

The Syrian Civil War: Analysis of Recent Developments

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On April 7, 2018 an alleged chemical weapons attack took place in Douma, Syria in which 70 people were killed.¹ Russia and the Syrian government denied using chemical weapons fight against rebels in Eastern Ghouta, Syria and its ally Russia deny any chemical attack took place - with Russia calling it a "staged thing". The rebel Syria Civil Defense Force says more than 40 people were killed and entire families were gassed to death in the attack, which drew global outrage. President Trump blasted "that animal" Syrian President Bashar Assad and said blame also fell on Russia and Iran for supporting his regime. Prime Minister Theresa said there was "unmistakable evidence" Syria was behind the attack. "No other group could have carried this out," May said. A year ago, Syria was accused of using sarin gas in an attack in the town of Khan Shaykhun. An investigation by the U.N. and OPCW concluded the Syrian air force had used the gas in its attack, which killed almost 100.²

Assad's position in the Syrian civil war is unassailable. He is supported by Iranian-back fighters as well as the Russian air force, has cemented his control over most of the western, more heavily populated, part of the country. Rebels and jihadist insurgents are largely contained to two areas along Syria's northern and southern borders.³

Syria's war, now in its eighth year, has seen the opposition make gains up until Russia entered the war in support of Assad in 2015. Since, Russia and Iran's support helped tilt the balance of power in favor of Assad's government.

In less than three years, the Syrian government has regained control of the majority of Syria, with opposition groups now restricted to the northern part of the country. The civil war has further shattered Syria, and international powers including the United States, Russia, Turkey, Israel and Iran have intervened to fight for their interests. Iran and Russia have expanded their military reach. Russia has a presence on most Syrian military bases, and its air force has been essential to Assad's recent advances. Iran has used the chaos of war to strengthen its proxies to deter and possibly confront Israel. The United States still has about 2,000 troops in eastern Syria working with a Kurdish-led militia to fight the jihadists of the Islamic State. But with the militants now nearly defeated, American officials have started thinking about when to withdraw. Before the suspected chemical weapons attack in Douma, President Trump had said he wanted to bring them home soon.

While the United States called for Syrian president Assad to leave power early in the conflict and gave cash and arms to the rebels who sought to overthrow him, it has more recently resigned itself to his remaining in power. That was partly because it feared the vacuum that could emerge if Assad's regime collapsed, and partly because it was clear that Russia and Iran were willing to invest more in winning than the United States was.

Meanwhile, the Syrian conflict has brought about immense death and destruction to the country. The Assad regime has a hateful record of using chemical weapons against its own people.

Chemical weapons use has become an all too regular weapon of war in the Syrian conflict.⁴ More than half a million Syrians have been killed over the seven year civil war. There have been 34 chemical attacks allegedly launched by Syrian President Assad in his war against armed opposition groups in the country.⁵

Syria's civil war has created an immense international refugee crisis. An estimated 11 million Syrians have fled their homes and some 13.5 million need humanitarian assistance within the country. Among those escaping the conflict, the majority have sought refuge in neighboring countries or within Syria itself. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 4.8 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, and 6.6 million are internally displaced within Syria. Meanwhile about one million have requested asylum to Europe. Germany, with more than 300,000 cumulated applications, and Sweden with 100,000, are EU's top receiving countries⁶

The chemical attack in Douma, if confirmed, would be the largest of its kind in Syria since April last year, when sarin or a sarin-like substance was dropped on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, killing at least 85 people. In April 2016, the United States had launched a retaliatory missile attack against a Syrian airbase from where it alleged the attack had been launched.⁷ But the pinpoint strike did not deter Assad and despite his firm denials, there is an abundance of evidence that Syrian forces, with Russian connivance, have been using chemical weapons against their own people on a regular basis ever since.⁸

Today, Russia, the main powerbroker in the region, is allied with Syrian President Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah in the Syrian civil war. Shi'ite-dominated Iran is Assad's main regional ally and has provided military and economic support for his conflict with a range of Sunni Muslim rebel and militant groups. Iran denies having any conventional armed forces in Syria but has acknowledged military advisers and volunteers from the revolutionary Guards Corps are there to help Assad's forces. President Assad, backed by Moscow and Tehran, cleared out the last rebel strongholds in the Eastern Ghouta area.

Today, the US, France and Britain believe that there is a circumstantial case that Syria and its Russian and Iranian partners bear direct responsibility for the incident. Syria's government and Russia have denied a chemical attack took place in Douma.

The War of Words

On April 8, 2018 US President Donald Trump accused Syrian regime leader Bashar Assad of carrying out the attack. He accused Iran and Russia of responsibility for supporting the Assad regime and said there would be a "big price" to pay. Earlier this week, Trump said his administration was working on a response to the suspected chemical attack, including military options. On April 9, 2018, he said a decision would come in 24 to 48 hours. Meanwhile, Russia's ambassador to Lebanon said on April 10, 2018 that Russia would confront a U.S. strike on Syria by shooting down missiles and striking their launchpads or points of origin.

On April 10, 2018 the UN Security Council failed to approve moves to set up an inquiry into the alleged attack on Douma.

As permanent members of the council, Russia and the US vetoed each other's proposals to set up independent investigations. The US-drafted resolution would have allowed investigators to apportion blame for the suspected attack, while Russia's version would have left that to the Security Council. The votes on April 10, 2018 came amid an escalating war of words between the US and Russia and a looming threat of Western military action following the Douma incident.

President Trump said on April 11, 2018 that missiles “will be coming” in response to the attack and lambasted Moscow for standing by Syrian President Assad. He further stated on April 12, 2018 that he expected to make decisions “fairly soon” on how to deal with Syria, where he has threatened missile strikes in response to a suspected poison gas attack, as a Russian envoy voiced fears of wider conflict between Washington and Moscow.

Meanwhile, meanwhile, the fallout from the attack has sparked a war of words on who was responsible and what the response should be.

Prime minister May said that the need for a response as urgent and described the apparent chemical attack as "abhorrent" and a "shocking, barbaric act" The UK and its allies were looking at ways to "prevent and deter" the use of chemical weapons, she added. May earlier described the use of chemical weapons as a "humanitarian catastrophe" that "cannot go unchallenged".

On April 11, 2018, May pointed the finger at the Assad government, and promised to ensure that those responsible were “held to account”.

On April 10, 2018 President Macron said that if military action was taken, it would target "the regime's chemical capabilities", and not the forces of its allies, Russia or Iran. He said that he did "not want an escalation" and that a decision would be made in the coming days.

The information that France had showed "chemical weapons were indeed used and that the regime could clearly be held responsible", President Macron added.

On Twitter, President Trump responded to an April 11, 2018 warning from Alexander Zasytkin, Moscow's ambassador to Lebanon, that missiles would be shot down and their launch sites targeted if they threatened the lives of Russian personnel.

The United States and Russia further escalated a war of words over Syria on April 11, 2018, with President Trump warning that U.S. airstrikes “will be coming” despite Russia’s pledge to shoot down American missiles aimed at its ally.

“Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and ‘smart!’ Trump wrote on Twitter. President Trump’s tweet was the first explicit U.S. statement that a military response is in the offing. “You shouldn’t be partners with a Gas Killing Animal who kills his people and enjoys it!” Trump wrote, in one of his most direct criticisms of Russia. U.S. President Donald Trump warned on April 11, 2018 that missiles “will be coming” in response to the toxic gas assault on April 7 that killed dozens of people in Douma, a town near Damascus which had been held by rebels until this month.

Russia says there is no evidence of a chemical attack in Douma and has warned the United States and its allies against carrying out any military strike.⁹

In a tweet on April 11, 2018, Trump asserted that “our relationship with Russia is worse now than it has ever been, and that includes the Cold War.” He further stated that: “Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria,” he wrote. “Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and ‘smart!’ You shouldn’t be partners with a Gas Killing Animal who kills his people and enjoys it!”

As expected, Russia, Syria and its other main backer Iran have said reports of the Douma attack were fabricated by rebels and rescue workers and have accused the United States of seeking to use it as a pretext to attack the Syrian government. Syria and Russia have insisted that no chemical attack occurred and that only the opposition groups they call “terrorists” possess chemical weapons.

Both Syria and Russia have said reports of the attack were fabricated by rebels and rescue workers in the town and have accused the U.S. of seeking to use it as a pretext to attack the government. Russia warns that jumping to any conclusions about a reported chemical attack near the Syrian capital of Damascus without confirmed information would be wrong and dangerous as there is no investigation underway into the alleged incident. In addition, Russia has said that it has warned the US of "grave repercussions" if it attacks Syria over claims of a chemical weapons attack.

The Syrian conflict has become very complicated as the country has also become a battleground for Iranian fight with Israel. The Syrian conflict now involves several regional powers with diverse agendas. On April 9, 2018 Israel committed an airstrike on Syrian air base that Iran was constructing. Seven members of the Iranian military were among at least 14 people reported killed in the strike, and Iran has threatened Israel with retaliation.

The strike was the most significant direct attack of its kind and the Iranians were expected to act in response. On April 10, 2018 Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said Israel would not accept an Iranian “chokehold” in Syria and appeared to call on Russia to prevent Iran from further digging itself into the region.

Israeli officials have repeatedly warned against Iran’s destabilizing activities in Syria and defined its continued presence there as a “red line,” which Jerusalem is prepared to act against militarily.

Israel’s concern is that Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based terror group, will use Syria’s border to threaten Israel and stage attacks against Israeli civilians and troops.

Israel fears that this will leave Iran open to set up positions along the border of the Golan Heights or deeper inside Syria.

Israel has previously carried out at least one explicitly acknowledged attack on the Tiyas base, which it said was home to an Iranian drone program.

Prime Minister Netanyahu said on April 9, 2018 that Israel will hit anyone who intends to harm the country.

“We have one clear and simple rule and we seek to express it constantly: if someone tries to attack you – rise up and attack him. We will not allow, here on the Gaza border, them to hurt us. We will hurt them,” he said in a speech in the Gaza border town of Siderot. “Security in the present is a necessary condition for security in the future and what we have here today is a powerful expression for our future security,” Netanyahu said, apparently referring to the dual threats Israel faces in the north and in the south.

On April 11, 2018, a top official from Iran, toured eastern Ghouta and vowed to stand by Syria in the face of “any foreign aggression”. “Syria’s enemies are angry because of its military advances against terrorist groups,” stated Ali Akbar Velayati, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s top adviser. He said on April 11, 2018 that Tehran would support Damascus against any foreign aggression, in an apparent response to President Donald Trump’s comments about a possible military strike on Syria.

“We will stand by Syria’s government against any foreign aggression ... Iran backs Syria in its fight against America and the Zionist Regime (Israel),” Ali Akbar Velayati declared during his visit to eastern Ghouta in Syria.

Velayati stated on April 10, 2018 that the strike would “not remain without response...Syria’s enemies are angry because of its military advances against terrorist groups”

The Syrian conflict is the theatre of a proxy war between the US and Russia. The chances of a direct confrontation are very negligible. It isn’t exactly the beginning of a new Cold War between the US and Russia. Notwithstanding the claims of President Trump, the US and its allies aren’t opening a war front with Russia and its ally Iran in the Syrian territory.

However, the US, Britain France, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Israel will likely take further measures to contain Russian influence in the region. Therefore, an actual war in the region is very unlikely.

Recently, United States relations with Russia have deteriorated significantly. President Trump’s comments about poor relations with Russia are echoed what the Russian foreign minister, Sergey. Lavrov, said recently in response to the wave of diplomatic expulsions of Russians from the United States and other countries. The expulsions were a coordinated response to the poisoning in Britain of a former Russian spy and his daughter. The tough talk on Russia, in response to the suspected chemical attack in Syria, is a new tone for President Trump, who has long pushed for improved relations with Russia. Recently, President Trump praised President. Putin for his re-election and even invited him to the White House. Russia has been a dominant theme during President Trump’s entire presidency, particularly with the appointment of Mueller to investigate Russia’s meddling in the 2016 campaign and possible coordination with his associates. President Trump would like to distract American public opinion from his many domestic problems and acting tough and decisive on Syria makes a lot of political sense. Plus, there is public anger over Russia’s support of Assad which can be galvanizes the possibility for a wider international response. But allies are more apt to make diplomatic threats than do anything on Syria. There doesn’t seem to be widespread agreement among the allies for a war. To gather together a wider international coalition, President Trump would need to put together a strategy

on Syria. However, that isn't happening yet. Allies like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Jordan aren't willing to contribute much for the President Trump strategy, if it is ever materialized in the first place. Probably, "all options are on the table" rhetoric would just mean another limited strike in Syria.

President Trump appeared to backtrack on April 12, 2018 when he said that:

"Never said when an attack on Syria would take place. Could be very soon or not so soon at all!" Later, he said: "We're having a number of meetings today, we'll see what happens. Now we have to make some...decisions, so they'll be made fairly soon."

French President Emmanuel Macron said France had proof the Syrian government carried out the Douma attack with chemical weapons but did not give further details.¹⁰

Later, the move toward military action slowed as the Trump administration sought to coordinate with allies, including France and Britain. Since the Douma incident the US, Britain and France are looking into the prospect of coordinated Western military action in Syria. A joint operation takes longer to organize. Most importantly, the United States desired to get allies on board. Prime Minister May of Britain was ready to join a military operation. She has ordered British submarines to move within missile range of Syria. President Macron has made clear that he is determined to participate in a strike as well. France has warplanes armed with cruise missiles in nearby Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

By April 13, 2018 Western powers continued to weigh their options over possible strikes against Syria's regime as pressure built to avoid an escalation following a warning from Russia that military action could lead to "war".

During his meeting with Trump and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joe Dunford, Mattis pushed for more evidence of the Assad regime's culpability for the attack, to bolster the case for air strikes, The New York Times reported.¹¹

The United States and its ally France assailed Syria's Bashar al-Assad at the United Nations on April 13, 2018 for using chemical weapons as the prospect of U.S.-led military action that could lead to confrontation with Russia hung over the Middle East.

As chemical weapons experts arrived in Syria to investigate a suspected poison gas attack by government forces, international diplomacy was in high gear to head off an escalation, though accusations flew thick and fast between Washington and its allies, and Russia, Assad's main backer.¹²

Meanwhile, Russia stepped up rhetoric over Douma 'chemical attack' Russia, which has stonewalled diplomatic efforts at the UN Security Council, has vehemently denied a chemical attack took place and accused the West of seeking an excuse for military action.

Russia warned the United States on April 13, 2018 that launching air strikes in response to a suspected chemical attack in Syria could spark a war between the two countries. Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich criticized President Trump's rhetoric.

On April 13, 2018 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said a reported chemical attack in Syria was staged by foreign agents. He said that there was "irrefutable evidence" that the attack was staged as part of a "Russophobic campaign" led by one country, which he did not name.

Russia's defense ministry, said: "We have evidence that proves Britain was directly involved in organizing this provocation."¹³ The United States Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said Washington estimated Assad's forces had used chemical weapons at least 50 times during the seven-year-long Syrian conflict. She said that: "All nations and all people will be harmed if we allow Assad to normalize the use of chemical weapons."¹⁴

The French ambassador to the United Nations, Francois Delattre, told the Security Council that the Syrian government's decision to use chemical weapons again meant they had "reached a point of no return". Britain's U.N. Ambassador Karen Pierce meanwhile rejected a charge by a Russian defense ministry spokesman that Britain was involved in staging a fake chemical weapons attack in Douma.

British Prime Minister Theresa May won backing from her senior ministers on April 12, 2018 to take unspecified action with the United States and France to deter further use of chemical weapons by Syria.

Meanwhile, a first team of experts from the global Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons arrived in Syria. The investigators, who are only mandated to determine if chemical weapons were used and not who used them, were expected to start their investigations into the Douma incident on Saturday, the Netherlands-based agency said. On April 13, 2018 U.N. war crimes investigators condemned the suspected use of chemical weapons in Douma and called for evidence to be preserved with a view to future prosecutions.¹⁵

Russia's ambassador to the UN said during the April 13, 2018 session that its specialists found no traces of "toxic substance use" in Douma, the largest town in the Eastern Ghouta region near Syria's capital Damascus, after a suspected chemical attack hit the area.

Vassily Nebenzia said Russia had "clear evidence" that the incident was staged, referring to the suspected chemical attack that killed at least 85 people in Douma on April 7.

The comments came as Igor Konashenkov, Russia's defense ministry spokesman, said in a televised appearance that his country had "evidence" the UK was involved in organizing the chemical attack in Douma.

"We have evidence that proves Britain was directly involved in organizing this provocation," he said.

Speaking at the April 13, 2018 meeting in New York, Nebenzia said the US "threat" to use force in Syria constituted a breach of international law.

He described the actions of the US as "reckless", accusing it of infringing on the sovereignty of states by threatening military action and of being "unworthy" of a permanent seat on the Security Council.

"The sole thing they [the US, France and the United Kingdom] have an interest in is to oust the Syrian government ... and contain the Russian Federation," Nebenzia said.

The meeting was one of several emergency Security Council sessions convened on Syria to discuss the suspected chemical attack.

President Donald Trump had warned that the US might take military action in Syria in response to the alleged chemical attack.

Russia had previously said it would respond to any US missiles fired in Syria by shooting them down and targeting their launch sites.

In her speech, Nikki Haley, United States ambassador to the UN, said the Trump administration believes Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces used chemical weapons at least 50 times during the seven-year conflict.

"Our president has not yet made a decision about possible action in Syria. But should the United States and our allies decide to act in Syria, it will be in defense of a principle on which we all agree," she said referring to US allies.

"All nations and all people will be harmed if we allow Assad to normalize the use of chemical weapons."

Shortly before the UN meeting convened, Haley told reporters that the US, UK and France had "analyzed" the situation and concluded that a chemical attack did take place on Douma.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis said on April 13, 2018 that the American government was confident that Syrian forces had used chlorine in the deadly attack on civilians on April 7, 2018 in Douma but did not provide evidence.

The White House has cited photographs and videos from Douma to make the case and has dismissed alternative explanations from the Syrian and Russian governments. It said that the nerve agent sarin may have been used in addition to chlorine.

Chlorine, as a commercially available substance, was not included in the 2013 agreement. But the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria joined as part of the 2013 deal, prohibits the use of any chemical as a weapon.

The Strikes and its Aftermath

On April 14, 2018 the United States, UK and French forces launched missile attacks on three sites allegedly linked to the production of chemical weapons near Damascus, as well as two military bases further north.

American officials and their European allies were careful to characterize the attack as a one-off strike designed to deter Assad from using chemical weapons again. America's defense secretary, Jim Mattis, who urged caution in the lead-up to the attack, said: "We were not out to expand this; we were very precise and proportionate." No more attacks are planned, said Mattis, unless Assad

uses chemical weapons again. “This is not about intervening in a civil war. It is not about regime change,” said May, Britain’s prime minister.

Pentagon officials said the missiles first struck a scientific research center near Damascus that develops, produces and tests chemical and biological weapons. The other two facilities targeted in the strikes are located west of the city of Homs (see map). One produces sarin gas and the other is part of a military command post, the officials said. Syrian state television claimed some of the missiles were shot down by the government’s air defense systems. Still, “a large part of [Syria’s] chemical arsenal has been destroyed,” Jean-Yves Le Drian, France’s foreign minister, told French television.

The attack was twice as big as one launched by America last year, which failed to deter Assad. The earlier strike, involving 59 cruise missiles, was in response to a chemical attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province. The target, a Syrian air base, was back operating a day later and Assad has launched several suspected chemical attacks since then.

Whether or not Assad is deterred by the latest strike—and warnings of more to come if he continues gassing his people—it will do little to alter the course of Syria’s civil war. Aided by Iran and Russia, Assad has been winning for some time. Rebels control only a few pockets of territory and are largely cut off from international support. As the missiles hit their targets and anti-aircraft guns lit up the sky, hundreds of people took to the streets of Damascus to protest the strike. After the bombing stopped the Syrian presidency posted on Twitter a video of Assad, dressed in suit and tie, confidently strolling into work. “The morning of resilience,” read the caption beneath.

When announcing the attack, President Trump tried to shame Iran and Russia into stopping Assad from using poison gas again. “To Iran and to Russia I ask: What kind of a nation wants to be associated with the mass murder of innocent men, women and children?” said Trump. Russia, in turn, threatened to respond. “We warned that such actions will not be left without consequences,” said Antonov, the ambassador to the United States, in a statement. But neither Russia nor Iran appears to have lost men or military kit in the strike. American and French officials say they warned Russia in advance.

Trump’s desire to make good on his promise to punish the “crimes of a monster” appear to have stalled his plans to pull America out of Syria. About 2,000 American troops are based in the north-east of the country, where they fight alongside a Kurdish-led force against what is left of the Islamic State jihadist group. “We look forward to the day when we can bring our warriors home,” said Trump, while announcing the attack. But his advisers want America to stay in Syria. For this administration, punishing Assad is likely to prove easier than devising a coherent Syria policy.¹⁶

Defense Department officials said on April 14, 2018 that American-led strikes against Syria had taken out the “heart” of President Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons¹⁷ President Trump and Pentagon leaders hailed as a success.

“A perfectly executed strike last night,” Trump wrote on Twitter. “Thank you to France and the United Kingdom for their wisdom and the power of their fine Military. Could not have had a better result. Mission Accomplished!”

The United States is “locked and loaded” to strike again if Assad is believed to renew his use of chemical weapons, Haley, the American ambassador to the United Nations, told the Security Council on April 14, 2018 at an emergency meeting called by Russia.

“We are confident that we have crippled Syria’s chemical weapons program. We are prepared to sustain this pressure, if the Syrian regime is foolish enough to test our will,” Haley said

“No amount of American blood or treasure can produce lasting peace and security in the Middle East,” President Trump said in his statement announcing the airstrikes. “It’s a troubled place. We will try to make it better, but it is a troubled place.” She said that Russia had failed to abide by a 2013 promise to ensure that Syria got rid of its chemical weapons stockpiles.

“While Russia was busy protecting the regime, Assad took notice,” she said. “The regime knew that it could act with impunity, and it did.”

The Pentagon provided no immediate evidence that the sites that were struck were producing substances covered by the 2013 agreement between Russia and the United States to eliminate Syria’s chemical arms.

The strikes were limited, with an eye toward making sure they did not draw retaliation from Russia and Iran and set off a wider conflict.

In a statement, the British government said that Prime Minister May, President Macron of France and Trump had agreed in separate phone calls that the military strikes had been a success, “sending a clear message that the use of chemical weapons can never become normalized.”

But the limited nature of the strikes left some members of Congress and other observers underwhelmed.

“I fear that when the dust settles, this strike will be seen as a weak military response and Assad will have paid a small price for using chemical weapons yet again,” Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina and a member of the Armed Services Committee, said in a statement.

There were no signs of immediate retaliation, suggesting that Assad and his allies planned to weather the storm, perhaps in the belief that the United States was mostly concerned with avoiding deeper involvement.

In announcing the strikes on April 13, 2018 Trump suggested that more American action could be on the way. “We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents,” Trump said. Other officials, however, said the United States and its allies were done for now.

The April 14, 2018 strikes were more extensive than those President Trump launched last year, involving nearly double the number of missiles. President Trump made it clear when

announcing the strikes that he does not consider it the job of the United States to fix problems in the Middle East. However, he did speak of working closely with American allies in the region such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Qatar to ensure that Iran did not capitalize on the defeat of the Islamic State.¹⁸

The surgical strike had been executed perfectly, President Trump said on April 14, 2018. “Mission Accomplished!” he declared on Twitter.¹⁹

That’s a phrase presidents and politicians have studiously avoided since President George W. Bush’s ill-fated aircraft carrier visit prematurely declaring success in the Iraq war. But aside from the curious choice of words, it raised the essential question regarding Syria going beyond the one-time strike: What exactly is the mission?

For most of Trump’s presidency, it has been to defeat the Islamic State and then get out. But what Trump outlined in his televised speech to the nation on April 13, 2018 was something more complicated. He promised a sustained campaign to stop Syria’s government from again using chemical weapons on its own people, while also emphasizing the limits of America’s ability or willingness to do more to stop the broader bloodletting that has devastated that country for seven years.

By most accounts, the strike essentially left in place the status quo on the ground. It did little if anything to weaken Assad beyond any chemical weapons stores it destroyed, leaving him to continue waging war on his own people through conventional means. It did nothing to exact the “big price” Trump promised to impose on Russia and Iran for enabling Assad’s chemical attacks.

Trump may have opted for the more cautious approach urged by Defense Secretary Mattis instead of a more crippling attack that may have been favored by his new national security adviser, Bolton, but he did not settle the larger question.

Mattis described the strike as an effort to stop Assad from using chemical weapons but noted that it was not intended to achieve broader goals.²⁰ Notwithstanding President Trump’s declarations, the strikes failed to inflict any severe damage on Syrian military infrastructure. In this sense, the US, UK and French strikes were no different from the military action in April 2017. The difference this year was that Washington blamed not only the Syrian regime for the chemical attack but also its patron, Moscow. This gave the situation more tension, increasing speculations about a direct clash between the US and Russia.

To Assad, it is clear that the US doesn’t have any strategy to resolve the Syrian conflict and is not even able to employ an effective mechanism to preclude the use of chemical weapons.

Russia understood that the strikes on Syria are not really in retribution for the alleged use of chemical weapons in Douma and definitely not an attempt to influence the outcome of the Syrian conflict. It was simply a demonstration of force. The Trump administration would have to lead a strategic alliance to change the direction of the war.²¹

President Assad is unlikely to relent in his determination to consolidate his hold on the country. On its own, military force is meaningless. It must be part of a political strategy and in this case

the strategy is about bigger issues than Syria itself and only offers a long-shot hope for the Syrian population. Prof Michael Clarke has correctly argued that

“Using military force is never easy, but it can only be effective if it is part of a coherent and realistic political strategy”.²²

The main goal of the attack was supposedly the prevention of any further use of chemical weapons. The US, UK and France carefully avoided hitting Russian and Iranian targets. As expected, the limited strike in Syria was mostly symbolic in nature. The primary reason for the strikes was not Syria itself but domestic politics in the United States. President Trump wanted to appear as being principled and tough on the issue of chemical weapons use. Recall that the previous April 2017 strikes by cruise missiles was limited and largely ineffective. Then the strike failed to weaken Assad’s capabilities. Seemingly, these limited strikes will be ineffective also. It is not clear what the Trump administration’s broader Syria strategy really is. It is known what the United States won’t do, however. The United States hasn’t voiced interest in removing Assad or in confronting Russia and Iran in Syria. Therefore, Russian and Iranian reaction was limited to only public condemnation.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations told the Security Council on April 14, 2018 that the United States is ready to launch another military strike if the Syrian government ever uses chemical weapons again.

The rhetoric from Syria’s backers stayed harsh Russian President Vladimir Putin said the strikes would have “a destructive effect on the entire system of international relations.”

Syrian television called the attacks a “flagrant violation” of international law, and Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, derided them as a “military crime.” But there were no signs the Russian military was preparing a retaliatory response.

The United States, France and Britain said they have proof, without identifying it, that chlorine gas caused victims to suffocate.

The European Union voiced support for the allies. European Council President Donald Tusk tweeted, “The E.U. will stand with our allies on the side of justice.”²³

On April 16, 2018 Theresa May has said it was "legally and morally right" for the UK to join air strikes against the Syrian regime to prevent "further human suffering".

She said that there was “clear evidence” the Assad government was behind the Douma chemical weapons attack. The UK had "explored every diplomatic channel" in response but regrettably decided there was no alternative to "limited, carefully targeted action".

May insisted it was in the UK's national interest to act - insisting that "we have not done this because President Trump asked us to but because it was the right thing to do".

She said the use of chemical weapons could not be "normalized" in either Syria or elsewhere, insisting the attack was a "stain on humanity" and fitted the pattern of the regime's previous use of such weapons.

"No other group could have carried out this attack," she told MPs, adding that the Syrian authorities had reportedly attempted to "conceal the facts... supported by the Russians".

The military response, she insisted, was aimed squarely at degrading the regime's capacity to carry out further "indiscriminate" attacks, rather than to try and topple the regime.²⁴

Global Reaction

As expected, NATO, European leaders, Japan, Germany, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Canada backed the Syrian airstrikes. Many European leaders voiced support and understanding for the U.S.-led airstrikes against Syria but warned against allowing the seven-year conflict to escalate. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. said:²⁵

"The use of chemical weapon is extremely inhumane, and we cannot absolutely tolerate that. Japan supports the determination of the U.S., the U.K. and France not to allow the use and proliferation of chemical weapons."

Australian Defense Minister Marisa Payne. said:

"By continuing to employ chemical weapons against innocent Syrian civilians, the Assad regime has violated international law and abandoned its own commitments to the international community. These strikes are not seeking to escalate the conflict in Syria, but these violations of international law and norms cannot be allowed to continue."

The European Council President Donald Tusk. said:

"Strikes by US, France and UK make it clear that Syrian regime together with Russia & Iran cannot continue this human tragedy, at least not without cost. The EU will stand with our allies on the side of justice."

NATO chief Stoltenberg. declared:

"Before the attack took place last night, NATO allies exhausted all other possible ways to address this issue to the U.N. Security Council but ... were blocked by Russia ... I am not saying that the attacks last night solved all problems but compared to the alternative to do nothing, this was the right thing to do."

German Chancellor Merkel. said:

"We support the fact that our U.S., UK and French allies took on responsibility in this way as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. The military strike was necessary and appropriate to preserve the effectiveness of the international ban on the use of chemical weapons and to warn the Syrian regime against further violations."

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy said:

"What has occurred in Syria in recent days goes far beyond the constant violation of cease fires. The response to these atrocities is legitimate and proportionate."

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, said that:

"The people who have been martyred by chemicals is a certain number, but the people martyred by conventional weapons is much, much more and more must be done to hold the Syrian regime accountable for the hundreds of thousands it has killed using conventional weapons.

Greece's Foreign Ministry declared that:

"Greece unreservedly condemns the use of chemical weapons and supports efforts to eliminate them ... at the same time, the international community should aim for a political and sustainable solution in Syria that will end the war... (and) allow the return of millions of refugees.

European Union Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker said:

"The international community has the responsibility to identify and hold accountable those responsible of any attack with chemical weapons. This was not the first time that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons against civilians, but it must be the last."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. said:

"Canada stands with our friends in this necessary response and we condemn in strongest possible terms" the use of chemical weapons in Syria. -

Also, as expected Venezuela and China, condemned the airstrikes as violating international law. China's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Chunying said:

"As always, we oppose the use of force in international relations and call for respect for other countries' sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. Any unilateral military action bypassing the Council runs contrary to the purpose and principles of the U.N. charter and violates the principles of international law and the basic norms governing international relations and will further complicate the Syrian issue."

On April 14, China's Foreign Ministry immediately issued a statement on the same day, opposing "the use of force in international relations" and "any unilateral military action bypassing the [United Nations] Security Council." China urged all parties involved — which would also include Russia, the Assad regime's major international backer — to "resolve the issue through dialogue and negotiation."²⁶

Regarding the suspected chemical weapons attack in Syria, the Foreign Ministry statement said that "a comprehensive, impartial, and objective investigation should be carried out to reach a reliable conclusion that can stand the test of time. Yet before that, a prejudgment should not be made".²⁷

Venezuela's government said it "energetically condemns" the attack on Syria, calling it a unilateral action that violates Syria's sovereignty and "the most basic norms of international law."

Surprisingly, India, Mexico and Pakistan chose to stay neutral "Mexico reiterates its broadest condemnation of the use of chemical weapons." — Mexican government statement that condemned the use of chemical weapons but did not explicitly approve or disapprove of the military strikes against Syria.²⁸

There was a lot of hue and cry in Pakistan and India against the strikes.²⁹ An editorial entitled “Endgame in Syria” published in The Nation stated:³⁰

What purpose do these strikes fulfil at all? At best, one can call these air attacks as a face-saving move by the West. Before the latest US, UK and French air attack, military action in April 2017 was conducted when usage of chemical weapons was reported in the town of Khan Sheikhoun. Back then too, the US bombed regime-operated Shayrat airfield. Nevertheless, the situation on the ground tells that the US-led strikes did not achieve anything for the civilians. In fact, American attacks received a negative response from the Syrian people. Above all, Bashar-al-Assad and his regime gained from the strikes as a few hours after the strikes he was seen triumphantly reaching his workplace while locals were celebrating in the streets. In a war that has consumed more than half a million lives, the masses wonder why chemical attacks constitute a “red line” to the West, that have taken only a fraction of the total killings, but not the barrel bombs and live artillery that has brought havoc in their lives. The skepticism among the people of Syria is growing day by day as far as Western response to the violations by the regime is concerned. They see the West as a mere spectator in the killing fields of Syria. The inability of the West to make peace in Syria means that its endgame in Syria is a perpetual civil war

On April 14, 2018 Pakistan stressed the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria in the wake of joint strikes by the United States and its allies in retaliation for the alleged chemical weapons attack by President Bashar al Assad.

In the wake of recent events, Pakistan has signaled that it believes a clear policy of diplomacy should be adopted in solving the Syrian crisis.

Pakistan’s policy is that it does not interfere in another country’s internal affairs. If the need arises, Pakistan will play its diplomatic role in resolving the Syrian problem.³¹

What Next?

It remains unclear how far the United States would go in trying to shape events in Syria. There are about 2,000 American troops in Syria to fight the Islamic State, but not to play a role in the civil war. In public comments before the airstrikes, President Trump said he wanted to pull them out right away. Advisers urged him to hold off, and he gave them five to six months to complete a withdrawal.³²

On April 17, 2018 President Trump stalled a preliminary plan to impose additional economic sanctions on Russia. Earlier, Russian lawmakers were crowing on April 13, 2018 that they were going to make the United States pay for already-imposed sanctions, potentially by blocking American imports or U.S.-Russian aerospace cooperation or allowing Russians to violate U.S. intellectual property rights. Russia, one top lawmaker promised, was going to “hit the Americans in the gut.”

But on April 17, 2018, senior lawmakers in the lower house of parliament, the State Duma, decided to hold off until May 15 before considering any counter-sanctions against the United States. Speaker Volodin said the Duma needed to meet with experts and the business community first.³³

Meanwhile, inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have still not reached the area, two days after arriving in Damascus. The inspectors are going to the scene to take samples and interview people, but “they are currently being prevented from doing so by the regime and the Russians,” Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain said in Parliament on April 17, 2018. Even before the O.P.C.W. inspectors arrived in Syria, the Western allies said they had ample evidence that the country had dropped a chemical agent on Douma, and that it had used chemical weapons many times during the seven-year civil war.

On April 17, 2018 it was reported that chemical weapons inspectors in Syria will be permitted to visit the site of an alleged chemical attack on April 18, 2018, Russia has said.

A Syrian government supporter holds up a Syrian national flag following U.S., British and French military

The US-led attack on alleged Syrian chemical weapons facilities raised a question around the world: What next?

After the airstrikes late last week, mixed messages from the administration have meant it's not entirely clear, particularly how the White House will react to any further chemical weapons attacks, and when and how the US will exit Syria, where it currently has about 2,000 troops.

Washington, along with London and Paris, launched the airstrikes in the wee hours of Syria's Saturday morning in response for an April 7 attack on the rebel stronghold of Douma that killed about 75 people, including children, and left another 500 in need of treatment for symptoms consistent with chemical weapons exposure.

Did Syria strikes kill any chance of diplomacy?

The strikes came not long after President Donald Trump signaled he wanted to end US involvement in Syria. But when he announced the military action to punish the suspected use of sarin gas and chlorine on Friday night, Trump said the US would be undertaking a sustained response to stop the use of chemical weapons. US officials stressed after the attack that the White House strategy had never changed.

"The US mission has not changed: The President has been clear that he wants US forces to come home as quickly as possible," White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders said. "We are determined to completely crush ISIS and create the conditions that will prevent its return. In addition, we expect our regional allies and partners to take greater responsibility both militarily and financially for securing the region."

French President Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed Trump's shift when he told French media on Sunday that "10 days ago, President Trump said the USA's will is to disengage from Syria. We convinced him that it was necessary to stay."

Macron was reacting to comments Trump had made about Syria on April 3, when he said, "I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home. It's time."

"Established US policy"

Questions about Trump's mixed messages led the US to insist the parameters for US involvement in Syria haven't changed and that the country remains focused on defeating the terrorist group ISIS.

Pahon, a Pentagon spokesman, reaffirmed that the "strikes do not signal a departure from established US policy."

"That we struck targets which enable the Syrian regime's chemical weapons program is separate and distinct" from the mission to defeat ISIS, Pahon said.

But the President's seeming shift raised questions about what exactly the US will do in future, particularly about any gas attacks that might use chlorine, a common household chemical that has been deployed repeatedly in Syria, officials say.

"We have a large volume of clear and compelling information, both of chemical weapons use and of Assad's culpability in this attack," a senior administration official told reporters April 14. "The information we have points to the use of both chlorine and sarin, both of which are chemical weapons, as used in this attack and beyond."³⁴

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is holding talks with the United States about sending troops into Syria as part of a wider international coalition.

On April 18, 2018 al-Jubeir, Saudi foreign minister, said the deployment offer was "not new", adding that Riyadh had previously proposed the idea to former US President Obama.

"We are in discussion with the US and have been since the beginning of the Syrian crisis about sending forces into Syria," al-Jubeir said.

Earlier, Saudi Arabia had announced its readiness to deploy ground troops in 2016 to fight the Islamic State in Syria.

While Saudi's air force partook in the aerial campaign aimed at defeating Islamic State from the very beginning in 2014, Saudi Arabia stopped short of a full ground troop deployment.

President Donald Trump was now looking to assemble an Arab force that would include Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to replace US military presence in Syria.

The force, which Trump's new National Security Adviser Bolton hopes will include Egypt, would oversee stabilizing the northeastern part of Syria, according to the report. The US has an estimated 2,000 troops stationed inside Syria, according to the Pentagon.³⁵

It isn't clear what the overall Syria strategy is now. Hopefully, a comprehensive strategy will be formulated soon to bring the Syrian civil war to an end. A negotiated peace settlement will have to get on board both Iran and Russia, however. It is easier said than done.

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