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Trump's War Policy in Syria

LONDON – Clearly, the last word has not been said about the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province, Syria, on April 4, which left 85 dead and an estimated 555 injured. But three points – concerning responsibility for the attack, the United States' military response to it, and the episode's effect on the course of Syria's civil war – need to be made.

First, all governments lie, not congenitally, but when it suits them and they think they can get away with it. This must be the premise of any effort to establish the truth about what happened. A good starting point is that democratic governments lie less often than authoritarian regimes, because they are less likely to get away with it. So one should prefer Russian President Vladimir Putin's account to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's, and US President Donald Trump's account to Putin's.

According to Assad, the massacre was a "fabrication." Putin, by contrast, admits that the massacre happened, but claims that the stock of chemical weapons was in rebel-held territory and was released either deliberately, to discredit the regime, or accidentally by government bombing. Finally, the Trump administration cites

conclusive evidence that the attack was planned and carried out by the Assad government. All three call for an “objective” inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the “event,” but disagree on what would count as “objective.”

Although Trump’s evidence has not been revealed, I think it is more likely than not that there was a sarin gas attack and that it was ordered by the Assad regime. But there is room for doubt. Assuming that Assad is not completely irrational, the relatively minor military gains from gassing some of the rebels (but also civilians) would be heavily outweighed by the probable effect on international opinion, embarrassment for his Russian allies, and the danger of provoking an American response. Moreover, to justify invading Iraq in 2003, the United States (and the United Kingdom) produced equally “conclusive” evidence that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, which turned out to be false. And the growth of the “security state” has increased democratic governments’ ability to get away with lies.

The second point is that Trump has revealed his psychological instability. His goal as president, he has constantly proclaimed, is to repair the US economy, not to be the world’s policeman. He repeatedly warned Obama not to get into a “shooting war” in Syria. Yet he did precisely that by launching 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian air base three days after the massacre at Khan Sheikhoun. He may indeed have experienced a spasm of emotion when he saw images of dead and dying children on TV, as has been widely reported; but visual evidence of Assad’s bloody methods has long been available.

Whether his response was indeed emotional, born of frustration at the failure of his domestic policy initiatives, designed to frighten North Korea, or a mixture of the three, it fits what psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman has labeled System 1 thinking: the propensity to respond impulsively to complex problems when more careful deliberation (System 2 thinking) is called for.

Trump’s impulsiveness is the stuff of nightmares, not only because it makes him exploitable by those with more deliberate agendas, but also because he commands so many deadly toys. Contrast his System 1 response to the sarin attack with the very deliberate reaction in October 1962 by President John F. Kennedy and his advisers to Nikita Khrushchev’s siting of nuclear missiles in Cuba.

The third point is that US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's statement in Moscow that the "reign of the Assad family is coming to an end" makes no sense. Of the 16 million Syrians who remain in Syria, 65.5% live in government-held territory. Unless Tillerson has in mind a hidden policy to remove Assad by assassination or coup, insisting on his departure as a condition of a political settlement in Syria amounts to prolonging the civil war: more armed support for the opposition will mean more Russian backing for the regime.

Either way, America's policy, insofar as it has one, is simply a war policy, with no time limit and incalculable consequences. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies coyly put it after the Tomahawk strike: "If it appears that Trump is on the way to reaching an appropriate policy equilibrium, his impulsiveness, ignorance of international affairs, unsystematic nature, native contrariness and 'transactional' disposition probably preclude the coalescence of a distinctive "Trump doctrine."

A prudent foreign policy is completely different from a "proportional" response to a specific event, because it involves establishing the ends that the chosen means are supposed to serve. In other words, foreign policy requires strategic thinking. Trump has shown no evidence of it; in fact, his policy impulsiveness risks digging an even deeper hole for Syria, into which the US, Britain, and Russia will be sucked.

In 1903, a student at the University of Cambridge, one John Maynard Keynes, wrote an essay on the conservative philosopher Edmund Burke, in which appears a pearl of wisdom for our own time. "In addition to the risk involved by any violent method of progress," Keynes argues, "there is this further consideration that is often in need of emphasis: it is not sufficient that the state of affairs which we seek to promote should be better than the state of affairs which preceded it; it must be sufficiently better to make up for the evils of the transition."

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