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US launches cruise missile attack against Syrian government

By James Cogan

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Between 8 and 9 p.m., US Eastern Time Thursday, two US warships in the Mediterranean fired a barrage of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a Syrian air base at Shayrat, near the city of Homs. The attack is the first direct assault by the United States on the Russian- and Iranian-backed government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and has plunged the world into days of uncertainty as to the consequences. Highlighting the utter recklessness and criminality of the American action, Russian forces were at the base.

The Syrian government has issued a bitter condemnation of the US attack, denouncing it as “aggression.” There are reports that at least four Syrian troops were killed and that the air base was virtually destroyed.

The Russian military was reportedly given notice that the air base was going to be bombed. Russia has large numbers of aircraft and personnel in Syria assisting Assad’s forces fight a six-year, US-sponsored insurrection by predominantly Islamist militias. If the Russians were given notice, questions remain as to whether they were given a sufficient window of time to withdraw their assets from harm’s way.

The pretext for the US attack is the sinister and dubious allegation that Assad’s air force used chemical weapons in an attack on a rebel-held town on Tuesday. The claims are dubious, above all, because the Syrian government had no motive to use such weapons, knowing that it would be

seized upon to demand that Trump order a direct US-led intervention. The Islamist rebels, by contrast, along with their CIA advisors, had ample motive under conditions in which they are facing complete military defeat. Moreover, the Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra militia is known to be in possession of, and to have used chemical weapons.

On Thursday, the Assad government again categorically denied any responsibility for a chemical weapons attack. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem stated: “I stress, once again, that the Syrian Arab Army did not and will not use such weapons even against the terrorists who are targeting our people.”

The attack on Syria is the outcome of months of political civil war in Washington, which has seen Trump denounced by the Democratic Party and much of the media as a virtual Russian puppet for his stated agenda of improving relations with Moscow. His domestic opponents have succeeded in compelling the new administration to shift and make the immediate focus of US foreign policy stepped-up operations in the Middle East.

The result is the prospect of a rapid descent toward a confrontation with Iran and nuclear-armed Russia. It is entirely conceivable that the Syrian military, using sophisticated Russian-supplied anti-aircraft missile systems, will now retaliate by engaging American aircraft in Syrian airspace or launching attacks on the American troops operating on the ground with various rebel militias in parts of the country.

Trump appears to have authorised the bombardment even as he was sitting down for dinner and a photo opportunity with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who arrived in the US just hours before and whose government has consistently aligned with Russia to defend Assad’s government.

Among the numerous questions posed by the US strike is whether the top-level summit between Trump and Xi can even proceed. The situation is, by any standard, unprecedented for a Chinese leader. Xi will face immense recriminations in China if he is seen sitting alongside Trump in polite diplomatic talks, at a luxury golf resort in Florida, while his own government, Russia, Iran and other countries are denouncing a unilateral and illegal American act of war on Syria.

Moreover, the Trump administration has been threatening to launch a pre-emptive attack on North Korea and trigger a catastrophic war on China’s borders. The missile strike on Syria will remove any doubt in Chinese strategic and military circles as to whether Trump would be prepared to order such action.

Trump held a press conference Thursday evening at his Florida mansion. In words dripping with imperialist hypocrisy, he stated: “Tonight I call on all civilised nations to join us in seeking to end this slaughter and bloodshed in Syria and also to end terrorism of all kinds and all types.”

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson subsequently issued a statement accusing Russia of being “complicit” in the alleged gas attack and denouncing it for failing to meet its undertakings in 2013 to ensure Syria destroyed its chemical weapons. At the time, the Obama administration, in the face of doubts in the US military establishment and popular opposition, used the Russian guarantees to back away from its plans to wage a massive air war on the Assad government.

The Putin government in Moscow, backed by Bolivia, has signaled that it will demand an emergency session of the UN Security Council on Friday to condemn the American strike. The Russian Senate Security and Defense Committee chair Viktor Ozerov told journalists that the attack was an “act of aggression against a United Nations member.” Prior to the missile strikes, Russia had demanded an impartial investigation into the alleged gas attack and warned Washington that there would be “negative consequences” if it instead took military action.

The other key supporter of the Assad government, Iran, has issued a statement through its foreign ministry that it “roundly condemns” the US action. Large numbers of Iranian military personnel are on the ground not only in Syria, but in Iraq, fighting alongside Shiite militias that are nominally loyal to the US-backed government in Baghdad.

In Syria, the Saudi- and Turkish-financed and armed Islamist Ahrar al-Sham militia declared that it “welcomes any US intervention through surgical strikes.” The Israeli government has issued a statement voicing its complete support for the American operation. Turkey had already given blanket support in advance of the strikes.

As the US strike took place late in the night European time, the imperialist allies of Washington in Europe, after spending days exploiting the alleged gas attack to denounce Assad and Russia and call for action, have not yet issued formal statements.

On the other side of the world, an indication of how numerous US allies may respond has been given in Australia. The country’s defence minister was phoned by US officials several hours before the US strikes. Australia has fighter-bombers and other aircraft operating with American forces in Syria and Iraq. Both the government and the main Labor Party opposition have made statements fully endorsing the US strike, though Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull would not confirm if the Australian military would join attacks on the Syrian government.