

Trump's Art of Confusion in Syria

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***Donald Trump** has the reputation of preferring, always, to negotiate business from a position of strength. While this is hardly unusual, it takes considerably more skill to negotiate from a position of weakness.*

Journalists and think-tank gurus have been watching closely to see how, after his hard beating at the hands of the media and powerful establishment forces inside the United States, he will establish himself—not as businessman but—in the international arena.

The Tomahawk missile strikes on a Syrian air force base have certainly earned him accolades from inveterate enemies, even if his about-face on the Syrian president in the Rose Garden, with the Jordanian king at his side, has confirmed the worst fears about the inherent weakness of a vacillating president.

The unexpected naval attack on the Syrian airbase has revealed two even more important things. **The first is the stubborn weakness of the United States' position in Syria.** I think the best way to describe the situation now is that, instead of cleverly unblocking the political deadlock on Syria, as he may have wished to do, **his move has gravely exacerbated the preexisting fragility of the US.** His equivocation and sudden militarism have boxed him in along with the other two Western powers on US's coattails—England and France.

So far, we have only seen bombast, wild declarations, and one attack against a Syrian base from left field. Days later, he obscenely recounted to Fox Business television that the decision to launch the attack, which killed at least ten civilians in nearby villages and several servicemen, was taken during dessert with visiting Chinese **President Xi Jinping.**



“We had finished dinner. We’re now having dessert. And we had the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you’ve ever seen and President Xi was enjoying it. And I said, ‘Mr. President, let me explain something to you’—this was during dessert—‘we’ve just fired 59 missiles.’”

With the abject failure of his anti-immigration executive orders and Obamacare initiative, on the home front, it seems accurate to conclude that Trump has effectively been brought to his knees by the neocons and liberals alike.

But there is a side to Trump's "negotiating" persona that we should not forget besides his infatuation with strength at everyone else's expense. The second important, then, concerns the tactic he learned in business of throwing his opponent off balance with unpredictable, even irrational actions. It's a classic maneuver in a game like chess. Well executed, it has the potential of abruptly changing the course of a losing streak. But chess is played with rigid rules, and interstate politics is not really a game. It is not even like running a business empire. There is a lot more at stake than can be crunched in numbers, recorded on corporate ledgers, or traded in dollars.

The Madman Theory

It was Henry Kissinger who refined unpredictability—the Madman Theory—into an art. That said, in one of the two main theatres of conflict he was involved in, he had to opt for the B-52s when things failed to go his way at the Paris negotiations—massive bombardments of North Vietnamese cities that exceeded any during WWII and earned him the reputation of a war criminal. The object was to show to what extent the US was prepared to go to secure its "interests" in Southeast Asia. We know the outcome of that conflict.

At the height of the 1973 October War, his other theatre, Israel had barely managed to recover the Golan Heights and Sinai Desert it had been occupying, but only after losing 92 warplanes and almost the entire war. The tide began to turn thanks only to Kissinger's insistence that the US create an "air bridge" for resupply, fierce pressure on the USSR and—we now know—rumors of a threat by Israel to use its nuclear weapons for demonstration. The unprecedented idea of "peace" talks that Kissinger subsequently put on the table during armistice talks, his master stroke, effectively neutralized Egypt. He went on to extract one humiliating concession after another from a groveling Anwar Sadat eager for the US embrace. After this, Israel had a free hand to invade Lebanon in 1978 and again, even more devastatingly, in 1982 without the slightest objection from Sadat. The second invasion, which took the lives of around 24,000 Lebanese citizens, was a watershed in Middle Eastern. Nothing would be the same again for Israel, either, and the whole region has been writhing in despair and anger ever since.

This is the predictable outcome of the "clever" tactic of changing the rules of the game for no higher purpose than raw self-interest. Kissinger considered it the mark of a greatest statesman to keep redefining goals and to have "the strength to contemplate chaos." This, of course, has been the tactic of choice of the neocons, who have been instrumental in the demolition of one country after another in an imperious effort to reshape Middle East according to their own image. As ingenious as it may sound, it carries its own seeds of self-destruction. It's rather easy to point this out in hindsight, but the effectiveness of unpredictability and the air of madness has clearly been wearing off since George W. Bush's 9-11 presidency.

Baffling Contradictions

Instead of allowing Trump to "negotiate" from a stronger position than the one Obama left him with, vis-à-vis a vilified adversary like Russia, the 59 Tomahawk missiles have further weakened his hand. In their aftermath, on April 6, **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson**

immediately enshrined the assault as a presidential moment. “This clearly indicates the president is willing to take decisive action when called for. The use of prohibited chemical weapons, which violates a number of international norms and violates existing agreements, called for this type of... kinetic military response,” he said.

His declaration would have been nothing out of the ordinary had it not been made in the wake of a baffling series of contradictory statements by Trump officials in Washington and at the United Nations. The media had been reporting the all-round confusion and consternation that resulted right up to Trump’s odd change of heart. The strikes came on the heels of two sets of declarations by American officials. Tillerson’s, to the effect that the fate of President Assad will be decided by the people of Syria; and US ambassador to the UN **Nikki Haley**’s broadside against the Syrian president and Russian support for his government. Russian **Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov** accused her of sabotaging the Geneva talks, a charge that has been repeated several times. But she persisted, at one point claiming that “regime change is going to happen.”

But then after the strike, Tillerson emphasized,

“I would not in any way attempt to extrapolate that to a change in our policy or our posture relative to our military activities in Syria today. There’s been no change in that status. But I think it does demonstrate that President Trump is willing to act when governments and actors cross the line ... in the most heinous of ways.”

While falling short of a rectification of Haley’s intemperate diplomacy, this view was reiterated later even by the “Mad Dog” **Defense Secretary Mattis**, who is religiously anti-Iran.

Despite this the escalation continued. The White House spokesman let slip the idea that “barrel bombs,” a militarily undefined concept, may constitute grounds for another US assault, only to clarify later,

“Nothing has changed in our posture. The president retains the option to act in Syria against the Assad regime whenever it is in the national interest, as was determined following that government’s use of chemical weapons against its own citizens.”

Well, is the US government concerned to protect the national interest or the innocent victims? Is the policy ambiguity painted by all those persons by design, part of Trump’s tactic of unpredictability to throw opponents off balance, or a sign of disorientation?

The G7 Summit

☒ Whatever Trump may once have been entertaining, it failed to materialize at the G7 summit into anything usable for pushing Putin around. In fact, the very idea of forcing Russia “into a corner” was expressly rejected there. While his Secretary of State was busy assuring the world that **Bashar al-Assad** will not be part of Syria’s future, Trump appeared singularly incapable of parlaying the impact of the missile strikes, which basically reshuffled the cards, into a tangible gain for use against Russia. Despite the high hopes and

affirmations of a unified stand, not to mention UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's rant about Assad being "toxic" and about the need to sanction both Russia and Syria, the Foreign Minister of the Italy, **Angelino Alfano**, was forced to admit at the end of the summit,

"At the moment there is no consensus on new sanctions as an effective instrument."

All they could muster was enough agreement to have Tillerson relay an ultimatum-like demand to President Putin to turn away from Assad and join the West's own—dreadfully ineffectual—strategy for a political solution. This obviously sidelined the indispensable efforts undertaken by Russia with its Astana initiative, which basically saved the Geneva talks. But the most tangible effect was to leave Tillerson waxing poetic about crimes against innocents "anywhere."

"We rededicate ourselves to holding to account," he announced at Sant'Anna di Stazzema, the scene of a Nazi massacre in Italy, "any and all who commit crimes against the innocents anywhere in the world."

Moralizing about victims is the last resort for the weaker party when the going gets tough. It's cheap and it's the oldest trick in the world, designed to avoid rational argument or a more sensible path in the face of a rout. In a longer statement, he took pains to scorn Russia's "alignment with Iran and Hizbullah." Self-importantly, he urged Putin to abandon his important ally Iran and to waste no time aligning himself rather with the US.

The Moscow Meet

Translated, all this loud talk—in place of quiet but more effective diplomacy—ensured that he had to fly off to Moscow with an emptier hand than he had before the summit and the strikes. This is precisely what he was made to understand before the cameras upon sitting down in his chair opposite Lavrov's team. As he was sitting down, **Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov** fired off that

"primitiveness and loutishness are very characteristic of the current rhetoric coming out of Washington. We shall hope that this does not become the substance of American policy."

Flanked by his own team and facing icy expressions from the Russian side of the table, Tillerson calmly said,

"I look forward to a very open, candid, frank exchange so that we can better define the U.S.-Russian relationship from this point forward."

But Lavrov sternly told him,

"I won't hide the fact that we have a lot of questions, taking into account the extremely ambiguous and sometimes contradictory ideas which have been expressed in Washington across the whole spectrum of bilateral and multilateral affairs. And of course, that's not to mention that apart from the

statements, we observed very recently the extremely worrying actions, when an illegal attack against Syria was undertaken.”



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov shakes hands with U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during a news conference.

Bull’s eye. “Ambiguous” and “contradictory” are Trump’s quintessential style. To underline his words, Lavrov also noted the politically sensitive issue of the vacancies at the State Department. It was as if to say that not only will Russia not be dictated to based on lies and flimsy pretenses, but that at this stage it is keenly interested in conveying a single message to Trump: shape up or else.

Considering the dubious circumstances surrounding the so-called “gas attack,” it may well turn out that the missile strikes will come to haunt Trump for a long time. Worse than sabotaging the Geneva talks, which went dismally bad for the West and Saudi Arabia at the last endless session, they are trickling acid all over Trump’s foreign policy, whether it has been left deliberately inchoate or by accident.

Although Russia and Iran are demanding an independent investigation of the chemical gas incident, the West sought unsuccessfully to pass a modified draft of its original resolution at the Security Council that, once again, implied the guilt of the Syrian government, despite previous objections by other Security Council members and in the absence of even preliminary facts. Should an impartial investigation finally get underway, the tables can easily be turned on the West on its own turf. The whole case against Syria on the use of chemical weapons has been holding together only because of Western solidarity, as if the truth of anything could be established by a simple show of hands. The very idea that the Syrian warplanes’ target might have been a terrorist storage site is ridiculed out of hand as mere Russian and Syrian propaganda. Slowly, however, information is emerging. There are reports based on electronic data indicating that Mohammad Allouch and others on the Saudi- and Turkish-based opposition delegation knew about the “attack” before it happened.

The “Post-Tomahawk Missiles” Period



Post-Tomahawk missile attack is how some media have begun to portray the aftermath of Trump’s change of heart on Syria. Everything has changed. But everything has changed because now both sides are sharply aware that neither international diplomacy nor politics can run very far on personalities and personalized fixations, like the one currently on Assad. Crafting policy and trying to fit reality into it to advance the narrow interests of a single actor, to the exclusion of others, are too transparent. Lavrov has made this abundantly clear to his counterpart in Moscow, unambiguously rejecting the blame being pinned on Syria and, increasingly, Russia for the chemical incident in Khan Shaykhoun.

Before the missile strike, the West (US, U.K and France) had been steadily boxing itself into a prickly corner with its almost uniform insistence that “Assad must go.” But Bashar al-Assad is just the president of a sovereign nation, whose fate no other state can decide. Russia, China and other countries will not permit it. Syria is not Libya in the middle of the North African desert. Historically and geopolitically, it is the cog the undoing of which will bring down the whole edifice, as events in the last six years have clearly indicated.

The Syrian government has already shown readiness to accept the results of a free election, indicating that this is the only means by which divergent political forces will be able to sort out the country's crisis. This happens also to conform to the principle of sovereignty. For Syria, Russia, Iran, China and others both in Arabic-speaking world and elsewhere, the stress has always been on *Syrian* political forces—not Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel on behalf of which the opposition is being accused of negotiating in Geneva. The Wahhabi armies gathered in Syria from over eighty countries are a big problem, because they are represented on the Saudi-based negotiating committee.

In the end, however, it will probably matter little how many trillions of dollars the UK and France have been hoping to attract from their client Wahhabi monarchies in the Persian Gulf by acting as their shields, or how little the US wishes to disturb Israel's plan to dominate the Middle East by getting rid of Syria and Iran and dissolving the Palestinian people into meaningless bandustans perpetually deprived of the most fundamental rights.

The Art of Confident Obstinacy

In a nutshell, the West appears to have found itself inside a box that Israel and Saudi Arabia have unwittingly created for it. The logic of this position is simple: all we can do now is continue to insist that Assad must go. The Western mantra has the same empty air of absolute confidence and conviction that Pope Martin V conveyed to Byzantine Emperor Manuel Palaeologus in 1422, echoing what Clement IV told to Michael Paleaologus even two centuries earlier. This is an old story. Both popes had been hoping to convert the maddingly unconvertible Byzantines to their Western Church's teachings—considered by the Byzantines as too radical and sectarian—before they could expect support and be saved from the Ottomans.

But the Holy See was toothless. Behind its arrogant mask there was nothing but unending chaos in the lands over which it reigned from Rome: the isolated, under-populated former Roman provinces to the northwest, now a backwater. It spread its influence there by disengaging from all other forms of Christianity it refused to tolerate. This hostility toward the "Orient," similar to today's, persisted to the bitter end. Just before Constantinople was finally captured by the technologically superior Ottoman navy, the only words of comfort the Pope would offer the Byzantine Emperor were:

"The Turks will fear to attack you if they know you are united to the rest of Christendom, and Christians will come to your help with more eagerness if they know that you are in full agreement with them."

The greatest bluff is when the choice between submission or death is presented to an opponent by a tiny player.

Fast-forward to Syria in 2017. The Western powers persist in the belief that stubborn insistence is their ticket to salvage what is left of the armed "opposition," which is being systematically wiped out both on the battlefield and through local reconciliation agreements. Behind all this is their obsession with "Iranian influence." They want Russia to help it get rid of that influence. But this obsession is firmly focused on Israel, which the West is still struggling to make permanent seventy years on.

The idea of a "Sunni" alliance with Israel against Iran dates from the Reagan years and later

picked up by Bush after 9-11. But note the recent stirrings among the American, Israeli, Saudi and Jordanian leaders. Last February, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that a plan had been presented, a year earlier, to **Benjamin Netanyahu** for a regional “peace initiative.” It happened at a secret summit meeting with then-US Secretary of State **John Kerry**. Saudi Arabia was in the forefront promoting this idea. Its intense interest in it came to prominent light when Salman al-Ansari, the president of the Saudi American Public Relations Affairs Committee (SAPRAC), founded only in March 2016 as a lobby group in Congress—where Saudi Arabia actively coordinates with Israel on both Syria and Iraq—has called for the kingdom to form a “collaborative alliance” with Israel. The hope is to be done with the “Palestinian issue,” once and for all. Imposing a settlement on the Palestinians backed up by a new “alliance,” goes the argument, would help “stop” Iran.

The Saudi position is now closely mirrored in the new attitude of the Syrian “opposition” toward Israel and Iran. This carries serious repercussions for Syria’s legally recognized sovereignty over the Golan Heights, including the Israeli-occupied parts. Now that Trump is in the White House, an alliance would give Saudi Arabia and Israel a shot at nothing less than *regime change* in Iran, a project in which some Saudi ministers have been special interest.

Original Sins

The Middle East policy of Trump and, more broadly, of the West looks erratic only to someone who does not acknowledge the original sin that has been driving it: the colonization of Palestine. It was the British mandate that facilitated the creation of a state of Israel in the fragile mosaic of the Middle East, the worst possible place for such an experiment. It happened on a land already inhabited by another people whose roots stretch back thousands of years.



Israel is now totally adapted to the Western policy that has emerged from this colossal event and which pays only lip service to the illegality of accelerating Jewish-only settlement. The issue of Palestine seems far away from Syria. but it continues to shape the region. Israel is determined to maintain control, by one means or another, of what is left of historic Palestine. It is heavily invested in Syria because its primary objective is to cement this dominance. It utilizes an extensive network of pressure groups across the United States, and consistently lobbies the US Congress for continued war in Syria. It has carried out regular air strikes, which amount to air cover for armed groups types fighting the government. It continues to coordinate logistically with al-Qaeda and other elements in the Golan area, Damascus and Homs, sharing satellite and other intelligence with them and providing medical treatment for their combatants. Its deep links with al-Qaeda groups have likely been facilitated by the Saudi Kingdom and Qatar,

which routinely negotiates with the Nusra Front on various files.

But the truth of the matter is that Israeli activities with regard to Syria predate this seven-year war. They go back to the 1970s, as newly declassified CIA documents show. Destabilization moved apace since the end of the Clinton administration, after the collapse of the “peace negotiations,” in the course of which Israel consistently refused even to acknowledge the principle of returning the occupied Golan Heights. After Clinton, Bush pursued his own “vision” for the Middle East, Iran and Syria. It was then that Israeli belligerence reached a new crescendo. With Syria forced to end its Arab League-sanctioned presence in Lebanon, Israel seized the chance in 2006 to launch a murderous attack against Lebanon’s civilian infrastructure—another application of the Madman Theory openly espoused by generations of Israeli leaders.

That month-long invasion was, in effect, the Israeli and American response to new overtures in 2004 and 2005 by the Syrian government to restart peace negotiations. But it ended in failure, the second after its momentous 1982 invasion. This failure is what spurred Israel to move on directly to Syria, just when underground Syrian exiles were preparing their own military game plan, well before the outbreak of demonstrations on Syrian streets in late 2010. The country’s economy had been booming. Syria had been self-sufficient in medicine, manufacturing 95% of its medicines products. It exported pharmaceutical and agricultural products, and its fabrics industry rivaled Turkey’s.

Foreign intervention has practically its economy. But its military has stood its ground. Destroying it or demanding that it be shared with Wahhabi armed elements, which are hungering to take over after a peace settlement, would completely pulverize Syria. Any reasoning person has to infer from the fixation on Assad, not to mention the threat of war crimes tribunals even after a peaceful resolution, that the Western goal must be the destruction of Syria. Either that or the West has gone stark raving mad.

As the chaos continues to spread around the Middle East with every failure, trying to “pressure” Russia and Iran into abandon Syria seems to be a recipe for a much wider conflagration, one that could easily become uncontrollable.

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