

The Imperialist Logic Behind Trump's Attack on Syria

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Within a few days in April, the Trump administration pivoted away from its nearly open support for the Assad regime to a military attack on it. This was followed by harsh language against Russia, the setting off of a huge bomb in Afghanistan, and the dispatch of an aircraft carrier armed with nuclear weapons toward North Korea.

What is behind this apparent pivot away from Assad and Russia? What has really changed in terms of the logic of US imperialism since the November election and especially since the attack on Syria?

Let us first look at the facts, in chronological order. In late March and early April, highly placed US figures, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, stated publicly that the Assad regime was a reality on the ground. He and others implied that the US would no longer oppose the murderous Assad, but seek to work with him against ISIS. This, after all, had been Trump's position during the campaign and since.

On April 4, possibly feeling he had received a green light to do so from the US, Assad's planes dropped what most observers have concluded were chemical weapons on the town of Khan Shekhoun, Idlib Province, in a rebel-held area, killing over 70 people. This attack was videoed and broadcast by local witnesses. Trump immediately started shedding crocodile tears over the innocent victims, including babies. (He said nothing about Assad's nearly 500,000 other victims.) Within less than 48 hours, Trump launched a missile attack on the Syrian airbase from which the planes had taken off, destroying some structures on the ground but leaving both the runways intact and warning the Russians (and thus their allies the Syrians) to get their aircraft and personnel out of the way ahead of time. Trump gave the final order for the attack while meeting with Chinese Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping, just as he had launched his travel ban on Muslims during a visit by British Prime Minister Theresa May. Both of these diplomatic gaffes may simply show the arrogant unilateralism of the Trump administration.

In the week that followed the attack on the airbase, the Trump administration attacked both Syria and Russia verbally, saying that they would not permit chemical weapons to be used again, and blaming Russia for not having stopped the chemical attack. Suddenly, administration spokespersons also announced that Assad should step down. In the same days, a US aircraft carrier was dispatched toward North Korea and a huge "conventional" bomb was dropped on Afghanistan targeting ISIS.

Why did Assad launch the chemical weapons attack, in violation of international law and of his own agreement of 2013, guaranteed by Russia and the United Nations, to give up all his chemical weapons? Here, the Trump administration bears a lot of responsibility, for having given him what he apparently thought was a green light for such an attack. Also, Assad may have thought that such an

exercise in impunity would demoralize the opposition further in the wake of his recent military victories in Aleppo.

For its part, the Trump administration may have launched its attack because it was embarrassed by the use of chemical weapons on its watch, as an offense to what imperialist logic considers to be the maintenance of order and stability. In the kind of logic the US regularly uses with regard to bloodthirsty dictators, its attack and the explanation for it told Syria that it could not use chemical weapons, but said nothing about dropping barrel bombs, torture, mass rape, and other ongoing war crimes against the Syrian people. Nor did Trump's supposed sympathy for dying babies extend to the numerous Syrian babies trying to enter the US as refugees, as he continues to try to implement his travel ban on entry from a number of Muslim countries. Trump may also have wanted to divert attention from the investigations of his campaign for ties to Russian intelligence services.

What, if anything has changed since the US election in November — and in the past week — with respect to relations among the US, Russia, and Syria?

Overall, it is unclear if anything fundamental has actually changed with regard to the US and the Middle East since Trump's election, certainly with regard to Syria. Ever since 2013, the US has been signaling that it wants to leave the Syrian regime in place, while also saying publicly that it wants Assad to step down. Under Obama, the US kept criticizing Russia and Iran for propping him up. Since 2013, the US under Obama has also said that targeting the horrific, reactionary fundamentalists of ISIS is its main aim, not opposing Assad. Trump had been saying more or less the same thing, but one major difference: refraining from calling upon Assad to step down, or from criticizing Russia. This past week, however, Trump suddenly said Assad should step down, after having launched his telegenic but merely symbolic attack on Syria.

Meanwhile, the US continues to aid Saudi Arabia in its brutal air campaign against the people of Yemen, something begun under Obama that almost never comes up in the corporate media. Under Trump, the US has also minimized even further than usual any criticism of Israel's settlements and occupation of Palestinian land, and said nothing as Israeli policy makers hint another war on Gaza may occur sooner rather than later. Trump has also carried somewhat further Obama's eventual embrace of dictators like General Al-Sisi in Egypt, as the Arab revolutions have moved from ascendancy to defeat. Once again, these "order-mongering powers," as Marx liked to say, tend to prefer stability, even that of the graveyard, so long as capital accumulation can continue.

The Trump administration has also used bellicose language toward Iran, falsely calling it the biggest supporter of terrorism. In addition to Trump himself, this attitude is shared by the supposedly more mainstream military leaders with whom he has peopled his national security apparatus, an attitude also shared by the Republican Party as a whole and by Israel. (On Iran, there is no daylight between white nationalists and neofascists in the White House like Steve Bannon and mainstream Republicans.) In apparent response to the Trump administration's public threats, Iran's most reactionary politician, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, reared his head in April, announcing that he might run for president next year. Whether anything will come of Trump's military threats against Iran, or of his attacks on the Iran-US-UN nuclear agreement, remains to be seen. But inside Iran, Ahmadinejad's reappearance suggests that Trump has already given ammunition to some of Iran's most reactionary elements. Thus, Iran policy is one area where Trump, at least so far, has adopted a stance somewhat different from that of the Obama administration, but this is nothing new for the US Republican Party itself. Whether this is all bluster toward Iran, or a real danger of war, is something that remains to be seen.

But the wild rhetoric of Trump and others in his administration, plus his having placed generals rather than diplomats in so many high positions, creates dangers of miscalculation, or worse, in a

world where nuclear weapons abound. Nowhere is this more the case than in the Middle East and the Korean peninsula.

As we protest Trump's war moves abroad and war on the American people at home, we cannot turn our backs upon the suffering in places like Iran or Syria at the hands of regimes that the US is targeting. In this sense, it was an outrage that at some of the demonstrations against Trump's attack on Syria, leading participants carried pro-Assad banners. We need to acknowledge that noxious ideological pollution is emanating not only from the Trump administration, but also from some parts of the Left who are willing to give anyone — Assad, Putin, Kim Jong-il, Khamenei — a pass, so long as they oppose US imperialism, or appear to do so. Otherwise the humanist content of our revolutionary opposition to Trump will be endangered.

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