

Syria's Agenda for Accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013

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ABSTRACT

Syria's decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013 was a significant milestone in the dynamics of chemical weapons control amidst domestic armed conflict and great power rivalry. This article aims to analyze why Syria chose to join the CWC regime at a time of crisis, positioning the decision as a strategic state action, rather than as a consequence of normative compliance with international law. This research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach through a literature review of official United Nations documents, Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) reports, and relevant academic literature. The analysis is conducted using a neorealist perspective that views the international regime as an instrument utilized by states in an anarchic international system. The results show that Syria's accession to the CWC functioned as a bargaining strategy to respond to coercive pressure, particularly the threat of US military intervention following the Ghouta incident, while also shifting the chemical weapons issue from the realm of the threat of force to international institutional and procedural mechanisms. Furthermore, the accession strengthened Syria's position within the multilateral framework by leveraging Russia's political protection in the UN Security Council. These findings confirm that the effectiveness of international regimes such as the CWC is highly dependent on the configuration of power and support of major powers, making state compliance with the regime more strategic and conditional than normative.



INTRODUCTION

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is one of the most comprehensive arms control regimes in the contemporary international system. This convention comprehensively prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons through the establishment of an international verification mechanism through the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Since its entry into force in 1997, the CWC has been designed not only as an international legal instrument but also as an institutional framework governing state behavior on chemical weapons issues through a set of rules, procedures, and inspection mechanisms (Krasner, 1982).

In practice, state participation in the CWC regime is often understood as a commitment to international norms and global security stability. Accession, or acceptance of the regime, generally occurs for several reasons, such as in post-conflict situations, in the process of improving international relations, or as part of efforts to build trust within the international community. In these circumstances, the international regime serves as an institutional means to reduce uncertainty and increase the predictability of state behavior.

However, due to the dynamics of international politics, states' decisions to join international regimes demonstrate that they are not always driven solely by normative considerations. In a number of cases, accession occurs under strong external pressure and in unstable internal security situations.

This emphasizes that international regimes often operate as a means of power politics for certain states, allowing security interests and strategic calculations to play a decisive role in state decisions.

One example that fits this framework is Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013. This accession occurred as Syria was in the midst of a domestic armed conflict that escalated into accusations of chemical weapons use, as well as under the threat of US military action following the Ghouta incident. At the same time, Syria also received political protection from Russia, its key ally on the UN Security Council.

Therefore, Syria's decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013 is relevant for further in-depth examination. Syria's decision to join an international regime that explicitly limits the possession and use of chemical weapons under such circumstances raises significant analytical questions. Rather than being understood as a voluntary acceptance of international norms, Syria's accession is more accurately seen as part of the regime's political and security strategy in the face of external pressure. The accession to the CWC opens the door to a shift in focus from the threat of coercive action to institutional mechanisms and international verification.

So far, most studies on Syria and the CWC have focused on post-accession violations and the limitations of the regime's enforcement. An example of a previous study I found was a journal article titled "United States Involvement in the Syrian Conflict as a Consequence of the Politics of Entangling Alliances" by Danar Hafidz Adi Wardhana at Arajang Publishing House. The journal contains research on the reasons and how the United States' involvement in the Syrian conflict is viewed through the neorealist perspective of international regimes. The conflict in Syria has led to opposition, where US interests clash with various opposition actors.

The second example of previous research found is an essay titled "Russian Support for the Syrian Government Amidst Power Parity Against the United States" by Nadia Izzati. The essay implicitly outlines the chronology of Syria's domestic armed conflict, focusing on the perspective of Syria's ally, Russia. The theoretical framework used in this paper is the Balance of Power, and the research findings indicate that Russia seeks to expand its sphere of influence to displace and suppress the dominance of the United States in the Middle East due to the parity of military power between Russia and the United States. Both studies examine Syria from different yet equally important perspectives, but neither study fully explains why Syria chose to join the CWC during the 2013 crisis. Therefore, this article focuses on Syria's accession decision itself using a neorealist perspective, which views international regimes as instruments utilized by states to the extent that they align with security interests and the international distribution of power (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1994).

To explain Syria's decision to access the CWC in 2013, the article utilizes a structural neorealist perspective. This approach views the international system as an anarchic structure lacking a central authority capable of consistently enforcing rules. Under these conditions, states are understood as rational actors that prioritize security and survival, especially when facing direct external threats (Waltz, 1979). Within the neorealist framework, also coined by Krasner, the existence of international regimes is not understood as an independent factor shaping state behavior. Instead, regimes are positioned as instruments used by states to the extent that they provide strategic advantages or help manage pressure from more powerful actors. In other words, adherence to international regimes is conditional and heavily influenced by the structure of the international distribution of power (Krasner, 1982).

This approach is relevant to analyzing the Syrian case because the decision to access the CWC was made in a situation where the regime's security interests were under intense pressure. In such a context, neorealism assumes that states will tend to choose options that reduce the risk of direct confrontation, even if those options formally limit some of the state's instruments of power.

From a neorealist perspective, international regimes like the CWC are not understood as neutral arenas, but rather as political spaces embedded in the interests of major powers. Therefore, the effectiveness of a regime is not determined solely by norms or technical mechanisms, but by the extent to which powerful states support or constrain the regime's enforcement process (Mearsheimer, 1994). Therefore, the problem formulation in this research is: Why did Syria choose to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013, even though at the same time the regime was under coercive threats and pressure from major power rivalries in the UN Security Council?

This question positions the accession decision as a strategic state action, rather than as a consequence of normative compliance. With this focus, this article attempts to explain Syria's accession

through a neorealist framework that emphasizes the regime's security interests and the configuration of international power. This research aims to identify and analyze why Syria chose to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013, despite the regime being under coercive threats and pressure from great power rivalry in the UN Security Council. This question positions accession as a strategic state decision within an anarchic international structure, rather than as a consequence of normative compliance. Different from previous studies that focused on post-accession violations and failures to enforce the Chemical Weapons Convention, this article places Syria's accession decision itself as the primary object of analysis. Using a neorealist perspective, this article demonstrates that accession to international regimes can function as a bargaining tool and a regime's survival strategy under coercive pressure, rather than as a form of acceptance of international norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

United Nations Security Council

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the principal executive organ of the UN, mandated with international peacekeeping, and uniquely empowered to issue legally binding resolutions for all member states. Its membership comprises 15 states, divided into five veto-wielding permanent members (P5) and ten non-permanent members elected on a rotating basis. Under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the UNSC has broad authority to implement coercive measures, ranging from economic sanctions to authorizing the use of military force. Despite its vital role, the body's effectiveness is often hampered by the use of its veto power, which has led to deadlocks in humanitarian conflicts. It also faces calls for reform, as the composition of its permanent members is deemed no longer representative of the global geopolitical realities of the 21st century.

Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)

The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) is an international treaty, effective since 1997, that completely prohibits the development, production, stockpiling, and use of chemical weapons, and requires the destruction of existing stockpiles. This convention is an improvement on the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which previously only prohibited their use. It addresses the issue of dual-use chemicals (civilian vs. military) by dividing them into three lists based on risk, so that oversight does not stifle the peaceful chemical industry. Implementation is overseen by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which has the authority to conduct unannounced inspections (anytime, anywhere) to ensure compliance. Considered one of the most successful disarmament treaties with near-universal ratification, it now faces new challenges from non-state actors in asymmetric conflicts.

Neorealism Theory

Neorealism (Structural Realism), popularized by Kenneth Waltz, argues that state behavior is determined by the anarchic structure of the international system, not by human nature. The absence of a central authority forces states to prioritize survival through self-help. This creates a Security Dilemma, where one state's defense efforts are perceived as a threat by another, triggering arms races, Balance of Power mechanisms, and obstacles to international cooperation due to a focus on relative gains. Theoretically, Neorealism is divided into Defensive Realism, which suggests states simply seek security (security maximizers), and Offensive Realism (John Mearsheimer), which encourages power maximizers. Although criticized by Liberals and Constructivists for being too deterministic and ignoring the role of institutions, this theory remains a primary analytical lens for understanding great power competition in global politics.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method used in this article is qualitative with a descriptive-analytical design. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand and explain Syria's interests in accessing the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) regime in 2013, rather than to measure phenomena quantitatively or with numerical data. The descriptive design was used to systematically describe the pressures and security dilemmas facing Syria and analyze CWC accession within the concept of bargaining power. Meanwhile, an analytical approach was used to interpret the findings through a neorealist theoretical framework.

Data were obtained through a literature review that included official CWC documents as well as relevant academic literature on international regimes from a neorealist theoretical perspective. The focus of this research analysis is Syria's agenda in accessing the CWC amidst coercive pressure. The analysis was conducted by linking empirical data with a theoretical framework to explain Syria's reasons for accession and its relationship to neorealist theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coercive Pressure and Syria's Security Dilemma (2013)

Syria's decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013 was inextricably linked to significant changes in the international security environment following the chemical weapons incident in Ghouta in August 2013. The escalation of pressure on the Ghouta region southeast of Damascus stemmed from the United States' prior explicit determination of the use of chemical weapons as an intolerable threshold. In August 2012, President Barack Obama publicly stated: We have been very clear to the Assad regime, but also to other players on the ground, that a red line for us is that we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized (Obama, 2012, quoted from CNN World, 2012).

This statement became a key reference point in international discussions regarding United States policy regarding the situation in Syria and was widely understood as a political commitment linking the use of chemical weapons to the possibility of a military response. Following the Ghouta incident, the US President's statement regarding the red line on the use of chemical weapons gained new weight because it was followed by concrete military action. From late August to early September 2013, the United States deployed several Navy destroyers equipped with Tomahawk cruise missiles to the Eastern Mediterranean. This deployment of military assets was understood as preliminary preparation for a possible limited military strike against strategic Syrian targets, as well as a coercive signal aimed directly at the Bashar al-Assad regime (Hart, 2018). The combination of high-level political statements and limited military deployments heightened the perception that the US threat of force was credible and imminent.

Consequently, this situation placed Syria in a relatively weak structural position vis-à-vis the United States. From a neorealist perspective, states in this position tend to pursue adaptive strategies aimed at reducing risk to avoid direct confrontation with an actor possessing significant military and political advantages (Jervis, 1978). Such a strategy is not intended to alter the existing international power structure, but rather to manage threats to prevent them from escalating into coercive measures that directly threaten the continuity of domestic governance. In this context, Syria's accession to the international regime could serve as a strategic instrument if it could shift the international response from the threat of military force to the framework of international institutions and established legal procedures.

At the same time, the dynamics of the international relationship between the United States and Russia also played a decisive role in shaping decisions regarding Syria. Russia, as Syria's main ally, has a strategic interest in preventing Western military intervention that could weaken the Bashar al-Assad regime and alter the regional balance of power in the Middle East. This interest has driven Russia to actively participate in managing the post-Ghouta crisis, both through diplomatic channels and by leveraging its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Russia has consistently used its political influence, including its veto power, to limit the use of military force against Syria and to encourage a multilateral resolution of the crisis. On the other hand, the United States' interest in pushing Syria stems from obstacles to domestic political support, such as opposition from members of Congress and a lack of public enthusiasm for new military action, which has limited the possibility of resuming large-scale military operations (Philips, 2016; Hart, 2018).

In this context, the Syrian chemical weapons disarmament scheme under international supervision emerged as a compromise solution. A bilateral agreement between the United States and Russia in September 2013 established a framework requiring Syria to declare and destroy its entire chemical weapons stockpile under the auspices of the OPCW. This framework was later institutionalized through UN Security Council Resolution 2118 (2013), which formally committed Syria to chemical disarmament obligations without automatically authorizing the use of military force (United Nations Security Council, 2013). For Syria, accession to the CWC was part of a bargaining

process. By joining the CWC regime, Syria could shift direct military pressure into institutional obligations within the OPCW's technical oversight framework, while still relying on Russian political protection in the UN Security Council. This accession thus functioned as an instrument of threat management within the international power structure, rather than a stand-alone form of normative compliance (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1994).

CWC Accession as a Bargaining Strategy in a Neorealist Perspective

Within a neorealist framework, Syria's decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) in 2013 can be understood in light of the Bashar al-Assad regime's interpretation of the international regime as an instrument of power politics, rather than as a normative order that stands outside of state interests. From Syria's perspective, the CWC is perceived as being within the orbit of US strategic interests, particularly in the context of US efforts to establish international legitimacy for pressure and potential coercive action against states deemed to be violating the chemical weapons prohibition norm (Mearsheimer, 1994).

The United States consistently positions itself as the primary actor in enforcing the anti-chemical weapons norm and links violations of that norm to international political and security measures. For Syria, the interconnectedness of the CWC regime, international investigative mechanisms, and the threat of force demonstrates that the international regime does not operate neutrally but is instead embedded within an unequal global power structure. In this reading, the CWC is seen as an instrument that could strengthen the United States' agenda if Syria remains outside the regime and is thus more easily positioned as a rogue state without institutional protection (Krasner, 1982).

However, neorealism also emphasizes that a materially weaker state does not completely lose agency. In an anarchic structure, states can still employ adaptive strategies to maximize their chances of survival. In the Syrian context, accession to the CWC represents an attempt to manage the United States' agenda by inserting itself into the same institutional framework, thereby narrowing the legitimate space for unilateral coercive action. By joining the CWC regime, Syria shifts its position from being an object of unilateral pressure to being formally bound by multilateral mechanisms and technical verification under the OPCW (Hart, 2018).

This calculation cannot be separated from Russia's role as Syria's strategic patron. Russia has a direct interest in preventing Western military intervention that could potentially alter the regional balance of power and weaken its position in the Middle East. Through its veto power in the UN Security Council, Russia provides political cover, which is Syria's primary source of bargaining power in the face of US pressure. This distribution of power in the UN Security Council allows Syria to negotiate compliance with the CWC within limits that do not threaten the survival of the regime (United Nations Security Council, 2013).

Furthermore, in terms of bargaining power, Syria is materially in a weaker position compared to the United States. However, Russia's presence significantly increases Syria's leverage in the bargaining process. Bargaining does not occur solely between Syria and the United States, but rather involves the presence of Russia, where Russia serves as a balancing force and compromise mediator. The September 2013 Syrian chemical weapons disarmament agreement reflects this configuration, where the United States' interest in upholding the anti-chemical weapons norm is aligned with Russia's interest in protecting its allies from direct military intervention (Hart, 2018).

Through accession to the CWC, Syria gained strategic advantages in this bargaining process. First, accession allowed Syria to shift the chemical weapons issue from a military threat to a technical and administrative realm under the oversight of the OPCW. This shift increased the political costs for the United States to take military action outside the UN Security Council mechanism. Second, by remaining within the regime, Syria could exploit the limitations of international enforcement regimes like the CWC, which rely heavily on the consensus of major powers. As long as Russia continues to use its veto power to limit escalation, Syria's compliance with the regime can be selective without triggering sanctions or international pressure (Kelle, 2024).

From a neorealist perspective, this pattern emphasizes that international regimes like the CWC function as bargaining arenas within the global power structure. Syria's accession is not a normative acceptance of the United States' agenda, but rather a strategy to manage pressure from powerful states

by leveraging Russian protection and the regime's own institutional limitations. Thus, the CWC becomes an instrument of threat management and regime survival in an anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Syria's decision to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 2013 was the result of strategic calculations heavily influenced by external pressures and international power configurations, rather than by any normative adherence to an arms control regime. From a neorealist perspective, this accession reflects the behavior of a state seeking survival in an anarchic international system, where state security and the continuation of power are paramount priorities.

The chemical weapons incident in Ghouta in August 2013 drastically increased coercive threats against Syria, particularly from the United States, which had designated the use of chemical weapons as a red line. Given the clear power imbalance, Syria found itself in a structurally weak position and faced a real risk of military intervention. Faced with this situation, the Assad government chose not to resort to open confrontation but instead adopted an adaptive strategy, utilizing the international regime as a threat management instrument. Accession to the CWC served as a means to shift the pressure from the potential use of military force to institutional mechanisms and international verification.

The main findings of this study indicate that Syria's accession to the CWC in 2013 was primarily a political survival strategy, not a form of compliance with international norms. By joining the CWC, Syria is no longer solely subject to unilateral pressure from the United States, but rather enters into a multilateral framework overseen by the OPCW. This position makes any potential US military action more politically complex, as it must go through international mechanisms rather than unilaterally. In this situation, Syria's membership in the CWC also provides greater scope for Russia to play its role in the UN Security Council. Russian political protection becomes more effective because Syria is formally bound to the international regime, so the chemical weapons issue is no longer treated solely as a pretext for military intervention.

Furthermore, the Syrian case highlights that international regimes like the CWC operate as bargaining arenas that rely heavily on the interests and consensus of powerful states. Enforcement of the regime is not absolute but rather determined by the political dynamics of the UN Security Council and the distribution of power among key actors. As long as Russia maintains its political support for Syria, the limitations of the CWC's enforcement mechanisms allow the regime's compliance to be selective without triggering decisive coercive consequences.

Thus, Syria's accession to the CWC demonstrates the limits of the effectiveness of international regimes in an anarchic international system. Regimes are unable to independently enforce compliance, but rather serve as instruments used by states in accordance with their security interests and survival strategies. This conclusion reinforces the neorealist argument that state behavior toward international regimes is ultimately determined by power structures, not by the strength of the norms themselves.

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