

Trump Strikes Syria

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All bets are off in the latest round of escalation in the Syrian conflict. The attack on al-Shayrat airbase involving 59 cruise missiles launched from the USS Ross and Porter in the Eastern Mediterranean was meant to be a lesson of sorts.

For US President Donald Trump, it was in the “national interest of the United States” to deter the use and spread of chemical weapons, making specific reference to the previous gassing of residents in Khan Sheikhoun that had left over 70 dead.

Sources connected with the Assad regime denied that Russian or government forces had deployed the nerve agent against the civilian population, citing an explosion of an al-Qaeda chemical weapons factory in Khan Sheikhoun as the source of the calamity.

Trump, however, had what he needed, and was hardly going to wait for the dust to settle. Even as he was conducting discussions with China’s President Xi Jinping, he could show that he was not entirely tied down by domestic frustration – the failure of dealing with Obamacare, the legal quagmire over immigration and travel bans, and a Congress which has proven intractable over a range of issues.

A local rush to identify legal sources that might have justified Trump’s sudden use of force took place immediately. The waxing and waning of Article II authority under the constitution was one such identified source. Internationally, however, the problem became instantly murkier, with international lawyers advancing vague assessments as deeming such an act “not illegal” but not particularly legal either. Absent a Security Council resolution on this issue, the US had operated in a side-stepping, cavalier fashion, taking it upon itself to twin obligation and security.

A deconflicting line, which sounded on its description to the press much like a dubious, outdated prophylactic, was used to minimise risk of engagement with Russian forces. (Immediately assume options: would the condom break? The rubber rupture?)

For Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Russia had failed in its role, outlined in the 2013 commitments, as guarantor that such chemical weapons “would no longer be present in Syria.... Either Russia has been complicit or Russia has been simply incompetent in its ability to deliver on its end of that agreement.”

This was a theatrical show of force that was of minimal force; force without noticeable effect; penetration without outcome, a sort of historical coitus irrelevance planned to gain a domestic advantage and remind other powers that the US president can still find a trigger – and use it – if he needs to. The paltry suggestion here was that a lethal wrap over the knuckles was on its way, so ready yourself for it.

But this shadow puppet display is at risk of proving dangerously unconstructive in so far as it places major powers in line of each other, while not necessarily impairing the targets in question with any degree of certitude.

What is left in place is the point of moral outrage salved by a supposedly proportionate strike, not to mention the crude fetishisation of the children in whose name this attack was launched. "This action," as House speaker Paul Ryan insisted, "was appropriate and just."

Assessing such appropriateness is nigh impossible. Military strikes orchestrated in the name of humanitarian virtue is always a dangerous proposition, a sense that the zealot has taken over the temple.

If one is to look at the statement made by US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, it is hard to even gauge what humanitarian doctrine the administration is drawing upon, short of conventional military bullying in the face of international obstruction. "When the United States consistently fails in its duty to act collectively, there are times in the life of states that we are compelled to take our own action."

Harold Hongju Koh demonstrates the paucity of reasoning at this level by identifying tests which are, at best, artificial and impossible to measure. Humanitarian intervention would, for instance, be lawful to halt "consequences significantly disruptive to international order - including proliferation of chemical weapons, massive refugee outflows, and events destabilizing to regional peace and stability".[1]

The grounds for this would be further hardened in the face of an obstructionist UN Security Council, and would pass muster if "limited force for genuinely humanitarian purposes... was necessary and proportionate to address the imminent threat".

All of this is to the good, until you realise that such strikes can have the habit of weakening one force in favour of another, of bolstering the dog in the fight you want at the expense of one you do not. Now it is made clearer than ever that the Assad regime is to be removed, and if necessary by force, a very dangerous proposition that simply paves the way for a security vacuum as terrifyingly lethal as that left by the Iraq invasion of 2003.

Sunni powers such as Saudi Arabia have already made it clear, not only that they supported the US strikes, but that Washington could well do more to push Assad out, paving the way for their own variant of fundamentalist Islam.

Tillerson, as if caught with his hand in the cookie jar, decided to claim that this punitive measure did not mean a change of any substance in US foreign policy towards Syria.

"I would not in any way attempt to extrapolate that to a change in our policy or posture relative to our military activities in Syria today. There has been no change in that status."[2]

But Trumpland remains an unpredictable, even dangerous place, where impulse often takes the place of reason.

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Notes

[1] http://www.houstonlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Koh_Final.pdf

[2] <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/04/269543.htm>

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