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ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Trump White House Reacts to Chemical Weapons Use in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Apr 2017

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Introduction

On April 7, the United States retaliated to a Syrian regime Sarin attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, in the Governorate of Idlib, by launching a salvo of 59 cruise missiles against the Shayrat airbase from where the bomber which targeted Khan Shaikhoun had departed. The US retaliation was unprecedented throughout the Syrian conflict, constituting the first time that American forces directly attacked the Assad regime. Previously, Washington was happy to stand idly by as the Syrian conflict—which has already claimed an estimated half a million lives—dragged on, focusing instead on destroying ISIL. This paper asks whether the cruise missile strike was a turning point, signaling a strategic shift in US policy towards Syria.

Washington's reaction to the Sarin attack adopted an increasingly escalatory tone once the pictures showing the ghastly consequences of the strike on Khan Sheikhoun went viral, on the morning of April 4. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer had made clear to the media that the civilized world should not be able to stand aside as the "reprehensible" crime of the Sarin gas attack on Syrian civilians went unpunished. Spicer also made an indirect allusion to a possible imminent retaliation from the US, in the form of a rebuke towards the Obama administration which, according to the White House, had lost credibility by not following up on the "red lines" given to Assad on the use of chemical weapons following the similar bombing of rebel-held East Ghouta in August 2013¹. That earlier chemical attack had led to the deaths of 1,300 Syrian civilians in the opposition stronghold.

Speaking alongside King Abdullah II of Jordan on the day after the Khan Sheikhoun attack, President Trump elaborated that the move to use nerve agents by the Assad regime had "crossed a lot of lines for me. When you kill innocent children, innocent babies -- babies, little babies -- with a chemical gas that is so lethal -- people were shocked to hear what gas it was -- that crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line"². The President then added that his attitude towards the Syrian conflict had

¹ "Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Sean Spicer," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, April 04, 2017, at:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/04/press-gaggle-press-secretary-sean-spicer-442017>

² See, "Remarks by President Trump and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan in Joint Press Conference", The White House Office of the Press Secretary, April 5, 2017, at:

already begun to change “very much”, asserting that a number of other attacks by Assad’s forces had made use of chemical weapons agents in the weeks leading up to the Khan Sheikhoun attack.

Trump convened a meeting of his national security advisers immediately after his joint press conference with King Abdullah II to discuss the options available to respond to the Sarin attack. American media have reported on the president’s stated desire to appear more decisive than Obama, and there would be obvious domestic and foreign political benefits to being able to use force, without involving the US in a direct and prolonged military conflict. Trump was also keen not to come into a direct conflict with Assad’s backers, and in particular, Russia. Another aim of any action by Washington was to make it clear that it would not tolerate the use of chemical weapons by any party in the Syrian conflict—this also served the purpose of sending a tacit signal that it would be more tolerant of the use of other types of weapons.

Trump’s military advisers offered him three different options while the president was en route to a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. All three of these plans had been previously prepared under the previous Obama administration. Deliberations within the Trump team helped narrow these to the possibility of attacking several Syrian military bases, or limiting the strikes simply to a strike on the Shayrat airbase used by the airplanes which bombed Khan Sheikhoun. By insisting on this limited, direct approach, the US president was able to justify his action on April 7 as “proportional” and justified under international norms³. A US military liaison officer contacted his Russian counterpart in Amman, Jordan, an hour before the retaliatory strike was due to begin, allowing Russia to avoid casualties and losses to its assets.

Trump gave the final order to begin the attack while having dinner with President Xi, on Thursday evening, Eastern US Time. The first Tomahawk missiles to hit the Shayrat base landed early Friday, at 03:45 Damascus time. Launched from two US naval destroyers stationed in the Eastern Mediterranean, the missiles were targeted at the

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/05/remarks-president-trump-and-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-jordan-joint>

³ John Walcott and Steve Holland, “Trump ordered Syrian air strike before dinner with Xi”, *Reuters*, April 8, 2017, available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-trump-idUSKBN1792W4?il=0>

airstrip, hangars, fueling stations and ammunition stockpiles, as well as the air defense systems on the base⁴.

Shifting Strategies?

The US cruise missile strike on a regime airbase in Syria has raised expectations about the possibility of a major strategic shift in Washington's approach to Syria. This follows a period when the Obama administration had avoided becoming directly embroiled in the conflict, while simultaneously seeking to ensure that there was a balance of powers between the regime and its opponents. The approach taken by the previous US administration left a power vacuum in Syria which groups such as ISIL were all too happy to fill. Combined with US reluctance to get involved, these factors allowed for Russian direct involvement in the fighting, allowing them to work tirelessly to prevent the ouster of Assad. Trump himself was not, historically, more interventionist than Obama. Indeed, he had criticized Obama's use of the "red line" language with regards to the 2013 chemical weapons attack, enjoining Obama not to use force to retaliate against the strike on East Ghouta—the victims of which did not merit any sympathy from the now-president⁵. Even as a candidate in the presidential elections, Trump had criticized his competitor Hilary Clinton's fixation on Assad, something which, he said, diverted attention away from the fight against ISIL. Trump also feared that a direct conflict with Assad would risk a confrontation with Russia.

Trump's declared position of non-interference remained intact even after he arrived in the White House. In fact, a few short days before the Sarin attack on Khan Sheikhoun, his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, announced during a visit to Ankara that Assad's fate would be decided by the Syrian people, seemingly echoing the refrain from Moscow

⁴ Dan Lamothe, Missy Ryan and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "U.S. strikes Syrian military airfield in first direct assault on Bashar al-Assad's government," *The Washington Post*, April 7, 2017, at:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-weighing-military-options-following-chemical-weapons-attack-in-syria/2017/04/06/0c59603a-1ae8-11e7-9887-1a5314b56a08_story.html

⁵ Barbara Starr and Jeremy Diamond, "Trump launches military strike against Syria," *CNN*, April 7, 2017, at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/06/politics/donald-trump-syria-military/>

and Tehran⁶. At the time, Nikki Haley, Washington's ambassador to the United Nations, made it explicitly clear that the ouster of Assad from power was "no longer a priority" for the US. On the very day of the attack on Khan Sheikhoun, Sean Spicer had even described the continuation of Assad in power as a "political reality" which the White House accepted. Steve Bannon, a continuing force in the Trump White House, even toyed with the idea of involving Assad in the battle against ISIL. So how can the American decision to strike Assad's military infrastructure on April 7 be understood in the light of all of this evidence that the White House is prepared to accommodate Assad as president of Syria?

Reasons behind the Strike

It appears that the Trump Administration wanted to make it very clear to the Syrian regime that there were certain red lines which it would uphold in Syria and that, unlike its predecessors, it had the capacity and willingness to act—alone if need be—to enforce its limits. Equally, however, the Trump administration also clearly wants to avoid being dragged into the Syrian conflict directly. In this regard, there has been no substantial shift in the American approach to the conflict in Syria. Recent statements by Rex Tillerson add further credence to the idea that the American strike on an Assad regime target was meant to be an act of deliberate retaliation, orchestrated to strike exactly at the airbase from which the Sarin-loaded planes flew off. It was not, Tillerson made clear, the prelude to a wider military intervention, and the Secretary of State also made clear that his country's priority remained the defeat and destruction of ISIL⁷.

Setting aside the idea that Trump was motivated to act in Syria because of his distress at the sight of young children killed by Sarin, there are a number of other factors which could explain what drove the Americans to strike at the Assad regime. The first such reason is to do with Trump's decreasing popularity, and his continued failure to secure backing on a number of domestic political issues, chiefly the question of healthcare reform, in addition to the impression of outright anarchy within his staff. In other words, the attack on the Shayrat base was a deft move for Trump to divert attention

⁶ "Remarks of Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu," U.S. Department of State, March 30, 2017, at:

<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269318.htm>

⁷ *ibid*

from his domestic troubles, and to dismiss some of the cloud of suspicion surrounding his election team's connections with Russia. With two separate, ongoing investigations into the Trump campaign's relations with Russia during the period he was facing off against Hilary Clinton, a military strike which angers Moscow could be a convenient means of undermining suggestions of such ties.

Another use of the strike could be to send an indirect message to other emerging powers which are presently at odds with the US, such as Iran and North Korea, notifying them that the era of American non-interference under Obama is finally over, and that under Trump, the US is prepared to back up its international positions with action. Intentionally or otherwise, it was instructive that Trump opted to launch the strike as he was dining with the Chinese head of state, a major backer of North Korea.

In addition, the strike on April 7 allows the US to reclaim, unambiguously, its place on the negotiating table with respect to Syria. This follows a period of several months at the end of the Obama presidency, when the US had effectively withdrawn itself from international efforts to end the Syrian crisis, handing over leadership to Russia and Turkey, who convened a new set of peace negotiations in the Kazakh capital, Astana.

Finally, the move by Trump to strike at the Shayrat airbase was a powerful way to signal to the regime in Damascus that there remained red lines which it could not cross with regards to the use of violence against its own civilians. This, of course, suggests implicitly that the use by the regime of more crude forms of violence—however vicious—is somehow more tolerable to the US administration than the use of chemical weapons.

None of the aforementioned factors are truly born out of a concern for the human suffering of Syrian civilians, whose blood will continue to be spilled by the Assad regime, its foreign allies and their proxy militia using "conventional means". In the meantime, the Trump administration will maintain the ban on entry of Syrian refugees into the US while paying lip service to the idea of creating "safety zones" within Syrian territory.

Conclusion

The Trump White House still lacks a coherent vision of how to deal with the Syrian conflict. While inertia means that it will continue the same Obama-era focus on combatting ISIL, including support for the mainly Kurdish "Syrian Democratic Forces",

there is one important novelty in this latest move. It demonstrates clearly that the US has shed its previous misgivings, destroying the psychological barrier which had prevented it from attacking the Assad regime for fear of what the retaliation from his allies might prove to be. Today, the White House is unmistakably enmeshed in the Syrian conflict, with the Secretary of State leaving no room for doubt that the future steps taken by the US would be defined by how the Assad regime and its allies react. The previous position by the Trump White House, which expressed itself only days before the Sarin attack on Khan Sheikhoun as a desire to free America from the Syrian conflict and to accept Assad's position as a *fait accompli*, has now been cast aside. The reason for this transformation is rooted in the boundless cruelty of Assad and his willingness to act vengefully against his own people.