WASHINGTON—President Barack Obama told Americans Tuesday he would pursue a newly energized diplomatic course to try to resolve the standoff with Syria, but he insisted that the U.S. must conduct military strikes, if needed, in response to the Assad regime’s alleged use of chemical weapons.

Mr. Obama said in a televised address that he asked Congress to postpone a vote on a resolution to authorize military force, which he looked likely to lose. Instead he said he would reserve the option of military strikes while pursuing a Russian proposal for Syria to hand over its chemical weapons under an international agreement.

"It's too early to tell whether this offer will succeed," Mr. Obama said, "and any agreement must verify that the Assad regime keeps its commitments.”

Mr. Obama's address, which showed no immediate sign of changing minds in Congress, came on a day of fast-moving developments in which U.S. lawmakers and officials from France, Russia and other nations scrambled to develop proposals under which Syria would relinquish its chemical weapons.

Syria for the first time directly admitted that it possesses chemical weapons and said it would cease their production and disclose the locations of the stockpiles to the international community, including the United Nations and Russia, which is at the center of the negotiations.

While Mr. Obama agreed to explore the possibility of a Syrian chemical-weapons handover, his administration expressed skepticism that a deal could be reached, and a dispute emerged quickly among members of the U.N. Security Council over how such a measure could be enforced, with France seeking language that leaves military action on the table and Russia rejecting such a move.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who will meet Thursday with his Russian counterpart in Geneva to continue talks, told Congress Tuesday that reaching any agreement on details of a chemical-
President Obama agreed to explore a Russian-backed proposal that would have Syria hand over its chemical weapons, while senators are working on alternative legislation regarding U.S. intervention. Justin Vogt, senior editor at Foreign Affairs, joins the News Hub to discuss.

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Mr. Obama made the possibility of a military strike a central element of his 15-minute address as he discussed the Syrian regime's alleged chemical-weapons attack on Aug. 21 that the U.S. says killed more than 1,400 of its own citizens, including children, outside Damascus.

"Let me make something clear: The United States military doesn't do pinpricks," he said. "Even a limited strike will send a message to Assad that no other nation can deliver." He said he had ordered the military "to maintain our current posture and to be in a position to respond if diplomacy fails."

At the same time, Mr. Obama acknowledged that the limits of U.S. power to resolve the Syrian civil war and that military action, "no matter how limited, is not going to be popular" after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said any U.S. action would be constrained: "I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria," he said. "I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan...This would be a targeted strike to achieve a clear objective: deterring the use of chemical weapons and degrading Assad's capabilities."

Initial reaction to Mr. Obama's speech suggested that he hadn't changed minds in Congress, where support for a resolution authorizing force had been eroding.

Rep. Trey Radel (R., Fla.) said the speech hadn't altered his stance that taking military action against Syria would be a mistake. "It still leaves me and the American people confused," Mr. Radel, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said after the speech, pointing to what he described as conflicting descriptions from the administration of how much force would be used in Syria. "Is this a slap on the wrist or is it an actual bombing campaign?"

Sen. Joe Manchin (D., W.Va.), who had opposed a Senate resolution authorizing military force in Syria, said his position hadn't shifted. "If you think military might and money will change the outcome in that part of the world, then we'd have done it by now," Mr. Manchin said in an interview after the speech. He said he was encouraged by the president's talk of diplomatic options.

Senate Armed Services Chairman Sen. Carl Levin (D., Mich.) said he supported the president's diplomatic efforts but that Congress should still vote to support a military strategy to keep up pressure on Syria.

After the diplomatic opening materialized Monday, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D., Nev.) canceled an initial test vote in the Senate for Wednesday. On Tuesday, after meeting with the president and Senate Democrats at the Capitol, Mr. Reid said the vote has been put on hold indefinitely, pending the outcome of diplomatic efforts.

The timing of any Senate vote will be dictated by international "developments taking place, not some artificial timeline," Mr. Reid said.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D., Ill.) said the president asked senators to give him time to size up the diplomatic opportunity. "He needs a number of days," said Mr. Durbin. "The president was not overly optimistic about it."

U.S. military officials said Tuesday that the latest developments wouldn't prompt them to move any forces or take American ships off alert. "We aren't taking a deep breath," said a military official. "If we stand down, this whole thing evaporates."

Pentagon officials said they were aware of potential plans for a U.N. resolution, but they didn't know that it would materialize. The reaction showed that Mr. Kerry's off-the-cuff comments Monday—which opened the door to the latest diplomatic scramble by saying the U.S. would be receptive to a plan under which Syria turned over its chemical weapons—wasn't coordinated across the government.

"It was an accident on one hand, and not an accident on the other," said a senior U.S. official.

Amid the move to delay votes in Congress, a bipartisan group of senior senators began reworking the language of a potential resolution on the
A bipartisan group of senators is drafting a new resolution that would postpone a military strike against Syria to give the United Nations time to pursue a diplomatic alternative, but authorize the use of force if those efforts fail. Julian Barnes joins Lunch Break with details. Photo: AP.

use of force, reacting to eroding support among lawmakers and developments at the U.N.

They were drafting an amendment that would call for the U.N. to pass a measure declaring that Syria had used chemical weapons and to remove them by a certain date, which lawmakers were still negotiating, a person familiar with the effort said. If the weapons weren't removed by that deadline, the resolution would authorize the president to launch limited military action.

"This is a way of both keeping the pressure on Syria and on Russia to get rid of the chemical weapons, which is the goal of this whole effort. But, secondly, if they fail, then it would keep the authority to launch a strike," said Sen. Carl Levin (D., Mich.), one of the lawmakers working on the measure.

The bipartisan group included John McCain (R., Ariz.), Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.), Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.), and Bob Menendez (D., N.J.).

Authors of the bill hoped that the changes would build support among lawmakers who were opposed to force, or on the fence, by putting more emphasis on diplomatic efforts. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D., N.D.), who had opposed the initial Senate resolution, said she was open to an alternative.

"While I'm still waiting to learn additional details about this new resolution, if it means we're closer to a diplomatic solution addressing the use of chemical weapons in Syria, that's a good thing," she said.

The rapid turn of events from Moscow to Damascus to Washington followed two weeks of remarkable twists in Mr. Obama's push to follow through on a red line he set last year against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad using chemical weapons.

The U.S. was on the brink of unilateral military strikes against Syria when Mr. Obama made the surprise announcement on Aug. 31 that he would seek the backing of Congress.

Then, on Monday, the White House found itself inadvertently in negotiations with Russia over a diplomatic endgame after Mr. Kerry opened the door to the talks in unscripted comments.

U.S. lawmakers and administration officials remain skeptical any such proposal would work.

Mr. Kerry cautioned Tuesday that the U.S. wouldn't delay action indefinitely for Syria to meet the international community's conditions for giving up its chemical weapons. "We're waiting for that proposal, but we're not waiting for long," he said in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem said in a statement he read to a pro-regime Lebanese TV station, al-Mayadeen, that Damascus would cease production of chemical weapons and disclose the locations of its stockpiles to the United Nations, Russia and others.

France said it would submit a resolution to the U.N. Security Council aimed at forcing Syria to give international inspectors full access to its chemical stockpile and allow for its swift dismantlement.

Russia called the resolution "unacceptable," citing the French proposal's use of a U.N. measure that would potentially authorize the use of force, as well as language that laid blame for using chemical weapons on Syria's government. Russia said it would instead propose a draft declaration backing an initiative to put Syria's chemical weapons under international control.

The White House, although skeptical, embraced the overtures from Damascus and Moscow. Mr. Obama spoke separately with President François Hollande of France and U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron Tuesday.

All three agreed to work "closely together, and in consultation with Russia and China, to explore seriously the viability of the Russian proposal to put all Syrian chemical weapons and related materials fully under international control in order to ensure their verifiable and enforceable destruction," a White House official said.

—Julian E. Barnes, Kristina Peterson, Siobhan Hughes, Sam Dagher and Gregory L. White contributed to this article.

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Obama Holds Fire, Waits on Russia Plan.