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National security team springs to action after Trump warns of Syria strike

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President Trump warned Syria and Russia on Wednesday of an imminent U.S. military strike, promising that missiles targeting Syria “will be coming” and criticizing Moscow for defending Syrian President Bashar Assad and his arsenal of chemical weapons.

While Syrian and Russian forces were spotted digging in and moving equipment in preparation for an attack, Mr. Trump’s national security team held an afternoon meeting at the White House chaired by Vice President Mike Pence to review military options.

Mr. Trump’s early-morning tweet set off alarms in capitals around the world and a scramble by administration officials to ensure allies and adversaries that the U.S. government was developing a coordinated response to the crisis.

In Moscow, President Vladimir Putin expressed hope that “common sense would prevail,” as Russia and Syria continued to deny any knowledge of a chemical attack that killed at least 40 in Douma, which was one of the last enclaves near Damascus still in the hands of anti-government rebels.

Hours after Mr. Trump’s Twitter threat, Defense Secretary James Mattis told reporters at the Pentagon that the U.S. and its allies were “still assessing the intelligence” from the weekend’s attack.

“We’re still working on this,” said Mr. Mattis, who later attended the national security meeting. “We stand ready to provide military options [that are] appropriate as the president determined.”

Despite many previous comments that he did not like to “telegraph” his military intentions, Mr. Trump appeared to signal on Twitter that an attack by the U.S. and its allies was a certainty. He ridiculed Moscow’s claim that it can shoot down any U.S. missiles over Syria.

“Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and ‘smart!’ You shouldn’t be partners with a Gas Killing Animal who kills his people and enjoys it!” Mr. Trump tweeted, in a reference to Mr. Assad.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry said Mr. Trump’s threats were reckless and endangered international peace and security.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Facebook that “smart” missiles would destroy any evidence of a chemical weapons attack.

Although the U.S. and its allies say the evidence of a chemical weapons attack is strong, any sizable strike on Syria carries major risks, given the considerable number of Russian and Iranian forces on the ground backing the Assad government and the presence of a 2,000-strong U.S. military deployment in eastern Syria still battling the Islamic State terrorist movement.

The president’s threat of retaliatory military action prompted a slew of Russian comments warning that U.S. strikes could trigger a direct military clash between the nuclear-armed, onetime Cold War rivals.

A top Russian lawmaker said the Russian navy will engage its warships in the Mediterranean Sea to protect Russian assets in Syria from any U.S. strike, The Associated Press reported.

Alexei Kondratyev, a deputy head of the upper house’s defense committee, said that in addition to ground-based air defense systems that Russia has in Syria, the Russian navy in the eastern Mediterranean will be involved in fending off any attack.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders argued that Russia bears responsibility for the atrocity last weekend because the Kremlin guaranteed in 2013 to oversee the removal of Syria’s chemical weapons — a guarantee President Obama cited at the time as one reason he backed away from military action. She said in late afternoon that Mr. Trump hadn’t made a final decision on an attack.

“The president has a number of options at his disposal,” she said. “The president has not laid out a timetable.”

Preparing for an attack

After Mr. Trump’s tweet, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — a British-based war monitor with a network of sources on the ground — reported that government forces were emptying main airports and military air bases in anticipation for an attack. Mr. Trump launched a cruise missile salvo at a Syrian air base shortly after taking office last year after another suspected Syrian chemical weapons attack on civilians.

The Russian military said Wednesday that it had observed movements of U.S. naval forces in the Gulf. Any U.S. strike would probably involve the Navy in waters within range of Syria, given the risk to aircraft from Russian and Syrian air defense systems. A U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer, the USS Donald Cook, is in the Mediterranean.

U.S. officials have been consulting with global allies on a possible joint military response to the poison gas attack. France, which has been particularly critical of the Assad government, said it would consider a response with the U.S. and Britain. Saudi Arabia said it would support a military operation in Syria, and military analysts believe Israel was behind an airstrike on some Syrian military positions over the weekend.

In London, British Prime Minister Theresa May called an emergency meeting of her Cabinet to discuss Syria, and British submarines have reportedly been ordered to move within missile range of the country.

Mr. Trump canceled a trip to the Western Hemisphere summit in Peru this week, in part at the urging of new national security adviser John R. Bolton, to manage the crisis that is testing his vow to stand up to Mr. Assad.

While Syria and Russia continue to deny that a chemical attack took place Sunday in Douma, the World Health Organization said Wednesday that about 500 people had been treated for “signs and symptoms consistent with exposure to toxic chemicals” in the rebel enclave just before it fell.

Civilians in government-held areas in Syria expressed a mix of fear and defiance. Social media pages were flush with angry comments, mostly from government supporters, some lamenting Syria’s perpetual conflict and others taunting Mr. Trump to go through with his threats.

“They have threatened us a thousand times. Let them go through with it or shut up,” a participant said in an online poll asking if Syrians were afraid of a U.S. attack.

“We have become accustomed to such threats that aim to frighten the Syrian people,” said Marwan Ghata, 66, an engineer. “We will not leave our houses, and our army is ready to retaliate.”

As the Trump administration weighed its next move, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee urged Mr. Trump to ensure that any military attack is “regime-threatening” for Syria. Sen. Mike Rounds, South Dakota Republican, said the U.S. should target Mr. Assad’s “command-and-control system.”

“This one’s got to be a very serious, a very regime-threatening attack,” Mr. Rounds said on “The Hugh Hewitt Show.” “Remember, this guy’s already been warned once. This is one that should be noticed not just by the Assad regime, but by Iran and by Russia as well, very clearly.”

Russia and Iran are providing the Assad government with military support in Syria’s 7-year-old civil war.

Congress weighs in

Some lawmakers, meanwhile, warned the administration not to take action against Syria without a congressional authorization of military force. Sen. Edward J. Markey, Massachusetts Democrat and a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, criticized Mr. Trump’s threats that he intends to conduct military strikes.

“Before President Trump conducts military operations, he must come to Congress for authorization,” Mr. Markey said. “Numerous, large-scale attacks on another country without congressional authorization are unconstitutional, and they push the United States closer to what could be an interminable, all-out conflict in Syria. And announcing military actions over Twitter

is the height of irresponsibility and contradicts the president's own previous commitment never to disclose America's plans publicly.”

Michael Rubin, a former Pentagon official and Middle East specialist at the American Enterprise Institute, said there are legitimate reasons for the U.S. to target Mr. Assad personally. He said killing Mr. Assad would be “the ultimate deterrent to dictators” who use chemical weapons or sponsor terrorism.

“There is nothing absolute about the prohibition on targeting world leaders,” Mr. Rubin wrote this week in *The Washington Examiner*.

But John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, said Mr. Trump should “back down” from his threats of an attack against Syria. He said any military strike would be illegal because it hasn't been authorized by Congress.

“No U.S. military action short of all-out regime change is going to deter the Assad government from committing future atrocities,” Mr. Glaser said. “It strains common sense to take an illegal military action with virtually no chance of success and with high risks of escalation because roughly 40 people were killed by chlorine in a civil war that has killed 500,000 people by bullets and bombs.”