

April 14, 2017 – CAUTION

While the country is filled with high fives from the right and the left for Trump's attack on Syria, some of our favorites are suggesting notes of caution. Here's [Craig Pirrong, The Streetwise Professor](#).

President Trump ordered a cruise missile strike on a Syrian air base that was allegedly the launching point of a sarin attack on a town in the Idlib Governate. My initial take is like Tim Newman's: although the inhumanity in Syria beggars description, getting involved there is foolish and will not end well.

The Syrian conflict is terrible, but Syria makes the snake pit in [Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom](#) look hospitable. ...

... To put it slightly differently. Good intentions mean nothing. Results and consequences do. I am at a loss to think of any policy with results and consequences that accord with good intentions. Indeed, it almost inevitable that any major military intervention would not save Syrian lives but would cost American ones.

Truth be told, given the devastation wreaked on children, women, and men in Syria by bombs, shells, small arms and even throat-slashing blades, chemical weapons do not represent a quantum shift in the horribleness of the Syrian war. Dead is dead, and periodic use of chemical weapons does not materially affect the amount of dying that is going on. Assad—and the Islamists he is fighting—have killed and maimed far more innocent civilians with conventional weapons than with chemical ones. The use of chemical weapons does not represent a fundamental shift in the nature of the war, which was already a total war waged without restraint against civilians by all sides (would that there were only two sides in Syria). ...

And the [Professor](#) followed with another post.

The Syria story has many threads. I'll address a few of them here.

First, to follow on Ex-Regulator's comment: Trump's initial public justification for the strike—the humanitarian impulse stirred by pictures of dying children—is deeply troubling. Sentimentality is a poor basis for policy. In particular, it has no limiting principle. If you take a tragic view of humanity—if you view mankind as fallen and flawed—you know that there is a virtually unending supply of sad, heartbreaking, stories. So how does a president choose which appeal to answer? And how do people know which appeals he will answer? Truth is, we have no idea. The line will be arbitrary, which leads to unpredictable, inconsistent policy. ...

... Occam's Razor would say that Trump's attack completely undercuts the narrative that he is Putin's bitch. But Occam's Razor is an alien concept in the fever swamps of the left. The certifiably insane (Louise Mensch) and the hyper partisan but supposedly sane (Lawrence O'Donnell, Chris Matthews) certain have never shaved with it. They are claiming that this proves Trump is Putin's bitch! The "reasoning"? He is doing it because the most likely interpretation is that it shows that Trump isn't Putin's bitch, so that means that he is! Or something.

In other words, this lot interprets everything that Trump does as evidence of his collusion with the Russians. This means that the hypothesis that he is in collusion with Putin is unfalsifiable, and hence is junk reasoning. It should therefore be rejected, as should anything that those who espouse this theory say.

Lastly, the attack is a complete embarrassment to the Obama administration, which preened and bragged that it had rid the Assad regime of chemical weapons. ...

A more hopeful note comes from **Scott Adams, of the Dilbert Blog.**

1. President Trump just solved for the allegation that he is Putin's puppet. He doesn't look like Putin's puppet today. And that was Trump's biggest problem, which made it America's problem too. No one wants a president who is under a cloud of suspicion about Russian influence.

2. President Trump solved (partly) the allegation that he is incompetent. You can hate this military action, but even Trump's critics will call it measured and rational. Like it or not, President Trump's credibility is likely to rise because of this, if not his popularity. Successful military action does that for presidents.

3. President Trump just set the table for his conversations with China about North Korea. Does China doubt Trump will take care of the problem in China's own backyard if they don't take care of it themselves? That negotiation just got easier.

4. Iran might be feeling a bit more flexible when it's time to talk about their nuclear program. ...

And from **Andrew Malcolm** who liked the missile strike.

President Donald Trump's sudden missile strike against a Syrian airfield in retaliation for a gas attack on civilians will not change one thing about that sad land's bloody civil war.

It will, however, alter the strategic calculus in many places within but also far beyond the troubled Middle East. Politically, the missiles also likely blasted any attempted allegations that Trump is a Putin patsy. Watch upcoming job approval polls for the popular verdict.

The 58 \$1 million Tomahawk missiles (one fell into the sea) took out Syrian air force planes, reinforced hangars, fuel storage tanks and ammunition dumps. The intended message to Bashar Assad was, you can no longer use chemical weapons with impunity.

As columnist Charles Krauthammer aptly put it, following eight years of relative apathy and inaction after worse war crimes, the message from the new American president was not that there's a new sheriff in town, but that there IS a sheriff in town. ...

Streetwise Professor

Trump, Putin, and the Tomahawk Chop

by Craig Pirrong

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The Syrian conflict is terrible, but Syria makes the snake pit in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* look hospitable.

Further, the politics of Syria (both internally, and in the region) make the intrigues of Game of Thrones seem like child's play by comparison. [So I agree with Tim:](#)

Every course of action I can think of other than "fuck 'em" has an almost zero chance of succeeding in its aims and a very high chance of making things worse. ...

... It's not through moral principle that I am saying this, it is from practicality based on fourteen years of recent, bloody experience: Assad is a monster, the Russian government is showing the world exactly what they are like by backing him, and the Syrian people are suffering terribly, but there is nothing – *nothing* – we can do about it. It is a terrible indictment on the state of the world, but a policy of "fuck the lot of 'em" is the only workable one on the table right now. It's high time our leaders started taking it seriously. ...

To put it slightly differently. Good intentions mean nothing. Results and consequences do. I am at a loss to think of any policy with results and consequences that accord with good intentions. Indeed, it almost inevitable that any major military intervention would not save Syrian lives but would cost American ones.

Truth be told, given the devastation wreaked on children, women, and men in Syria by bombs, shells, small arms and even throat-slashing blades, chemical weapons do not represent a quantum shift in the horribleness of the Syrian war. Dead is dead, and periodic use of chemical weapons does not materially affect the amount of dying that is going on. Assad—and the Islamists he is fighting—have killed and maimed far more innocent civilians with conventional weapons than with chemical ones. The use of chemical weapons does not represent a fundamental shift in the nature of the war, which was already a total war waged without restraint against civilians by all sides (would that there were only two sides in Syria).

Insofar as Trump's action is concerned, it is best characterized as a punitive strike. And as punitive strikes go, it is modest. It bears more similarity to Clinton strikes in Iraq (e.g., Desert Fox) than Reagan's Operation El Dorado Canyon in 1986, which put the fear of god into Gaddafi: a 2000 pound bomb dropped near one's tent has a tendency to do that. In contrast, Thursday's Tomahawk detonations wouldn't have disturbed Assad's sleep in the slightest, let alone put him in mortal danger.

The record of such punitive actions in curbing the misbehavior of bad actors like Saddam or even Gaddafi is hardly encouraging, but at least the downside (to the US) of such indulgences of the Jupiter Complex is rather limited. The concern is that the raid turns out to be ineffectual in moderating Assad's behavior and leads to Trump to escalate, and to make regime change—

rather than a change of regime behavior—the objective. The neocons are celebrating and baying for more: that should be a cause for serious concern.

And I don't think that this was exclusively about Syria, or even primarily so. The Tomahawks might have landed in Syria, but in a very real sense they were aimed at North Korea. It is significant that Trump launched the attack while Chinese premier Xi was still digesting the steak he had eaten with the president.

Russia is clearly processing the message. The Russians are obviously angered. One would think that this puts paid to the Trump is Putin's bitch narrative. But that would assume sanity on the part of the left and the Never Trumpers, who are anything but sane.

The prospects for some rapprochement between the US and Russia were already on life support, now they appear to be dead and buried. This reinforces a point I've made for months: that if Putin really did think that a Trump presidency would be better for him than a Clinton one, he made a grave miscalculation. This event proves that Trump is predictably unpredictable, and that he is completely capable of a *volte face* at a moment's notice. The word I used was "protean", and the decision to fire off a barrage of cruise missiles after months-years, in fact-of criticizing the idea of American intervention in Syria is about as protean as you get.

This points to a broader message. For all his alleged *tactical* acumen, Putin has stumbled from one *strategic* blunder to another. It is highly unlikely that Russian involvement, whatever it was, materially impacted the US election: its impact has been exaggerated for purely partisan and psychological reasons. It is also highly unlikely that any Russian meddling in European elections will sway them in favor of pro-Putin candidates.

But Russia has paid a steep price for these equivocal gains: Russian actions have created political firestorms not just in the US but in Europe that have actually increased Russian isolation. Hysteria in America about Russian meddling in US politics is vastly overblown, and has been ginned up for partisan reasons, but that is irrelevant as a practical matter: it has made the US-Russia relationship more adversarial than it has been since the height of the Cold War, and that works to Russia's detriment.

His support for Assad in Syria has had similar effects. Yes, Putin achieved his immediate objective: Assad has survived, and looks likely to prevail. But Russia has only cemented its pariah status. The chemical attack makes it even more than a pariah. For what? Syria's strategic value is minimal.

Indeed, the chemical attack is not just a crime, but a blunder, and puts Putin and Russia in an even worse spot. The action appears so militarily unnecessary and politically counterproductive that like [Scott Adams](#), it raises doubts in my mind as to whether Assad actually ordered it. (The alternative explanations include a rogue general or a false flag carried out by the opposition.) But this is largely irrelevant: Assad is almost universally blamed, and as his stalwart defender, Putin and Russia have been deemed guilty of being accessories to and enablers of what is just as universally considered a war crime. By going all in for Assad, Putin made himself vulnerable to this. (That might provide a Machiavellian motive for Assad's action: maybe he thought that the chemical attack would bind Putin even more closely to him.)

So by intervening in Syria, and defending Assad even in the aftermath of a widely reviled chemical attack, what has Putin gained? Yes, he had the satisfaction of showing Obama (and in his mind, the US as a whole) to be feckless, all grandiose talk and no action. He could claim to have reversed Russia's retreat from the Middle East. He could assert that Russia is back and

must be reckoned with in world affairs. He apparently experienced great personal satisfaction as a result of these accomplishments.

But viewed more soberly, these gains are more than offset by losses on the other side of the ledger. Russia is isolated, distrusted, feared, and reviled. It's not entirely fair, but it should have been predictable. Moreover, nothing that Putin has done has improved what the Soviets called the correlation of forces. Indeed, although Russia has rejuvenated its military to some degree, other elements of national power (relative to the US) have slipped since 2008, and a Trump presidency will almost certainly erase the relative change in military power that occurred during Russian rearmament and the American sequester.

The simple fact is that other than in nuclear weapons, Russia cannot compete with the US, let alone the entire west. By achieving limited victories in strategic backwaters like Syria, all Putin has succeeded in doing is goading the US and the west into viewing him as a threat and sparking a competition that he can't win.

But Putin has staked a great deal on Syria, in terms of both national and personal prestige. He is not the kind of man to back down and lose face after putting down such a stake. For his part, after claiming benign indifference to who rules Syria, the protean Trump has reversed course, and in so doing has put his own reputation on the line over who rules there, or at least how the man who rules there behaves. That is a combustible mix, and I have no idea how it will turn out.

But I am sure of how things will *not* turn out. Sore election losers' dystopian fantasy of Trump selling out to Putin will never become reality. In fact, the reverse is more likely. Indeed, this could develop into a reversal of Reagan-Gorbachev. Then, two bitter antagonists found enough common ground to come to an understanding and ratchet down Cold War tensions. Now, two alleged members of a mutual admiration society are likely to find themselves in an increasingly antagonistic relationship, in yet further proof of my axiom that if you want to find the truth, you could do far worse than to invert elite conventional wisdom.

Streetwise Professor **[Down the Syrian Rabbit Hole](#)**

by Craig Pirrong

The Syria story has many threads. I'll address a few of them here.

First, to follow on Ex-Regulator's comment: Trump's initial public justification for the strike—the humanitarian impulse stirred by pictures of dying children—is deeply troubling. Sentimentality is a poor basis for policy. In particular, it has no limiting principle. If you take a tragic view of humanity—if you view mankind as fallen and flawed—you know that there is a virtually unending supply of sad, heartbreaking, stories. So how does a president choose which appeal to answer? And how do people know which appeals he will answer? Truth is, we have no idea. The line will be arbitrary, which leads to unpredictable, inconsistent policy.

Further, as Ex-Reg notes, by emphasizing his susceptibility to sentimentality, Trump makes himself a target for manipulation. These manipulations are likely to include false flags whereby those attempting to get the US to intervene on their side create an outrage to pin on their opponents: it cannot be precluded that this occurred in Syria last week.

Second, in subsequent remarks by others than Trump, the administration has downplayed the humanitarian aspect, and emphasized the signaling motivation. Moreover, it has explicitly stated that the signal was not directed at Assad alone, or even Putin and Assad, but also at Kim Jung Un and the Chinese.

My concern here is the Rolling Thunder problem: the signal that you think you are sending through a limited use of force is not necessarily the signal that your intended audience hears. What happened in Vietnam during the Johnson years was that graduated escalation was interpreted by Ho Chi Minh *et al* as weakness, and as an unwillingness to take decisive action. Assad or Kim Jung Rolly Poly may conclude that they can easily absorb a strike like the one launched Thursday night, and that Trump may not be willing to go much further. Or, they may conclude that (a) this strike was so modest, (b) Trump is likely to engage in graduated escalation if he escalates at all, and (c) they can absorb much heavier blows. Either way, they could be encouraged, rather than deterred.

Lesson from Vietnam (pun intended): if you want to achieve a decisive outcome, Linebacker trumps Rolling Thunder.

Of course, one reason for Johnson's reticence in Vietnam was the risk of drawing in the USSR or China. That's obviously an issue in Syria and North Korea. But if that is the real concern, don't even start down the road with a limited strike. If you do, eventually you will pull up short and look feckless.

Third, the administration is sending extremely mixed signals. Last week, Tillerson said point blank that regime change was not on the administration's agenda. This morning, Nikki Haley intimated that it is. Given that no matter how horrid the Assad regime any successor is likely to be as bad or worse, that regime change is even on the table is highly disturbing.

Fourth, assessing whether the chemical attack was a false flag or a regime attack requires an evaluation of the plausibility that Assad would do such a thing. As Dearieme and Ex-Reg note, and as I noted initially, it does not seem rational for Assad to have taken this action. It certainly was not a military necessity. But people like Assad think differently, and there may be some Machiavellian reason for him to take this action.

One is that he, like everyone else, is trying to fathom Trump's policy, and Trump himself. Therefore, Assad ran a calculated risk to see how Trump would respond to a pretty extreme provocation. As suggested above, he might be pleased with the answer (contrary to DC conventional wisdom).

Another is that he needed to bind Russia and Iran closer to him. Again running a calculated risk that they would stand with him rather than abandon him (for that would call into question their previous policy of support), he launched this attack and forced them to be complicit in a very inflammatory war crime.

Relatedly, one of Assad's big fears has to be a rapprochement between Russia and the US that would make him expendable. The Russians had guaranteed that he had eliminated chemical weapons. That guarantee is now shown to be inoperative, either due to (as Tillerson said) deliberate deception or incompetence. Regardless, now no deal with the Russians regarding Assad can be considered credible. This reduces the risk that the Russians will be able to cut a deal with Trump that makes Assad expendable.

I have no idea whether these possibilities are realities. I just put them out there to highlight that there can be twisted motives that cause people like Assad to take actions that seem to be against their interest—just as there can be twisted motives for jihadis to kill their own in horrible ways.

Fifth, Occam's Razor would say that Trump's attack completely undercuts the narrative that he is Putin's bitch. But Occam's Razor is an alien concept in the fever swamps of the left. The certifiably insane (Louise Mensch) and the hyper partisan but *supposedly* sane (Lawrence O'Donnell, Chris Matthews) certain have never shaved with it. They are claiming that this *proves* Trump is Putin's bitch! The "reasoning"? He is doing it because the most likely interpretation is that it shows that Trump isn't Putin's bitch, so that means that he is! Or something.

In other words, this lot interprets *everything* that Trump does as evidence of his collusion with the Russians. This means that the hypothesis that he is in collusion with Putin is unfalsifiable, and hence is junk reasoning. It should therefore be rejected, as should anything that those who espouse this theory say.

Lastly, the attack is a complete embarrassment to the Obama administration, which preened and bragged that it had rid the Assad regime of chemical weapons. All of the administration weasels—Susan Rice, Ben Rhodes, Colin Kahl among them—have been quick to defend the administration. Although Obama remains silent, their voices were joined by the next most authoritative one—John Kerry—who ranted against the airstrike. He claimed that the Obama administration had accomplished MUCH more without firing so much as a shot, and that Trump's attack will undermine all of the great progress that had been achieved.

But watch the weasels' weasel words. They all say that the 2013 agreement eliminated all of Assad's **declared** chemical weapons. Um, the criticism of the deal all along was that Assad might have undeclared stocks, and hence might retain a chemical capability despite the deal. It is beyond embarrassing that these people would protest so stridently that their deal was great in the face of an event which most likely shows that it was a complete, and completely predictable, sham.

So is Kerry's outraged response to the Tomahawk Chop delusional? Chutzpah? I'm going with delusional chutzpah.

It's almost tax time. So I suggest that you implement the following strategy, and cite the authority of John Kerry as justification. Report 50 percent of your actual income on your 2016 1040. When the IRS comes after you, tell them—in high dudgeon: How dare you! I paid all I owed on my **DECLARED** income! Good luck! I'll write you in jail!

The alternative explanation for the chemical attack—a false flag—hardly provides any cover for Obama and the Obamaites because that would mean that the chemical attack was launched by opposition forces that the administration supported. So, either the administration entered into a farcical deal, and was played the fool by Assad, or it was played the fool by anti-Assad forces whom it had supported.

People with any decency would don sackcloth and ashes and plead forgiveness. But we are talking about the Obama administration, so . . .

Perhaps there will be more clarity on all these issues in coming days and weeks. But I kind of doubt it. Any venture into understanding Syria is a trip down the rabbit hole. And given the

depravity of all the actors involved, that's yet further reason to stay as far away from this mess as is humanly possible.

Dilbert's Blog

[The Syrian Air Base Attack](#)

by Scott Adams

As I [blogged yesterday](#), the claim that Assad ordered a chemical attack on his own people in the past week doesn't pass my sniff test. For Assad to order a gas attack now – while his side is finally winning – he would have to be willing to risk his life and his regime for no real military advantage. I'm not buying that.

But let's say the world believes Assad **or a rogue general under his command** gassed his own people. What's an American President to do? If Trump does nothing, he appears weak, and it invites mischief from other countries. But if he launches 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian military air base within a few days, which he did, the U.S. gets several benefits at low cost:

1. President Trump just solved for the allegation that he is Putin's puppet. He doesn't look like Putin's puppet today. And that was Trump's biggest problem, which made it America's problem too. No one wants a president who is under a cloud of suspicion about Russian influence.
2. President Trump solved (partly) the allegation that he is incompetent. You can hate this military action, but even Trump's critics will call it measured and rational. Like it or not, President Trump's credibility is likely to rise because of this, if not his popularity. Successful military action does that for presidents.
3. President Trump just set the table for his conversations with China about North Korea. Does China doubt Trump will take care of the problem in China's own backyard if they don't take care of it themselves? That negotiation just got easier.
4. Iran might be feeling a bit more flexible when it's time to talk about their nuclear program.
5. Trump's plan of a Syrian Safe Zone requires dominating the Syrian Air Force for security. That just got easier.
6. After ISIS is sufficiently beaten-back, the Syrian government will need to negotiate with the remaining entities in Syria to form a lasting peace of some sort that keeps would-be refugees in place. Syria's government just got more flexible. It probably wants to keep the rest of its military.
7. Israel is safer whenever an adversary's air power is degraded.

On the risk side of the equation, we have the possibility of getting into war with Russia. I'd put those odds at roughly zero in this case because obviously the U.S. warned Russia about the attack. That means we knew their reaction before we attacked. And it was a measured response of the type Putin probably respects. I expect Russia to complain a lot but continue to partner with the U.S. against ISIS.

If it turns out that the sarin gas attack that sparked this military action didn't come from Assad, it doesn't much matter. President Trump will bank all of the benefits above even if the attack turns out to be a hoax. We know Assad had some chemical weapons at one point, and probably used them. No one will be crying for Assad if the attack was unnecessary. And realistically, the public will never be 100% sure who was behind the attack.

I doubt this is the first step in a larger plan for war to depose Assad. But if Assad thinks it might be, we have a stronger position over there.

I'm not pro-war, so this military action alarms me the same way it alarms most people. But objectively speaking, the risk-reward ratio for this attack on Syria's air field was exceptionally good. You rarely see so many benefits arise from one limited military action.

I thought President Trump would hold off on military action in the service of regime change. That still seems to be the case. But once our intelligence services traced the plane that allegedly dropped the gas back to a specific air base, it opened the option that Trump took. I didn't realize that our military knows what every aircraft in Syria is doing at all times. That's impressive, bordering on hard-to-believe.

McClatchy

[What Trump's attack on Syria did – and did not – do](#)

by Andrew Malcolm

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It will, however, alter the strategic calculus in many places within but also far beyond the troubled Middle East. Politically, the missiles also likely blasted any attempted allegations that Trump is a Putin patsy. Watch upcoming job approval polls for the popular verdict.

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As columnist Charles Krauthammer aptly put it, following eight years of relative apathy and inaction after worse war crimes, the message from the new American president was not that there's a new sheriff in town, but that there IS a sheriff in town.

Trump campaigned against the U.S. military being a global policeman. This single strike doesn't mean that's changed. His justification was based on the paramount importance of U.S. national security.

"It is in the vital national security interest of the United States," Trump said, "to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons. . . . Years of previous attempts at changing Assad's behavior have all failed, and failed very dramatically. As a result, the refugee crisis continues to deepen and the region continues to destabilize, threatening the United States and its allies."

It does mean, however, that America's allies, especially Sunni Arab states like Jordan and Saudi Arabia that were awaiting U.S. leadership, are encouraged. The Saudis have even offered troops to fight ISIS.

It does mean that bad actors such as Syria, Iran, Russia and even loopy North Korea must now factor in Trump's proven willingness to exercise American clout when he perceives a national security threat.

After the sarin gas attack with photos of babies gasping for air, Trump acted swiftly and decisively. But not, as critics fretted last year, wildly. He could have attacked all six Syrian airfields. He could have ordered Special Forces to simultaneously move in eastern Syria.

Instead, Trump targeted only the specific airfield that launched the gas attack. It was a measured response. No new ground troops. Not even pilots risking capture.

U.S. missiles were programmed to ignore structures storing gas components and barracks housing several hundred Russians. In fact, U.S. officers gave them an hour's notice to get out of the way, one reason Moscow's subsequent denunciation was measured.

Even chronic critics like fellow New Yorker Sen. Chuck Schumer found it hard to argue.

It was in striking contrast to President Barack Obama, who on Aug. 20, 2012, said of Syria, "A red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus. That would change my equation."

That was one of several times Obama got himself in trouble when not using a teleprompter. A year later Assad used chemical weapons again, killing more than 1,000. Obama threatened an attack as Secretary of State John Kerry reassured how minor it would be.

Then they allowed Russian leader Vladimir Putin, Assad's chief backer, to placate them with a plan to allegedly remove Assad's chemical weapons stockpile. In the end, Obama did nothing, blaming congressional inertia.

Clearly, that Russian guarantee was not honored, a point hammered home by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson last week: "Either Russia has been complicit, or Russia has been simply incompetent in its ability to deliver on its end of that agreement." Tillerson's upcoming scheduled visit to Moscow could prove interesting.

Is this the end of it? Not likely. With the help of Russia and Iran, Assad is still winning. He could take the missile lesson. Or he could defy it and risk further attacks, as warned by U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley. Trump's staff must now include congressional consultations on his thinking.

But Trump's action has also now become a new certainty that other international troublemakers must include in their assessments of American power.

Mitch McConnell with the nuclear option





The Modern-Day
Liberal Minded
President Trump
Survival Kit





4000 Years & we are back
to same language 😊🤔



2006 B.C. vs 2016 A.D.

