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The United States Attack in Syria: A Change in Europe-Trump Relations?

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The United States attack on the al-Shuayrat airport in Syria was met enthusiastically by a substantial portion of countries in Europe, including Britain, Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Cyprus, and Malta. Even Germany, which for years has objected to military intervention in international conflicts, expressed support, with German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel saying that the attack was in conformity with international law. In addition, senior European Union representatives, such as European Council President Donald Tusk and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, welcomed the action. Middle East states, including Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, likewise said that they saw the event in a positive light.

This stance clashed conspicuously with that of other countries, among them China, Iran, and Russia, which expressed strong opposition to the US action in Syria. The Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a laconic statement opposing the use of force in international relations, while Russian President Vladimir Putin responded sharply to the attack, calling it “aggression...in violation of the norms of international law.” The Russian and Chinese opposition to the US involvement in Syria is significant, given the prolonged efforts by a number of European countries to take action in the UN Security Council to overthrow Bashar al-Assad. Shortly before the US attack, a Russian veto blocked a Security Council resolution condemning the use of chemical weapons that killed dozens of people in Syria. Indeed, since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, Russia and China have vetoed eight resolutions containing severe condemnations of the Damascus regime.

The positive stance of most European leaders on the US attack in Syria is in stark contrast to how the Trump administration has been perceived by many of these same leaders. For example, Donald Tusk, who last January cited President Trump as one of the main threats to European independence, said that the European Union would continue to cooperate with the United States in order to solve the crisis in Syria. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who openly criticized the Trump administration’s views on NATO, free trade, and immigration, justified the attack. Ironically, it was European politicians who supported Trump in the presidential election campaign, such as Nigel Farage and Paul Nuttall of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Marine Le Pen of the National Front in France, who expressed opposition to American involvement in the conflict in Syria.

The European stance in support of the US military action may be due to reasons other than revulsion at the use of chemical weapons and the obstruction of efforts in the Security Council to pass severe condemnations of the Damascus regime. European countries were presumably alarmed by the connections with the Kremlin attributed to senior associates of President Trump. The possibility of striking a comprehensive deal, in which the US would sacrifice Ukraine in exchange for Russia's sacrificing President Assad, was a subject of discussion in the European press and research institutes. The attack in Syria, however, pitted the United States against Russia, and such a deal has become less likely, at least at this stage – also because of the investigation in Washington about the “Russian connection.” The congratulations from Europe were thus designed to encourage a new line against not only Assad, but his Russian patron as well.

If the verbal support for the US missile attack indeed intended to target Russia, European leaders will still have to wait until the United States policy on Russia becomes clear. The forming of positive relations with Moscow was one of the main points of the foreign policy that Trump advocated in his presidential campaign. Yet after he entered the White House, he experienced not only a barrage of reports about the relations with Russia among his senior associates, but opposition to the policy in question. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, whose links with the Russian administration in his previous job as CEO of the Exxon Mobil oil company were known and openly admitted, referred to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an “obstacle” to improvement of relations between the US and Russia. Tillerson set a high threshold for such improvement by adding that the United States was firmly committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and that the sanctions that the United States had imposed on Russia would remain in force until Moscow returns control of the Crimean Peninsula to Ukraine. This unequivocal declaration unquestionably eases the anxiety of European leaders about a Russian-American “deal.” Nonetheless, Trump's remark on his Twitter account, “Things will work out fine between the U.S.A. and Russia. At the right time everyone will come to their senses & there will be lasting peace!” remains in the background.

In tandem, there are signs that Russia's initial enthusiasm about Trump's election is waning. A number of decisions by Trump and measures he has taken since entering the White House have sparked a clash between the two administrations: the massive bombardment by the United States in Afghanistan; accusations against Moscow of a military takeover of the Crimean Peninsula; the missile attack in Syria; and the dispatch of an American naval force to North Korea have led officials in the Russian government to openly criticize American policy. For example, Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council of the Russian parliament, announced that the chances of forming an anti-terrorism coalition headed by the United States and Russia “will repose in the Lord before it has the chance to be born.” The Russian response shows the Kremlin's commitment to Assad remaining in power. In congratulating Assad on April 8, 2017 on the occasion of the 71st anniversary of Syrian independence, Putin expressed his hope for many more years of mutual cooperation.

Despite the sympathetic responses and their expressed and concealed motives, the views of European leaders on activity and certainly a military one, overt or clandestine, aimed at a change in the regime or an imposed solution in Syria are and will be more circumscribed. If the United States President reaches the conclusion that he should take such a decision, i.e., send an American force to achieve political objectives in Syria, he is liable to discover – beyond the difficulties at home to obtain the support of senior political and security establishments officials and the Congress – that difficulties in Europe await him, because the European words of praise for a single missile attack against a specific target in response to behavior by the regime in Damascus in contravention of the few remaining accepted norms in the bloody war in Syria were short-lived. Merkel indicated this when she explained Germany's support for the American action by saying that it was a limited action under extraordinary circumstances.

There is also a message for Israel in the response by European countries to the American use of force in Syria: the circumstances in which Europe is capable of containing an aggressive military response are limited with respect to its goals, extent, and the period of time in which it occurs. The basically critical European stance toward what it regards as an excessive Israeli response to rocket attacks, for example, has not changed.

