

Russia Has Backed Itself Into a Corner in Syria

Assad's use of chemical weapons puts Putin in an awkward situation: Trump or the Syrian Regime

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In this image provided by the U.S. Navy, the guided-missile destroyer USS Porter launches a tomahawk land attack missile in the Mediterranean Sea, April 7, 2017. **U.S. Navy via AP**

It seems bizarre that the fortunes of the U.S.-Russia relationship should rise and fall on the use of chemical weapons in Syria. In August 2013, after the horrendous sarin gas attack by the Syrian Army on Eastern Ghouta that killed over 1500 people, President Obama nearly ordered missile strikes in Syria but accepted the offer from President Putin to get Assad's chemical weapons destroyed under international supervision.

Now, Moscow and Washington are once again in a standoff over U.S. missile strikes on a Syrian airbase in retaliation for, what appears to be, Assad's use of chemical weapons

on Apr. 4 in the opposition controlled areas of Idlib. The attack killed over 70 people, many of them children.

It was not supposed to be this way. Fighting ISIS was supposed to be the low-hanging fruit for both the U.S. and Russia to relaunch their relationship under Trump, a president who even exhibited some willingness to work with Assad on fighting terrorism. Just days before the chemical attack both the White House and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson essentially recognized the “political reality of Assad staying” in power. Moscow was looking forward to re-engaging with the U.S. on this area of common interest.

The chemical attack in Idlib changed everything. It produced a radical shift in Trump’s personal position on Syria and Assad and made military action against the Syrian regime to punish and deter further attacks difficult to avoid. Trump boxed himself in politically by initially blaming “Obama’s weak response” and the decision not to punish Assad’s use of chemical weapons in 2013 with missile strikes.

Trump had to prove his toughness by launching a military response for a horrendous act by Assad that “crossed many many lines.” U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [bluntly stated](#) that Russia and Iran bear moral responsibility for the civilian deaths in the attack. Even more ominously, he called upon Russia to reconsider its support for Assad, who would have [“no role to govern the Syrian people,”](#) and even [opened the door](#) to regime change in Syria through “an international effort.”

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These are all are major reversals of Trump’s declared positions, and a major blow to Moscow’s hopes for reshaping its relationship with Washington. The Kremlin now must find the right strategy to handle this problem. Fortunately, it has a few options it can put on the table next week, when Tillerson meets with Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Russia’s initial reaction to the chemical attack was a blanket defense of Assad’s air force: they bombed a rebel chemical weapons factory. Those same rebels then staged videos of children dying of exposure to sarin gas. It was predictably hapless. It was also obvious that Moscow was taken aback by the attack. Russia’s friends in Syria failed to give them the heads up.

In reacting to Trump’s missile strike on Assad’s air force, Russia leaned heavily on escalatory rhetoric, but its response had little substance. Moscow labeled the strike an act of aggression against a sovereign state, and suspended a military-to-military agreement on avoiding incidents in Syria’s crowded airspace. Overall, the reaction was self defeating. After all, Russia was warned in advance by the United States through this exact agreement.

It may be that Russia will increase the number of its air defense systems in Syria to make U.S. operations there more difficult, but this will not change much on the ground. Moscow appears to understand that this was a one-off attack to demonstrate the U.S.’s credibility in enforcing vital international norms and projecting an image of U.S. strength to other powers.

Russia is still sticking to its guns in its blanket defense of the Syrian regime, but this time

around Assad may have overplayed his hand. He disrespected Putin by making him look helpless as a guarantor of the chemical weapons deal with Washington or worse, complicit with Assad in cheating on the agreement. He humiliated Putin before Trump by making Putin look weak. It is a slight the Russian leader has never taken lightly.

There is a sense among the Russian players that Assad was perhaps deliberately trying to scuttle the Astana peace process in which Moscow and Ankara invested much political capital. Assad and Tehran want full military victory, not a power sharing arrangement with defeated rebels. Assad and his Iranian backers never thought much about Astana and were clearly irritated by Russia and Turkey acting like the guys who run the show.

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Putin will wait for Tillerson to assess whether it would be better for Russia to punish Assad in the name of the great game with Trump. Putin's cards are better now than in 2013 when he was desperate to prevent U.S. airstrikes so as not to appear powerless to stop them. What's changed from 2013 is that the U.S. no longer has a viable military option against Assad and no appetite to unseat him by force. The strikes were symbolic, not changing much on the ground. This makes Russia's stake in Syria secure.

What Moscow should be concerned about is whether Trump will broaden the U.S.'s goals in Syria from the focus on defeating ISIS to a more expansive policy of ending the civil war and ensuring a political settlement. This would be especially concerning for Moscow if Trump does this while simultaneously taking it upon the U.S., through military coercion, to enforce agreements and ceasefires. This would sideline Russia, but we are not there yet.

Provided the UN's investigation into the chemical weapons attack puts the blame on Damascus, it would make sense for Putin to play the role of a true humanitarian. One way for him to do that would be to gently punish Assad by grounding his air force. Russia has sufficient air defense power deployed in Syria to do it. There is no more Aleppo for Moscow to take, so why not make Assad somewhat more incentivized for a negotiated settlement by limiting his military options?

This will, of course, infuriate the Iranians. But they have been running their own show behind Russia's back. The Trump administration and Israel want Russia to distance itself from Iran and its objectives in Syria. What could be a better way of telling Tillerson that Russia feels U.S. pain on Iran? And for Israel, Russia [has just recognized West Jerusalem](#) as its capital, out-trumping Trump.

Tillerson is going to find out next week whether the only man who can actually tango in Moscow will be in the mood to dance, or not.

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