

The US-led missile strikes in Syria

Niklas Nováky

THE 14 APRIL US-LED MISSILE STRIKES AGAINST THE REGIME OF PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD IN SYRIA IN RESPONSE TO A SUSPECTED CHEMICAL WEAPONS ATTACK WERE NECESSARY TO REESTABLISH DETERRENCE AGAINST ANY FUTURE USE OF SUCH WEAPONS IN THE COUNTRY. YET, THE STRIKES WERE REACTIVE RATHER THAN STRATEGIC IN NATURE, AND WILL NOT CHANGE THE COURSE OF SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR. THIS WOULD REQUIRE THE WEST TO OUTLINE A CLEAR VISION FOR THE COUNTRY'S FUTURE, AND A STRATEGY TO ACHIEVE IT.

On 14 April, the US launched missile strikes against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria together with France and the UK. The strikes were a response to a suspected chemical weapons attack by the regime on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in north western Syria on 4 April, which killed more than 80 people. The strikes had three targets: (1) a scientific research facility in Damascus allegedly used for producing chemical and biological weapons, (2) a chemical weapons storage facility west of the city of Homs, and (3) a chemical weapons equipment storage and a command post near Homs.

The strikes constitute the West's largest military intervention in Syria since the country's bloody civil war erupted in 2011. Approximately twice as many munitions were used in them compared to America's previous unilateral strikes (also in response to a regime perpetrated chemical weapons attack) in April 2017, in which only one site was targeted. They also mark

the first time the administration of President Donald J. Trump has acted militarily in conjunction with its European allies, which has high symbolic significance.

Yet, the US-led strikes in Syria were reactive rather than strategic in nature, and will not change the course of the country's civil war. Their two main effects will be (1) to make the Assad regime think twice before using chemical weapons in the future, and (2) to satisfy certain domestic and international constituencies in the West, that have been calling for punishing Assad for violating international chemical weapons conventions. To affect the course of the conflict itself, the US and its European allies would need to outline a clear vision for Syria's future, and a strategy for achieving it. Otherwise the West will be unable to work towards a solution to the Syrian conflict, or to balance the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the country.

The United States

President Trump should be applauded for his readiness to enforce red lines in Syria. Unlike former President Barack Obama, who did not intervene in the country after a chemical weapons attack in 2013, despite declaring earlier that such an attack would cross a 'red line' for the US, Trump has now demonstrated twice that he is willing to punish the Assad regime. According to Trump, the purpose of the strikes was 'to establish a strong deterrent against the production,

spread and use of chemical weapons'.¹ In the case of the 2017 strike, this effect was arguably achieved for eight months. He also suggested that the strikes would not necessarily be a one-off, noting that the US is 'prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents'. Secretary of Defence James Mattis, who had urged caution within the White House in the runup to the strikes, reinforced this point with a different tone by noting that no more strikes were planned unless Assad uses chemical weapons again.²

Yet, the strikes also highlighted an incoherence in current US policy towards Syria. A week earlier, Trump noted that he would like to pull out the remaining 2,000 US troops operating in north-eastern Syria as soon as they have finished destroying the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist group.³ This is despite the fact that both Secretary Mattis and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have argued for a continued US presence in the country after ISIS has been defeated to prevent the group from returning, but also to balance the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the country. However, after the Assad regime's chemical weapons attack on 4 April, Trump was reportedly 'moved' by the civilian suffering it caused and temporarily set aside his concerns for a taking a decision that might prolong US engagement in Syria.⁴ This means that the US is currently balancing two conflicting impulses: (1) to pull out from Syria as soon as ISIS has been defeated so that others could finish the mess; and (2) to remain engaged in Syria to keep Assad from killing his own people, and balance the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the country.

The first impulse is the one to which Trump himself

seems to be drawn instinctively. It also seems to enjoy the support of a significant amount of Americans, given that 49% of them do not think it is in US national interest to be involved in Syria.⁵ In not retaliating against the US missile strikes, it seems that the Syrian regime itself and its two main allies, Russia and Iran, are expecting Washington to eventually withdraw from the country. As a result, they do not want to take any actions at this stage that might provoke the US and prolong its engagement in Syria. The second impulse characterises the thinking of much of the US national security establishment and people like Secretary Mattis. Most Americans themselves see that the US has a moral responsibility to be involved in Syria.⁶ Resolving these two impulses will be crucial if the US is to develop a more effective Syria strategy, and balance the growing influence of Russia and Iran in the country.

Europe

The involvement of France and the UK in the US-led strikes seemed to suggest an increased willingness on Europe's part to engage in Syria – and an astonishing readiness to militarily cooperate with an American President in whose ability to handle world affairs many Europeans have no confidence at all.⁷ British Prime Minister Theresa May, whose country experienced a chemical attack on its own soil in March, when former Russian spy Sergei Skripal was poisoned with a military-grade nerve agent, said the Assad regime's 'persistent pattern of behaviour' in using chemical weapons 'must be stopped – not just to protect innocent people in Syria from the horrific deaths and casualties caused by chemical weapons but also because we cannot allow the erosion of the international norm that prevents the use of these weapons'.⁸

¹ *The New York Times*, 'President Trump on Syria Strikes: Full Transcript and Video', 13 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-syria-airstrikes-full-transcript.html>.

² H. Cooper, T. Gibbons-Neff and B. Hubbard, 'U.S., Britain and France Strike Syria Over Suspected Chemical Weapons Attack', *The New York Times*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-strikes-syria-at-tack.html>.

³ M. Crowley and N. Toosi, 'Trump wants 'out' of Syria 'very soon,' contradicting top officials', *POLITICO*, 30 March 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/president-donald-trump-wants-out-of-syria-very-soon-contradicting-top-officials/>.

⁴ A. Gearan and M. Ryan, 'U.S. launches missile strikes in Syria', *The Washington Post*, 13 April, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/pb/world/national-security/us-launches-missile-strikes-in-syria/2018/04/13/c68e89d0-3f4a-11e8-974f->

[aacd97698cef_story.html?outputType=accessibility&nid=menu_nav_accessibilityforscreenreader](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-syria-airstrikes-full-transcript.html?outputType=accessibility&nid=menu_nav_accessibilityforscreenreader).

⁵ Quinnipiac University Poll, *U.S. Voters Support Syria Bombing 2-1, Lifting Trump; Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Voters Divided On Trump's Handling Of North Korea*, 19 April 2017, p. 20, https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us04192017_Uwpq863m.pdf/.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ R. Wike et al., *U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership: America still wins praise for its people, culture and civil liberties*, Pew Research Center, 26 June 2017, p. 59, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/25100416/PG_2017.06.26_US-Image-Report_Full-Report.pdf.

⁸ United Kingdom, Prime Minister's Office, 'PM statement on Syria: 14 April 2018', Press release, 14 April 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-statement-on-syria-14-april-2018>.

French President Emmanuel Macron also noted that 'We cannot tolerate the normalization of the employment of chemical weapons, which is an immediate danger to the Syrian people and to our collective security'.⁹

The strikes were also backed by other European leaders who were not involved in them. German Chancellor Angela Merkel noted that the intervention was 'necessary and appropriate, to ensure the effectiveness of the international ban on chemical weapons use and to warn the Syrian regime of further violations'.¹⁰ The strikes also received backing from the leaders of EU institutions—that is, European Council President Donald Tusk, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani, and High Representative Federica Mogherini.

However, the strikes also laid bare the EU's current lack of vision and strategy towards Syria, and the glaring differences in the strategic cultures of its member states. With regards to vision and strategy, HR/VP Mogherini's lengthy statement also reiterated that 'there can be no other solution to the Syrian conflict than political'.¹¹ Yet, as long as Assad remains in power and is backed by Russia and Iran, there is no hope for a negotiated political solution to the conflict. The interests of the regime and the rebels it is fighting are, for the moment, diametrically opposed, and the EU needs to recognise this. With regards to strategic cultures, Chancellor Merkel made clear a day before the strikes that Germany would not participate in military action.¹² On one hand, this decision was unsurprising given Berlin's well-known reticence towards the use of military force. Yet, on the other, it creates a problematic image which extends far beyond Germany, when Europe's wealthiest country remains persistently unwilling to back up its diplomacy with force, even if the target of that force would be a dictatorship that uses chemical weapons against its own people.

⁹ France, Elysée, 'Press statement by the President of the French Republic on the intervention of the French armed forces in response to the use of chemical weapons in Syria', 14 April 2018, <http://www.elysee.fr/communiqués-de-presse/article/press-statement-by-the-president-of-the-french-republic-on-the-intervention-of-the-french-armed-forces-in-response-to-the-use-of-chemical-weapons-in-syria/>.

¹⁰ K. Oroschakoff, 'Broad support from EU leaders for Syria strikes', *POLITICO*, 14 April 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-jean-claude-juncker-donald-tusk-vladimir-putin-syria-strikes-broad-support-from-eu-leader/>.

European countries' different responses to the conflict in Syria also do not bode well for the EU's efforts to boost its defence dimension. These efforts have hitherto focused on setting up new structures (e.g. European Defence Fund, Military Planning and Conduct Capability) and activating previously unused provision in the Lisbon Treaty (i.e. Permanent Structured Cooperation). These initiatives mainly help in addressing the capability shortfalls that have prevented the EU from taking care of security problems in its own neighbourhood in the past. Yet, they do nothing to address the bigger problem of most EU member states' unwillingness to use their capabilities in action. The Syria strikes exposed yet again this unwillingness as France and the UK were the only European countries that participated in them. After Brexit, France will be the only EU member state with both the capabilities and the strategic culture to participate in such strikes. This is unsustainable for an actor that wants to achieve 'strategic autonomy'.

Conclusions

The US-led missile strikes against the Assad regime in Syria were a necessary measure to re-establish deterrence against the use of chemical weapons. Yet, they were reactive rather than strategic in nature, and will not change the course of the Syrian civil war. To do that, the US and Europe would have to formulate a clear vision for Syria's future, and a strategy for achieving it. The EU also needs to pay more attention to the main demand-side problem of its defence cooperation—that is, the unwillingness of most of its member states to use their capabilities in action.

Niklas Nováky is Research Officer at the *Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies* and Assistant Editor-in-Chief of *European View*.

¹¹ Council of the EU, 'Declaration by the High Representative Federica Mogherini on behalf of the EU on strikes in Syria', Press release, 196/18, 14 April 2018, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/04/14/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-targeted-airstrikes-in-syria/pdf>.

¹² M. Schlee, 'Merkel rules out German participation in military strike on Syria', *POLITICO*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/chancellor-angela-merkel-rules-out-german-participation-in-military-strike-on-syria-bashar-al-assad-chemical-weapons/>.

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and likeminded political values.

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

© 2018 Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

The European Parliament and the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or their subsequent use.

Sole responsibility lies with the author of this publication.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20
Brussels, BE – 1000
<http://www.martenscentre.eu>