

Blind Assault: Trump Strikes Syria

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Global Research, April 14, 2018

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Feeling that some display of force was needed, US president Donald Trump issued orders on Friday to demonstrate some form of muscle, albeit exercised some thousands of miles away. "A short time ago, I ordered the United States Armed Forces to launch precision strikes on targets associated with the chemical weapons capabilities of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad." The United Kingdom and France also mucked in.

What was it all in aid of? There would be no redrawing of borders, no toppling of Assad, and even a possible aggravation of the security tangle that exists in a beleaguered country. It all pointed to staged outrage resulting in indulgent punishment, an act of violent scolding at the end of missiles for a claimed chemical attack by Syrian government forces last weekend that left over 40 people dead. In Trump's words, "These are not the actions of a man. They are the crimes of a monster."

UK Prime Minister Theresa May eschewed notions that the assault was "about intervening in a civil war" let alone initiating some effort at regime change. "We would have preferred an alternative path. But on this occasion there is none."

US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis insisted that the assaults were confined to "the chemical weapons-type targets. We were not out to expand this; we were very precise and proportionate. But at the same time, it was a heavy strike."

Earlier in the week, there had been muttering, concern, and retraction. Trump was giving an enormous heads-up to his Russian counterparts on Wednesday. "Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and 'smart!'" On Thursday, he cooled off. "Never said when an attack on Syria would take place. Could be very soon or not so soon at all!"

This did not stop some in the analyst's arm chair from considering that caution and assessment had prevailed. "The best thing that happened this week," [mused](#) David Ignatius, "was that the policy process paused for a careful consideration of military options."

Ignatius, with feelers deep in the Washington security establishment, praised Trump for his deferral of action to allow for "more study" before claiming that US planners had one fundamental problem: "how to calibrate military action this time so that it sends a clear deterrence message to Syria and Russia, without escalating the conflict."

Certainly, Assad seemed to have been having things his own way. The chemical attack supplied an ideal pretext to assert authority in the name of protecting international norms, a concept that has never sat well with Trump. (Norms, you ask? What norms?)

Such strikes also seemed to be engagement on the cheap, with Trump having [made it clear](#)

earlier this month that he wanted to be rid of the Syrian problem. “I want to get out,” he explained to those in attendance at a news conference with Baltic leaders. “I want to bring our troops back home.” His rationale was not complex: the “primary reason” for retaining a US presence was premised on the defeat of Islamic State militants, which was “almost completed”.

In expressing such views, Trump also reserved a few swipes against allies which have become a diplomatic staple, including the ever problematic Saudi Arabia. “Saudi Arabia is very interested in our decision. And I said, Well, you know, you want us to stay? Maybe you’re going to have to pay.”

This raises a nice point, given Trump’s own words of disapproval directed against Teheran and Moscow in justifying the missile strike. “The nations of the world can be judged by the friends they keep. No nation can succeed in the long run by promoting rogue states, brutal tyrants and murderous dictators.”

Within Congress, there has been automatic approval, even from the Democrats, papered over with concern that taking an issue with such an assault would make them seem quietist. This is the age of macho and they must be seen to play along.

There were, however, qualifying pointers. Nancy Pelosi, House Minority leader, made the apposite observation that, “One night of airstrikes is not a substitute for a clear, comprehensive Syria strategy.” But not wanting to be left off the blood soaked wagon, Democrat Chuck Schumer deemed the airstrikes “appropriate” though “the administration has to be careful about not getting us into a greater and more involved war in Syria.” The response of being too late comes to mind.

The evaluations have yet to come in, be there the number of missiles that found their targets; those shot out of the sky (a [Syrian claim](#) has been made that 13 missiles were shot down by air defences near Al-Kiswa); and the issue of whether substantial infrastructure damage was inflicted. Even the Syrian government’s own chemical arsenal has been deemed by France’s Emmanuel Macron to be “clandestine”, which is always a testing point on how best to assess success.

Britain’s Ministry of Defence was not even waiting, claiming that “initial indications are that the precision of the Storm Shadow weapons and meticulous target planning have resulted in a successful attack.” But this is the platform of illusions, and this presidency, the product of dreams and nightmares, is a continuation of it.

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