

Assad's Ransom

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has laid out his terms for destroying his chemical weapons stockpiles.

"When we see the United States really wants stability in our region and stops threatening, striving to attack, and also ceases arms deliveries to terrorists, then we will believe that the necessary processes can be finalized," he said in an interview.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gives a news conference in 2009. (Dieter Nagl/AFP/Getty Images)

The key line there is "ceases arms deliveries to terrorists." Assad is demanding the U.S. choose between its goals of enforcing the ban against chemical weapons and getting Assad out of power.

Right now, Assad's got the upper hand in Syria's civil war. The U.S. could change that in two ways. One is directly bombing Assad's military assets. The other is aggressively training and arming the opposition — something we're really only just beginning to do.

The discussion around the Syria disarmament deal has mostly focused on defusing the U.S.'s threat to bomb Assad. But what Assad is saying here is that's not good enough: The U.S. also needs to stop arming his enemies. That means the real cost of destroying Assad's chemical weapons is watching him crush the opposition and retain power.

So far, the White House has argued that these policies are separate — that they can pursue disarmament on one track while also working against Assad's victory on another. But it's hard to believe that Assad will cooperate in the destruction of his weapons even as the U.S. is seriously arming the people trying to overthrow him.

A lot of people have wondered why Russia and Syria seem to be working to throw the Obama administration a lifeline. But the answer is clear: Assad only cares about his chemical weapons insofar as

they help keep him in power. Sacrificing them to end the threat the U.S. poses to his regime is more than worth it to him.