FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 12.04.2017

Syria first?

Four views on the US attack on Syria

On Friday 7th April the US launched a missile attack targeting a Syrian airbase, from which Bashar al Assad's regime launched a chemical attack on civilians that killed over 80 people. Hundreds more suffered symptoms consistent with a reaction to a nerve agent, probably sarin. Meanwhile, Syria claimed the US's retaliatory air strike killed seven people, including four children. Whilst US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, said the strikes did not indicate a shift in US policy toward Syria, many observers have taken them as a sign the US is prepared to continue its role in shaping and policing world affairs. America's allies, including Britain, Germany and France, were supportive of the air strikes against Syria, putting the entire blame at Assad's door. Russia's Vladimir Putin, called them "illegal", while China urged caution.

International Politics and Society asked a group of experts in defence and international relations for their take on the US air strikes.

No military solution

The US attack on a Syrian airfield represents a turning point. We can't let one side branch out on its own again. The situation may well escalate and there could be more provocations. Up till now the UN Security Council has been of no help. US President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson need to hold talks with China and Russia and tackle the Syria crisis together. All participants in the war in Syria – including Saudi Arabia and Iran – have to acknowledge there will be no military solution to the conflict.

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A new, peaceful Syria can only come into being within the framework of the United Nations. There are no alternatives to the Vienna peace talks and the Geneva negotiations. There needs to be an independent investigation into the chemical attack and all remaining, undeclared stockpiles of chemical weapons should be

destroyed. Germany can once again offer assistance.

Dr Rolf Mützenich, Deputy Chair of the SPD Parliamentary Group for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Human Rights

An impulsive act

In 2013, many Syrian's welcomed Barack Obama's (empty) threat to retaliate when the government gassed its own people. Trump's real attack on the Shayrat airbase this April met with similar approval. Observers have long been demanding no-fly zones to put an end to Syrian Army attacks on civilians. Though many Syrians are highly critical of the US, they no longer care who comes to their defence in the brutal civil war. This was the first time in the six-year-old conflict that the Syrian regime's war crimes have caused any international response.

A selective attack will have no lasting effect unless it is part of a comprehensive strategy to settle the conflict.

Of course, a selective attack will have no lasting effect unless it is part of a comprehensive strategy to settle the conflict. Particularly alarming is the spontaneity of the decision to react militarily. A few days earlier Washington had said Assad could stay, then suddenly cruise missiles were flying. This kind of impulsive military action offers little reason for hope. Future decisions taken at such speed could easily escalate the conflict.

Dr Friederike Stolleis, Director of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's Syria Project

Hopes dashed of friendly ties with Moscow

Hopes for closer Russian-American cooperation have apparently gone up in smoke after Donald Trump ordered a military attack on Syria without first informing Moscow. At least, that was the tone of Russian statements the morning after the strike. Speaking on behalf of Vladimir Putin, a spokesman for the Kremlin was quick to condemn the US attack as an act of aggression against a sovereign state and a violation of international law. He said the operation was an attempt by the US administration to distract attention from civilian casualties caused by its own troops in Iraq. Russia's Defence Ministry announced the immediate suspension of the 2015 Russian-American memorandum on aviation security that was

intended to prevent incidents in the skies above Syria.

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Russian newspapers are uniformly critical of the American attack. The pro-government *Komsomolskaya Pravda* quoted *National Defense* editor Igor Korotchenko, saying Trump 'tried…to show he was more tough and decisive than Obama'. The independent *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* warned of the 'unforeseeable consequences' of the American attack and the liberal online paper *Meduza* reported a fall in the rouble following the US attack on Syria.

Those who hoped a Trump win would lead to greater cooperation between Americans and Russians in stabilising Syria must now acknowledge a new phase of escalation whose outcome is uncertain. Just how much this development will impact future US-Russian relations is uncertain.

Mirko Hempel, Director of the Moscow office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Dr Jens Hildebrandt, its Deputy Director

Defending European values

Donald Trump fires missiles at a Syrian airbase – and Europe breathes a sigh of relief. It's the first time a decision by Trump has met with such approval. This has to do with the strike's 'surgical' nature – it was a military success, and caused no civilian casualties. The White House's own rhetoric after the attack also indicates the US is prepared to resume its role as the 'world's policeman'.

Trump's decision to attack has also spared Europeans the headache of coming up with their own response. Without the US attack, the EU would have needed to appeal to the UN Security Council, following another red line crossed in Syria. The EU talks a lot about 'defending the Western community of values', building strategic autonomy and boosting its military capacity. But rapid, coordinated military action from member states would have been impossible to sell politically.

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After six years of all-out civil war in Syria and the repeated use of chemical weapons, we in the West need to decide on a stance. Will we only engage with Syria once it has bled to death, after the conflict has simply petered out? Do we

really believe that EU actions have made any difference in the lives of Syrians? Isn't it finally time to effectively sanction inhumane acts?

In recent years, the international order and its values have come under fire, with breaches of international law, war crimes, red lines repeatedly drawn and transgressed. There's a certain tragedy in the fact that Trump is now defending red lines once drawn by Obama. Trump's Syria attack was risky, and one wonders how he decides on foreign policy ('emotions first?'), and how much he intends to coordinate with partners in the future.

In the short term, at least, the US bombing will be seen as a powerful act of deterrence which certainly be noted in Moscow. If we are serious about maintaining the international order and defending European standards and values, we must welcome decisive action against Assad. But Trump going it alone does not spare Europe from deciding its own future role in Syria.

Anna Maria Kellner, Consultant on Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation

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