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USA

Trump's unbelievably small attack on Syria

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Rarely did such a limited attack as the one launched by the United States by means of cruise missiles against the Syrian air base of Shayrat provoke so much ado. US President Donald Trump authorized the attack in the evening of Thursday 6 April, shortly before having dinner with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping at his own Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. It is in all likelihood the minimal option that Barack Obama had envisaged when the Syrian regime crossed his "red line" in August 2013. In one of his memorable statements, John Kerry described that option as "a very limited, very targeted, very short-term effort," one that would be "unbelievably small."

That the Pentagon had indeed made use of this old plan seems corroborated by the statement of the Russian Defence Ministry, whose spokesman described the attack in the following terms:

On April 7, from 3.42 to 3.56 (Moscow Standard Time), two destroyers of the US Navy (USS Ross and USS Porter) made a massive strike with 59 cruise Tomahawk missiles from the area near Crete Island (Mediterranean Sea) against the Syrian Shayrat Air Base (Homs province). According to the objective monitoring data, 23 missiles reached the Syrian Air Base. . . . Therefore, the combat effectiveness of the American massive missile strike on the Syrian Air Base is extremely low. Today it is obvious that the American cruise missile strike had been planned long before this event. It is necessary [usually, prior to such a strike] to conduct reconnaissance operations, to plan and prepare the missile flight paths, and put them on full combat alert. It is clear for any specialist that the decision for the missile strike on Syria had been made well in advance of the events in Khan Sheikhoun, which have become just a formal reason for the attack, while the demonstration of military power has been dictated only by reasons of internal policy.

The attack was so "unbelievably small" and its deterrent effect so limited that the Syrian Air Force resumed its bombing of Khan Sheikhoun the day after, while repair work started at the Shayrat Air Base. Contrarily to countless comments about the miracle that would have happened had Barack Obama ordered a similar strike in 2013, it is most likely that it would not have changed much of the course of the Syrian war. Only an attack on a much larger scale could have made a big impact by spreading panic among the ranks of the Asad regime. Had the former president enforced his "red line" in 2013 with a "very limited" attack like the one that Trump did launch, it could at best have prevented the killing by chemical weapons of the eighty-six victims at Khan Sheikhoun—out of close to half a million Syrians killed by "conventional" weapons since the start of the war.

Obama's "red line" itself was utterly amoral. It was like saying: "Kill as much as you wish with conventional arms, but do not use chemical weapons as they can spill over the border." The latter weapons were prohibited because, as Obama stated on 20 August 2012, "that's an issue that doesn't just concern Syria; it concerns our close allies in the region, including Israel." As for Trump's shedding of crocodile tears for the "beautiful babies" massacred by gas bombs, it was unbelievably hypocritical. It would be quite hard indeed to believe that the US president had previously never seen killed and mutilated Syrian babies on Fox News, his only "reliable" source of information. His greenlighting of the "unbelievably small" attack designed under his predecessor was anything but a spontaneous act of moral outrage. Militarily rushed, the attack was a well-thought-out political decision. Its political impact was unbelievably big, indeed. Luke Harding aptly summarized its effect in the Guardian:

For the White House Thursday brought obvious dividends. After a chaotic period, in which the administration had been dogged by its apparent ties to the Kremlin, the news agenda had decisively flipped. For months, Trump had been unable to shake off accusations that he had colluded with Putin before the US election. Now the president was acting publicly against Russia's strategic interests. Or at least he appeared to be.

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Some of Trump's sharpest Republican critics on Russia - senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham - praised his action. Hours before the strike Hillary Clinton said she backed intervening. Trump's opinion poll ratings are at historic lows. One imagines they will now creep upwards.

But there is much more to the story than such "reasons of internal policy" that the Russian military spokesman himself had detected. The Shayrat attack is actually the opening salvo in Trump's unfolding grand strategy. It neatly fits into Trump's foreign policy doctrine that Josh Rogin had aptly summed up in the Washington Post on 19 March, days before the Shayrat attack, with the motto: "Escalate to de-escalate." His article is worth mulling over as it is most likely to appear in retrospect as the roadmap for what we might be witnessing in the coming weeks. The Shayrat attack could well turn out to be the escalation that was indispensable for Donald Trump's long-heralded de-escalation with Russia and accommodation with Bashar al-Asad, at the same time as it was a message addressed to Iran, the designated arch-enemy of the Trump administration.

Taking place during Trump's dinner with Xi Jinping, it was also a message to China about North Korea. Trump, who had derided Obama's "red line" on Syria, has drawn one of his own on North Korea when he put Pyongyang "on notice" in early January, before even inaugurating his presidency. Thus, the Shayrat attack may very well have been a demonstration on an easier target of what Trump would be willing to do against North Korea, were it to carry on its development of an intercontinental ballistic missile: a message that Xi Jinping could not have failed to perceive.

Anyone believing that the Shayrat attack was the proof that Trump was moved by humane feelings after all and that it signalled a turn for the better in US foreign policy would be well advised to revise their view. The new attack should only be regarded as a most serious additional reason to be deeply worried about the new administration's erratic behavior in world affairs.

[Jadaliyya](#)

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