

Syria- the US flips a page

Maj. Gen. Neeraj Bali (Retd.)

Abstract

The strong response by the United States (US) to Syria's use of chemical weapons has added uncertainty to an already volatile situation in that region. This also marked a stark departure from a policy of avoiding military intervention in Syria. Why did the US change course? Would it be a 'game-changer' for the Syrian situation and cast a long shadow on US-Russia relationship, hitherto described as 'cosy' since Mr Donald Trump became the US President?



Launched from the Mediterranean Sea at 2.40 AM local time on Friday, 7 April 2017, the 59 subsonic Tomahawk cruise missile strike on the remote and relatively nondescript Syrian airbase at Al Shayrat is unlikely to significantly alter the complex and bloody game underway in Syria. The extent of damage at the base – assessed by different quarters as extensive, including six soldiers (a British based human rights organization claimed that a [General was among the killed](#)), nine civilians, 20-25 aircraft ([US sources](#)), [six MiG 23 aircraft](#) (spokesman for Russian military) and [nine aircraft](#) (Russian journalist present on the base) – is not even the point. It was a demonstration of force, no less and no more. The question to be answered is – what did it seek to achieve? And hidden in that answer are clues to what might happen next.

Most experts would agree that the US was hustled into this action. Having routinely criticised Obama's policy as feckless and timid, President Trump had already boxed himself into a corner. The irony that Trump had all along been vocally opposed to armed action against Syria is, of course, now buried beneath a mountain of forgotten tweets. Embattled at home and unwilling to appear indecisive to his base, the President had to act.

Even if compulsions of domestic politics are discounted and the US action viewed purely as a signal of its principled opposition to the use of banned chemical agents against hapless civilian population, clearly the goals are limited. No one is under any illusion that this would loosen Bashar al-Assad's grip over large parts of Syria, much less catalyze a regime change. Nor can it significantly prop up the flagging morale and fortunes of the rebel forces. If it has introduced a new element into the narrative, it is this: there could be a slowing down of the train that Assad and his allies were driving with impunity and shrinking the opposition held swaths of territory in an increasingly one-sided war; as it is known, after [Aleppo was captured](#) by Assad's forces in December 2016, he had complete control over every major urban centre. But this is based on the premise that, unprecedentedly, Assad – and Putin – would blink.

The attack certainly hasn't prompted any visible equivocation in Russia vis a vis its solidly unwavering support of the Assad regime. That expectation is a far cry, because [Russia does not even accept](#) – or at least postures not to

believe – that Syria is in possession of chemical weapons. It was Russian assurances after the agreement it brokered with Syria in 2013 for complete elimination of chemical weapons that restrained Obama's hand. And yet, if the US version that chemical attacks using the deadly Sarin nerve agent on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province killing 84 civilians and injuring another 546 originated from Al Sharyat is accurate, it presents a telling commentary on the Russian sincerity to enforce that agreement years after it was signed because Russians were present at that base in significant numbers.

Following the attack, the Russian criticism of the US has been unequivocal. Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov](#) called it “an act of aggression” “under a far-fetched pretext”, reminiscent of the 2003 invasion of Iraq without the consent of the UN. Speaking to *Pravda*, the Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Defence and Security Viktor Ozerov remarked that, ‘everything that Donald Trump has said before about Syria has lost its meaning.....but we will respond to this.’ This, however, appeared to be routine rhetoric and there have been no other indications that Russia will retaliate beyond the token measures it has already adopted; even as Putin's office characterized it as a ‘[significant blow](#)’ to US-Russia relations and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev pontificated that bilateral relationship had been ‘completely ruined’, the response on ground barely rose above tokenism.

The Russian military rescinded an agreement of sharing information relating to Syrian airspace to obviate accidents and pulled the plug on a hot-line. Russian news agency TASS also [reported](#) that a frigate would visit the logistics base at the Syrian port of Tartus. Beyond such symbolism, there has been no other response. While the editor-in-chief of the Moscow-based National Defence magazine Igor Korotchenko told TASS that arguably the Syrians had no air defence mechanism at that base, others appear to dispute this assertion. Indeed, the Director of the Centre of Strategic Conjunction Ivan Konovalov was at pains to explain the reason for Syrian inability to use its advanced S-400 Air Defence systems to thwart incoming Tomahawks because its employment required clearance from Moscow. The conclusion is unmistakable – Russia did not sanction the activation of the retaliatory mechanism, even though it had 60 to 90-minute advance notice of the attack from the US so that its 100-odd experts were not caught in the harm's way.

Could it be then that Russia is not averse to pressurizing Assad to some extent? There have been a few speculations in the recent past that the Russians were beginning to tire of the recalcitrant Assad, who has been singularly unwilling to make any concessions or join peace talks.

By all accounts, the attack is a one-off demonstration and apparently bereft of the benefit of a thought-through strategic follow up. What are the next political and military steps? [Brookings](#) quoted [Daniel Byman](#) of the Center for Middle East Policy that this did not appear to be part of a coherent strategy but was “more as an attempt at therapy to salve our anguished conscience”. It has certainly inserted the US into conflagration without any clarity on the trajectory it might assume, particularly if there are future actions by Syria or Russia that militate against US ‘ideals’ and goals. Would Putin use this as an opportunity to escalate the conflict with enough calibration to establish his dominance and render the US action as an empty gesture, unviable to follow up? It is hard to see that Russia would simply ignore this attack and lose ground in Syria and the Middle East.

The first pointers to the future were to emerge from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Moscow on 11 April. Prior to the visit, Maria Zhakharova, a spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry was reported by TASS as pointedly saying that Tillerson will be asked to comment on ‘the strange things they did’ and will be educated on ‘everything we think about it.’ That sounds frosty. But the signals that have emanated from the visit are mixed and confusing. After keeping Tillerson in suspense, [Putin finally met him](#) but no insight was offered on the content of the parleys. Foreign Minister Lavrov, however, publicly disagreed with Tillerson and went as far as to offer a lengthy tutorial for Mr. Tillerson about all the examples of American-led regime change in the world — from Slobodan Milosevic to Saddam Hussein to Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi — that went bad, suggesting it made no sense to add President Bashar al-Assad of Syria to the list.

There had been some indications in the recent past that the Russians were getting weary of Assad and by implication could, therefore, welcome some pressure to force him to parleys. But that prognosis appears to have come to nothing; Russia stood by Syria and vetoed a Security Council draft resolution for investigation of the chemical attack in Syria.

Russia might also await the response from Beijing before taking its next step; even though President Xi Jinping who was dining at Mar-a-Lago when the decision was shared with him, hasn't offered a public comment, China is unlikely to stay silent over unilateral use of force by the US. China held its cards close to chest and abstained during the 12 April [UN vote](#) to condemn the gas attack.

It is impossible to read tea-leaves with any certainty but it appears that the US action is fated either to go down as a tactical blip or an unintended invitation to Putin to stamp his authority on the region or as a catalyst for unintended US entry into a conflict that is pregnant with possibilities, all violent and bloody.

Only Mr Putin knows the answer. And, alas, he does not tweet.

(Maj Gen Neeraj Bali (Retd) is an Infantry Veteran who served the Indian Army for over 37 years. A MSc and MPhil in Defence Studies, he is an alumni of the Asia Pacific Centre of Security Studies, Hawaii, US. He served as Security Advisor in Lesotho, Southern Africa. Views expressed in this article are the author's and not of Mantraya.)