

Trump Lurches into Chaos and Conflict

President Trump lurched into the attack on Syria in much the same chaotic way that he has lurched from side to side on domestic policy and foreign affairs, notes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

It seems clear – as much as anything is “clear” – that the so-called Tomahawk “tweets” were intended as a message (in the sense that they did not constitute a military strategic act, *per se*), but even now, the address on these Tomahawk tweets remains disputed. Ostensibly, it was directed at Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, but Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China, and Kim Jong Un of North Korea are considered probable addressees too (although no one seems certain of this, and U.S. statements are both confused and confusing).

But if we look a little closer at the U.S. National Security dynamics, it is clear that for National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster at least, the target is Russia (see below).

So what might have provoked this sudden lurch toward military action, and towards Trump’s great Syria policy “U-turn”? Ostensibly, nothing had changed on the ground in Syria: Syria, Russia, and Iran were continuing to prosecute the war against the jihadists with slow, but solid success. Tactical military co-operation with America was growing, and had been effective in halting Turkish disruption.

President Assad had signaled an opened door to Syrian co-operation with U.S. forces in the war against “terrorists,” and President Putin was clear that he would welcome a summit with President Trump. Indeed, US officials were already anticipating the symbolic “defeat” of ISIS, with the fall of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria as a major Trump achievement. All in all, things might have been thought to be heading in a positive direction (from the U.S. perspective).

Then, in the space of some 120 hours, we move from policy U-turn (from “Assad can stay”), to missiles, following the improbable claim that President Assad was willing to jeopardize this benign change in his environment for the sake of chemical-bombing women and children, in some strategically insignificant village long held by jihadists of various radical ilk. (Claims of use of chemical weapons by both sides are hardly new in Syria, either: this conflict is the site of the most intensely fought propaganda-war in history).

A Complex Puzzle

In trying to find an explanation for this sudden, out-of-the-blue, discontinuity of U.S. policy, we are forced into speculation – trying to put together the parts to a complex puzzle:

The first (but only the first) piece relates to First Daughter Ivanka Trump. On seeing the distressing images of dying children on TV, she had an emotional melt-down, and “nagged her father into doing it.” (We have the reports of her brother Erik, Trump’s son, as well as the British Ambassador in Washington’s telegram to the British Prime Minister, stating that Ivanka was the initial catalyst). “Sure, Ivanka influenced the Syria strike decision,” Erik said.

But Pat Buchanan too (a former Republican Presidential candidate who has supported Trump) points to Trump’s own emotional state having played a pivotal role, when he asks “what was Trumps rationale” for the action. (And in the same vein, so does the *New York Times*).

Buchanan writes: “What was Trump thinking? Here was his strategic rationale: ‘When you kill innocent children, innocent babies – babies, little babies – with a chemical gas ... that crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line. ... And I will tell you, that attack on children yesterday had a big impact on me ... my attitude toward Syria and Assad has changed very much.’ Two days later, Trump was still emoting: ‘Beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack. No child of God should ever suffer such horror.’”

In short, the initial reaction was emotive and impetuous – taken, it is clear, without bothering to wait for a considered analysis of facts, because *obviously* Assad did it, and Ivanka was in grief for the children.

From this initial reaction of emotion, and the desire to act, perhaps came into play Trump’s well-documented obsession to act, in every way, the opposite to that in which Obama acted. Roxanne Roberts, who sat next to Donald Trump at the 2011 White House Correspondents Dinner, wrote in April 2016:

“Regarding the vast mystery ... Why is the billionaire reality star running for president? I don’t know. You don’t know. But a handful of armchair psychoanalysts – reporters for major news organizations, no less – have decided that it all began at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Association dinner, where Trump was the butt of jokes by President Obama and ‘Saturday Night Live’ comedian Seth Meyers.

“Trump was so humiliated by the experience, they say, that it triggered some deep, previously hidden yearning for revenge. ‘That evening of public abasement, rather than sending Mr. Trump away, accelerated his ferocious efforts to gain

stature in the political world,' wrote the New York Times last month."

Judge his face for yourself (see here). So, unlike Obama, who prevaricated (in the wake of the 2013 claim of chemical weapons used by Syrian government forces), Trump did the opposite: He did not pause; he acted decisively and swiftly. Both White House spokesman Sean Spicer and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson kept pressing this narrative of Trump's decisiveness and swiftness.

Of course, *post hoc*, the further rationalizations may have set in: this attack on Syria, on Putin's protégé Assad, Trump may have mused, additionally would kill dead the Democrats' meme that he was somehow "Putin's man." This is the now celebrated "Machiavelli rationale" justifying Trump's Tomahawk decision – a clever ruse to disarm the disparaging claim that he was the "Manchurian Candidate." Maybe this became an afterthought, but the evidence suggests that the *actual* decision was grounded in the emotional impact of the moment.

So far so good, but did his National Security Adviser tell him that the intelligence services had their doubts about Assad's culpability? It seems they did. We do know, from multiple sources, that many in CIA and DIA, including those on the ground, did not accept that President Assad was responsible.

The Missing Intel Officials

Robert Parry, a long time Washington hand writes: "There is a dark mystery behind the White House-released photo showing President Trump and more than a dozen advisers meeting at his estate in Mar-a-Lago after his decision to strike Syria with Tomahawk missiles: Where are CIA Director Mike Pompeo and other top intelligence officials?"

"Before the photo was released on Friday, a source told me that Pompeo had personally briefed Trump on April 6 about the CIA's belief that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was likely not responsible for the lethal poison-gas incident in northern Syria two days earlier – and thus Pompeo was excluded from the larger meeting as Trump reached a contrary decision.

"At the time, I found the information dubious since Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and other senior U.S. officials were declaring quite confidently that Assad was at fault. Given that apparent confidence, I assumed that Pompeo and the CIA must have signed off on the conclusion of Assad's guilt even though I knew that some U.S. intelligence analysts had contrary opinions, that they viewed the incident as either an accidental release of chemicals or an intentional ploy by Al Qaeda rebels to sucker the U.S. into attacking Syria. ...

"But in the photo of Trump and his advisers, no one from the intelligence community is in the frame. You see Trump, Secretary of State Tillerson, National

Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, White House chief of staff Reince Priebus, strategic adviser Steve Bannon, son-in-law Jared Kushner and a variety of other officials, including some economic advisers who were at Mar-a-Lago in Florida for the meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

“However, you don’t see Pompeo or Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats or any other intelligence official. Even The New York Times noted the oddity in its Saturday editions, writing: ‘If there were C.I.A. and other intelligence briefers around, ... they are not in the picture.’”

So, at the crucial NSA meeting that formalized the government decision, the participants were “rigged” – in the sense that those who may have questioned the narrative of Syrian government culpability, simply were excluded. McMaster was the only intelligence professional present, and Trump got official endorsement for his instinctive conviction that President Assad was responsible.

But, here we come to the fourth piece to this puzzle: Why did the formal decision to attack the Syrian airbase metamorphose from a symbolic smack over the knuckles for Assad to an ultimatum? An ultimatum furthermore, which was clearly directed to Mr. Putin: Either Assad is your ally, or the U.S. – You choose. Whomsoever drafted this ultimatum will have understood well that such a binary choice was intended to visit humiliation on President Putin. Well, the only substantive security/intelligence professional present was General McMaster – of whom an erstwhile admirer of the latter’s intellectual powers, has written:

“I have been forced ... to come to the conclusion that McMaster is a big part of the problem in the mad rush to war on Syria that erupted, last week, war that could lead to a direct military confrontation with Russia. His appearance on Fox News Sunday was an indication of that but there were indications of this potential well beforehand, while he was still at US Army Training and Doctrine Command. His pre-occupation for the past two years, before he went to the White House, was, after all, how to reshape the Army for future war against Russia.”

Going After Russia

In the *Fox* interview, McMaster was asked a number of questions about Trump’s missile attack. Here is part of what he said: “The objective (of the strikes) was to send a very strong political message to Assad. And this is very significant because ... this is the first time the United States has acted directly against the Assad regime, and that should be a strong message to Assad and to his sponsors.”

He added: “Russia should ask themselves, what are we doing here? Why are we supporting this murderous regime that is committing mass murder of its own

population and using the most heinous weapons available ... *Right now, I think everyone in the world sees Russia as part of the problem.*" (Fox News with Chris Wallace) (CF emphasis added)

To place this last answer in context, we need to refer to what McMaster, at a talk to CSIS in Washington D.C. in April 2016, said:

"And what we're seeing now is we've awakened to, obviously, this threat from Russia, who is waging limited war for limited objectives – annexing Crimea, invading Ukraine – at zero cost, consolidating gains over that territory, and portraying the reaction by us and allies and partners, as escalatory: That what is required to deter a strong nation that is waging limited war for limited objectives on battlegrounds involving weaker states – or what Thomas – Mackinder called at the end of the 18th, early 19th century the shatter zones on the Eurasian landmass – *what is required is forward deterrence, to be able to ratchet up the cost at the frontier ...*

"Of course, this is a sophisticated strategy: that Russia is employing – and we're doing a study of this now with a number of partners – [one which] combines, really, conventional forces as cover for unconventional action, but a much more sophisticated campaign involving the use of criminality and organized crime, and ... part of a broader effort to sow doubt and conspiracy theories across our alliance."

McMaster went on: "And this effort, I believe, is aimed really not at defensive objectives, but at offensive objectives – to collapse the post-World War II, certainly the post-Cold War, security, economic, and political order in Europe, and replace that order with something that is more sympathetic to Russian interests." (emphasis added)

So where does this McMaster aspect take us? It suggests that President Trump's core instincts (seemingly) are still primarily focused on the domestic, U.S. scene. It is precisely here, however, in the domestic sphere that he has suffered serious reversals. After nearly 100 days, he has no legislation.

Some Capitol Hill Republicans have envisioned the nightmare scenario for 2017, and it goes like this: "No ObamaCare repeal. No tax reform. No trillion-dollar infrastructure package. No border wall."

Additionally, "It's not just drafting laws that Republicans have failed at – it's drafting *passable* laws. Right now there are Republican factions who believe that health care should be abandoned so they can score a win on tax reform, and factions that believe tax reform isn't possible without first dealing with the Affordable Care Act. *There's also an increasing recognition*

that they can't get everything they want pushed through without seeking some Democratic support in the Senate, a factor that makes it even more likely that they will shed Freedom Caucus votes in the House. Because Republicans have spent decades declaring that anything which can garner a Democratic vote is intrinsically evil." (Emphasis added)

Hitting a Wall

In short, Trump has hit a domestic legislative "wall." And being instinctive, rather than intellectual-strategic by nature, when he hits one wall, he lurches off in another direction until he hits another wall. Now, at the urging of son-in-law Jared Kushner and his Goldmanite allies (Cohn, Phillips), Trump is lurching off in search of some "middle ground" that might help him get some legislation passed and save Republican candidates in the mid-term 2018 elections from a deserting base. Perhaps he thought that "decisive" action in Syria would help claim him the middle ground?

T.A. Frank in *Vanity Fair* warns succinctly: "He first went for establishment nominees in filling his Cabinet, then hit the wall of resistance from his base, and tacked back toward Bannon, then hit a wall of mainstream outrage over his travel ban, then lurched toward Reince Priebus and more stress on procedures, until he hit a wall with health-care overhaul, then lurched into an attack on Syria, running into a wall of outrage from his base and approval from all the wrong people. So he'll probably lurch away from Syria, or try to. But acts of war have a momentum of their own, and for many of Trump's deplorables, this was not a compromise but a betrayal."

Mr. Frank has put his finger on the problem exactly: It is three inter-connected problems, in fact. Firstly, in betraying your friends (your political base), to court your enemies: you risk losing both – but the loss of the former can be fatal, and the fleeting approbation of enemies, is, at best, granted on a short lease.

Just to be clear, the activist base that brought Trump to the Presidency is not happy. The divisions within Trump's team are not just a matter of bad chemistry between Steve Bannon and Jared Kushner that can be corrected by a slap over the wrist – they are deeply ideological. Kushner (and Ivanka) are globalist, liberals from New York, and are both erstwhile Democrats. They represent the polar opposite of that for which stands Bannon and the America Firsters and nationalists.

But secondly, with legislative and GOP paralysis looming, mid-term elections in 2018, and strife within the Trump team already disorientated by Presidential "lurchings," there is risk of systemic break-down.

And thirdly, in allowing McMaster to “weaponize” the “Tomahawk tweets” as an ultimatum to Putin (together with McMaster’s ambitions to “surge” in Syria and Iraq) Trump risks events spiraling out of control. There are interests in Syria who would happily escalate the situation into a standoff between America and Russia, in which either Putin or Trump will be humiliated by having to “blink first.”

Mr. Frank is likely right that Trump will “probably lurch away from Syria, or try to,” but as one expert on Russia ominously noted: “When I hear of the notion of imposing a no-fly zone over Syria, against the will of Russia, I get a knot in my stomach, because I fully understand where this could lead.”

We are lurching to a situation as potentially serious as was the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

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