

Trump's 59-Tomahawk 'Tweet'

In what amounted to a 59-Tomahawk middle-of-the-night "tweet," an impulsive President Trump reacted emotionally, not rationally, in attacking Syria, says ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Before President Trump's "retaliatory" strike against Syria on Thursday, I had written: "This, fundamentally is the question posed by the alleged chemical attack in Syria this week: Do Western Intelligence Services still retain an ability to speak-out to 'power,' warning against going with the easy, immediate, 'go-along' MSM (mainstream media) 24/7 news memes – and counsel their governments, rather, to await careful investigation?"

"Can they *also* reflect on the wider strategic implications of any flawed rush to judgment'? Or, is the Intelligence 'Community' still hostage to having to make politicized intelligence assessments in order to validate some muscular show of US strength?"

Well, now we know. The system failed again.

Though, perhaps, there was some candle flame of light flickering weakly somewhere in the darkness: It seems that President Trump was in a "rush," indeed: he was warned. Some senior persons argued the toss. And the military action was scaled down from what had been originally demanded by the President.

Still, the Tomahawks flew, and the question becomes: can the Intelligence Services regain some integrity in the aftermath? In the aftermath therefore, this is the kind of thing that they ought to now say:

–The Russians briefed the United States on the proposed [Syrian Air Force] target in Idlib. There is a dedicated phone line that is being used to coordinate and de-conflict on any upcoming operation (i.e. prevent U.S. and Russian air assets from shooting at each other).

–The United States was fully briefed on the fact that there was a target in Idlib that the Russians believed was a weapons/explosives depot for Islamic rebels.

–The Syrian Air Force hit the target with conventional weapons. All involved expected to see a massive secondary explosion. That did not happen. Instead, smoke – chemical smoke – began billowing from the site. It turns out that the Jihadist rebels used that site to store chemicals (not sarin) that were deadly.

The chemicals included organic phosphates and chlorine and they followed the wind, and killed civilians.

–There was a strong wind blowing that day and the cloud was driven to a nearby village and caused casualties.

–We know it was not sarin. How? Very simple. The so-called “first responders” handled the victims without gloves. If this had been sarin they would have died. Sarin on the skin will kill you.

Need for Intelligence Integrity

The American *Defense Intelligence Agency* almost certainly knows this kind of detail. The “state of health” of the Western intelligence system now can be judged by whether such doubts and explanations subsequently emerge in the wake of the U.S. attack, and some integrity is regained, or whether official ranks simply close behind the “Assad-certainly-ordered it” meme – in order to preserve U.S. face.

Paradoxically, Trump’s “war” on fake news may, on this occasion, rebound against him: already tidbits of information are emerging on well-informed U.S. news sites. And, if it does turn out that this was another false flag, flown by an avid MSM news, 24/7, and not born out by the evidence and facts, what will be the political consequences?

What should an Intelligence Service – with integrity – have said to the “powers that be” about this event? Well firstly, they would warn – from bitter experience – that first initial impressions, in intelligence terms – are often wrong impressions. That to conclude that “Assad did it” because he supposedly had already “done it” (in 2013), is not supported by evidence. It would be facile, and wrong.

Then perhaps, the services would remind the “powers that be” that America was brought into the first Gulf War – in no small part – levitated, atop an emotional wave amassed from a similarly heart-tugging episode: the story of Kuwaiti babies being torn from their hospital incubators by Iraqi soldiers, and left to die on the hospital floor. It was a complete fabrication, but it impacted heavily on America’s decision to go to war.

And, ever since, “activists” across the Middle East have understood this to be the West’s Achilles’ heel: images of dying children simply swamp and erase any subsequently emerging evidence on the truth of the matter. The emotional import eclipses too, any cool-headed thinking.

This is their point. We live in an era in which the media loves to play the

heartstrings, and cares little for the subsequent truth of things. All manner of interest groups across the world understand this – and use it to try to force the hand of Western intervention (always in support of those interests). In short, “beware the false-flag, humanitarian outrage”: it is often deliberately contrived, to provoke an overreaction.

Reasons for Doubt

In this latest instance of claimed “use of chemical weapons,” there was every reason for the U.S. (and European) intelligence services to avoid any rush to judgment – that is, if they still retain that capacity.

Firstly, what occurred is disputed; secondly, the Russians (who *do* have professional intelligence services) have given their differing understanding of events which should be duly considered since they are on the ground, and are also widely present *inside* all the various arms of the Syrian government.

Thirdly, the credibility of the White Helmet “witnesses” is open to question. And fourth, because it makes no sense – in terms of “*cui bono*” – to attribute the chemical bombing of women and children to the deliberate decision of President Assad, this assumption should be rigorously tested.

What a nonsense it would be to take it as a given: why should attacking women and children (or anyone, for that matter) with chemical weapons, conceivably be in President Assad’s interest – particularly now? President Trump should have asked his services for a serious delve into this issue of *cui bono*. This is not partisan: such questions are the obvious requisites of intelligence professionalism.

So what are the consequences? Some may assess that there will be almost none: the Russians were forewarned of the missile attack – and they, in turn, had forewarned the Syrians, who had removed most of their aircraft from the airfield before the attack occurred.

And the missile attack was focused on a secondary airport from which the Syrian air attack had launched. In short, the event could be viewed as nothing more than a muscular, missile-delivered, (\$59 million) “tweet” from Trump. Message sent and done.

It could be (viewed in this way), but it won’t. It will not be business as usual, after Trump’s firing-off his 59 Tomahawk “tweets” (39 percent of which reached their target), but nor will it precipitate the opening of war. There will be no visible military reaction, and some may congratulate themselves on America having somehow “stood up” for its values.

The Tomahawk “Tweets”

But silently, geo-strategic calculations are being re-formulated. The world today has changed. Tomahawk “tweets” do not strike terror into “non-compliant” governments, as once they might have. The “non-West” has learned a different repertoire of responses against which the U.S. lately has floundered.

Consider what happened: less than a week ago, Rex Tillerson was saying (in Ankara), that the “longer-term status of President Assad will be decided by the Syrian people.” Then, some 100 hours later, Assad has become a “war criminal”; and Russia is complicit in the chemical “attack” (according to Nicki Haley, the U.S. Ambassador at the U.N.), and 24 hours after that, missiles are flying.

The message seems pretty clear: the U.S. has reverted completely. It has reverted to its old, neocon, groupthink. Russia, China, Iran and many others must now factor this in. They will all be amazed at how quickly U.S. doctrine has flip-flopped – with nary a moment’s reflection – on a whim, as it were.

Russia, China and Iran will not launch the cavalry in response, but China will be considering what this means for its South China Sea spat with the Trump Administration; Russia will be re-calculating on Syria, now that “the possibility of anti-terror co-operation with the U.S. has been undermined,” and Iran will be reinforcing in Syria, Iraq (and in Yemen).

More dangerously, the fault line in the region between Iran and its allies, and Saudi Arabia and its allies, will sharpen and become more belligerent – now that the U.S. has explicitly placed itself in the Israeli and Gulf States’ camp.

The point is that these 59 Tomahawks have demonstrated that America’s foreign policy has no strategic “anchor,” and will revert to its neocon “default mode” when faced with a sudden event. Trump really did not pretend at a conceptual foreign policy (as Robert Parry has noted). It was essentially transactional: “demanding that ‘allies’ – from Japan to Saudi Arabia to European nations in NATO – pay more for their costly U.S. security umbrella.” It never amounted to a foreign policy, *per se* – and therefore is, to a large extent, anchorless.

As a simple message that every American could grasp, however, it worked. Yet those very states give to the U.S. “less than peanuts” in return. The U.S. cannot afford this “generosity” any longer: it needs to rebuild its home. Most Americans can respond to such a plain statement of obvious truth.

Shackled by Groupthink

True, as Parry wrote, there had been some hints of “new thinking including

abandoning President Obama's fitful – and bloody – campaign to force 'regime change' in Syria; accepting a more realistic solution to the political mess in Libya; and trying to cooperate with Russia on combating terrorism, such as the fight against Islamic State and Al Qaeda, and reducing international tensions, such as the ongoing crisis in Ukraine."

But the fundamental weakness to this approach, as Parry observes, has been that the Administration has been "hobbled by its inability to break free from many of the groupthink that have dominated Official Washington for the past quarter century or so as the foreign policy establishment fell under the domination of the neoconservatives and their junior partners, the liberal interventionists, virtually banishing the formerly influential 'realists' as well as the few peace advocates."

The consequence has been that Trump's team periodically lurches off in pursuit of one or other of these dominating mantras, whether it is "pandering to the Saudis and the Israelis; repeating the neocon mantra that 'Iran is the principal source of terrorism' (though that is clearly not true given the support for Al Qaeda and other Sunni terror groups coming from U.S. 'allies' such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar); [or] falling into line with NATO's hype of Russia as the new global villain."

"But without any strong strategic thinker" Robert Parry has argued, "capable of separating one from the other and leading the administration in a thoughtful direction," foreign policy will lack any real geo-strategic directionality.

Indeed, it is not clear that the "team" as whole (i.e. members such as Nikki Haley) ever truly concurred with Trump's pivotal foreign policy insight: that America's security interests, together with those of Europe, fundamentally intersect in détente with Russia. That notion, now, has been – possibly irrevocably – undermined.

How did this all go so wrong? One can only speculate. But it seems that Trump was reeling from the series of legislative and operational setbacks. Perhaps he was attracted by a wish to demonstrate decisive, bold, immediate action – and this chemical weapon episode seemed to offer him this possibility? There are too, profound rivalries at play in this new Administration, pulling Trump policy in different directions: *Politico* sums this up saying: the "Big fight [in the team] is between nationalists and the 'West Wing Democrats'". Steve Bannon and allies are the "nationalists," and the "West Wing Democrats" is a reference to Jared Kushner (an erstwhile New York, Democrat), and his circle. And Bannon has just been removed from the U.S. National Security Council – either by his own volition, or by Kushner and National Security Adviser McMaster's maneuverings (it is not so clear).

The rift is deep between the two key advisers, and no doubt is adding to policy volatility, as Kushner vies for the more liberal and popular approach (he complains that Bannon is weakening his father-in-law's popularity). Bannon represents the more radical and nationalist line.

Perhaps bombing Syria was somehow viewed as a bipartisan and widely popular move in America – a low hanging (\$59 million) fruit?

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