

Polizette

Trump Strike Brings Risk of Entanglement or ‘Red Line’ Moment

Initial intervention could force expanded U.S. role in messy Syrian conflict

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In deciding on a missile strike against Syria on Thursday, President Donald Trump is still at risk of creating his own “red line” moment, according to foreign policy experts from across the political spectrum.

Trump took the first step Thursday night, launching 50 to 60 Tomahawk cruise missiles at an air base in Syria. That came hours after the president told reporters on Air Force One, “something should happen.”

“He [Trump] issued this kind of awkward post-hoc red line. In that sense, it was kind of nonsensical and not strategic.”

After an initial low-key response to reports that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had used suspected sarin gas to kill at least 70 people, Trump surprised observers by how forcefully he condemned the regime during a joint appearance Wednesday at the White House Rose Garden with Jordanian King Abdullah II.

“It crossed a lot of lines for me,” he said. “When you kill innocent children, innocent babies ... with a chemical gas that is so lethal — people were shocked to hear what gas it was — that crosses many, many lines.”

To some, that sounds a lot like former President Barack Obama's infamous declaration in August 2012 that the use of chemical weapons would cross a “red line.” But after Syrians did, in fact, use sarin gas a year later to kill some 1,400 people outside of Damascus. Obama opted against military action. Instead, he negotiated a deal with Syria and Russian President Vladimir Putin in which Assad agreed to get rid of his chemical weapons stockpile — an agreement it now seems he failed to honor.

Obama's critics ever since have argued that American credibility took a hit as a result.

Experts who spoke to LifeZette before Thursday's missile strike described the risk of venturing into the messy Syrian civil war. John Glaser, associate director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that leaders usually draw red lines to deter actions, not respond to them.

"He [Trump] issued this kind of awkward post-hoc red line," he said. "In that sense, it was kind of nonsensical and not strategic.

Dramatic Reversal?

Military action in Syria represents a dramatic reversal of one of Trump's core campaign pledges — avoiding entanglement in the Middle East. He promised to focus on narrow engagement designed to take out the Islamic State terrorist organization but steer clear of long, open-ended military operations such as Iraq and Afghanistan. He even suggested that Russia could be an ally in the region.

Robert Kaufman, a Pepperdine University political science professor and a foreign-policy hawk who was highly critical of Obama, said Trump needs to develop clear policy goals and remain vague until he decides what steps to take. LifeZette.com

"It's very important not to issue a red line unless you're going to deliver on it," he said. "He needs to be very careful of that ... I would cultivate ambiguity."

Wading into Syria is fraught with peril, according to experts, who agreed that removing Assad from power without an unlikely diplomatic solution could not reasonably be accomplished without committing tens of thousands of soldiers and a willingness to stick around for a long-term occupation.

What's more, experts warn, fighting against the Assad regime risks a confrontation with Russia — which already has troops fighting on the side of the government and has deep ties in the country.

"The problem with Syria is that there are no good outcomes," said Ariel Cohen, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Complicating matters is that the Syrian civil war has multiple competing and overlapping factions, he said. Fighting Assad could result in strengthening ISIS and rebranded al-Qaida factions that are fighting alongside U.S.-backed rebels.

Cohen said the opposite strategy has the reverse perils.

"What is our preferred outcome? Is it fighting ISIS only?" he asked. "That would de facto ... put us on the same side with people we don't want to be on the same side with."

'Not The Muscle for the Arab Regimes'

Cohen said one option would be to organize an expeditionary force of friendly Arab counties to do the fighting on the ground, with U.S. air support. But he said that has risks as well.

"We need to very clearly understand where our interests lie and separate them from Arab interests," he said. "We are not the muscle for the Arab regimes."

Kaufman, author of "Dangerous Doctrine: How Obama's Grand Strategy Weakened America," said Trump has more limited options. He said the president could, for instance, destroy Syria's air force. That would send a message to both to Assad and Putin, while at the same time undermining domestic allegations of Trump's supposed Russia ties.

"This could be a two for one for him," he said.

But Glaser, the Cato scholar, said limited military action is unlikely to change the Syrian regime's behavior. What's more, he said, "mission creep" eventually could pull America deeper into the quagmire. A larger military commitment "very likely would exacerbate the humanitarian suffering" that provoked the response in the first place, he added.

Glaser said it is worrying the Trump appears to be backtracking on his campaign promises and boxing himself in. And he warned of unintended consequences.

"If you succeeded in bombing the regime out of existence, the problem is a massive power vacuum that results," he said.

And virulently anti-American interests could fill that vacuum, Glaser said.

Cohen said Trump should study Obama's missteps carefully before committing to action.

"They say that smart people learn from the mistakes of others, and stupid people learn from their own," he said. "I think that the president will learn from President Obama's mistakes and not box himself in."