness, not by its virtue.”⁴⁷ Aron’s “oxymorus” international ethics, which I have defended elsewhere, is a valuable conceptual framework in foreign policy analysis.⁴⁸ The morality of an action should be judged by its ethical consequences, and thus the ultimate question concerning limited strikes should be: do they work? That is, did they compel the Syrian regime to stop using chemical weapons? This would be a moral good.

The fact that there were two sets of strikes, in 2017 and then again in 2018, seems like an acknowledgment of failure in and of itself: the second one happened precisely because the first was apparently not enough to deter the Syrian regime to continue using its weapons. However, looking more closely at the numbers and the timeline, one observes that there were no less than 336 confirmed chemical incidents in Syria between December 2012 and January 2019 (most of them much less lethal than the three major ones of August 2013, April 2017, and April 2018), and a little more than 88 percent of those incidents (297) happened

before the first strike (April 7, 2017).⁴⁹ Between December 2012 and March 2017, there were an average of 5.6 chemical incidents per month. Following the April 2017 strike, between May and December 2017, the number of incidents dropped to 1.75. Therefore, it does look like there was a “strike effect,” one that was enough to decrease the number of chemical attacks for a couple of months, but not enough to deter the regime permanently. The chemical attacks intensified in January 2018 with an average of 6.6 incidents per month between January and March 2018. This period was then followed by the second strike, which seems to have had a more radical effect, as there have not been any confirmed chemical incidents since. This suggests that there is indeed a “strike effect.” The reason could be because, as the French foreign minister said, “Much of the chemical arsenal has been destroyed”⁵⁰ (incapacitation), or because, if the Syrian regime still has the means, it does not dare to use them anymore (deterrence). In any case, this cessation can be interpreted as a relative success. Overall, the 2017 and 2018 strikes appear to have had the effect of restoring the red line that the 2013 non-intervention discredited, effectively emboldening Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers.

We can draw two general conclusions from this analysis about the compelling effect of limited strikes, that is, their ability to coerce the target state to stop doing a particular action. First, it all depends on the cost for the target state: when it can cease its action at practically no cost because those actions do not bring any substantial tactical or strategic advantage that cannot be achieved by other means, then the strikes can have a temporary compellence effect. This was the case with Syria’s chemical weapons. However, one should not expect limited strikes to induce a change of behavior considered too costly by the target state.

Second, limited strikes are effective—they have a compelling effect—insofar as they can be interpreted as a signal of seriousness and readiness to escalate if necessary. However, if the threat of escalation is absent, they could, on the contrary, portray a lack of seriousness and commitment. As Lupton argues in this roundtable,⁵¹ a few missiles or airstrikes that are not that costly for the party taking coercive action fail to communicate resolve. This is no reason to discredit limited strikes altogether. This is, however, an incentive to consider them as part of a broader strategy involving a readiness to use more force if necessary.⁵²

My point is that for limited strikes not to be too limited in their effect, they need to be credible—that is, backed by the potential of a greater use of force. As explained above, demonstrative compellence and coercive diplomacy in general

need to be coupled with a credible threat of escalating violence if there is noncompliance. This brings into question Daniel Brunstetter's "Rubicon Assessment," presented as "a black and white process" in which deciding to pursue limited strikes "means the first step in the process is to rule out war."⁵³ A preventive-consequentialist approach of limited strikes requires making sure they have or could have a deterrent/compellent effect. And that cannot be obtained by ruling out war. Brunstetter writes that "to choose limited force means, morally, to act with a presumption against escalation (to war) in mind."⁵⁴ Focusing on actions rather than intentions, choosing limited force means, morally, to act in such a way as to have the best deterrent/compellent effect, and that implies no presumption against escalation. On the contrary, it means making sure the adversary understands the price of noncompliance.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to produce both a descriptive and a normative argument: that there is something specific about the French warfare ethos that makes it particularly receptive to the *jus ad vim* framework and, therefore, to the use of limited strikes; but also that the moral justification of those strikes should be guided by a consequentialist ethic, preventive rather than retributive. From a consequentialist perspective, limited strikes are justified when they "work," and for that to happen, they need to be credible and imply the potential of an escalation; the challenge being to keep the escalation under control. Carrying the risk of inefficacy at one end of the spectrum and of escalation at the other, limited strikes are indeed a matter of balance.

NOTES

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Abstract: What are the philosophical arguments justifying limited strikes? This essay, as part of the roundtable “The Ethics of Limited Strikes,” adopts a French perspective both because France is, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, one of the states that launched such limited

strikes in recent years, and because it developed a limited warfare ethos. There is something specific about such an ethos that makes it particularly receptive to the *jus ad vim* framework and, therefore, to the issue of limited strikes. This essay also builds on the case of the use (or threat) of limited force in Syria as a response to the country's use of chemical weapons between 2013 and 2018. Presented as a way to "punish" the Syrian regime as much as to "deter" it from using chemical weapons again, these limited strikes are a good illustration of the traditional retributive/preventive dichotomy of penal philosophy. I argue that the moral justification of those strikes should be guided by a consequentialist ethic, preventive rather than retributive. From a consequentialist perspective, limited strikes are justified when they "work"—that is, when they have a deterrent/compellent effect. For that to happen, they need to be credible and imply the potential of an escalation; the challenge being to keep the escalation under control. Carrying the risk of inefficacy at one end of the spectrum and of escalation at the other, limited strikes are indeed a matter of balance.

Keywords: intervention, Syria, just war, *jus ad vim*, limited strikes, punishment, prevention, consequentialism, chemical weapons, compellence