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US strikes on Syria dominate Trump-Xi talks

By Peter Symonds

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The criminal US attack on Syria with a barrage of cruise missiles cast a menacing shadow over talks underway at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago luxury resort in Florida with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The strikes, which took place as the two men were dining on Thursday evening, sent a message to Xi that the US was prepared to use military force without warning to achieve its ends.

In the lead-up to the much anticipated summit, the Trump administration repeatedly warned that it would use “all options,” including military strikes, to ensure that North Korea halted its nuclear and missile programs. Just days before Xi arrived, Trump told the *Financial Times*: “If China is not going to solve North Korea, we will. That is all I am telling you.”

Speaking briefly after talks yesterday, Trump absurdly declared that “tremendous progress” had been made in “our relationship with China” and that his own relationship with Xi was “outstanding.” He added: “I believe lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away.”

For more than a year, both during the US presidential election campaign and following his installation in office, Trump has repeatedly denounced China over trade, alleged currency manipulation, failure to rein in North Korea and Beijing’s reclamation and construction in the South China Sea.

As president, Trump openly called into question the basis of US-China relations—the so-called One China policy under which the US recognises Beijing as the sole legitimate government of all China, including Taiwan

With the attacks on Syria in the background, Trump clearly threatened that the US would take unilateral action against North Korea, if the Chinese government did not force Pyongyang to meet Washington's demands.

In comments to the media after the meeting, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that Trump indicated to Xi that “we would be happy to work with them [China]” but that Washington was “prepared to chart our own course if this is something China is just unable to co-ordinate with us.”

According to Tillerson, there was “a real commitment that we work together to see if this cannot be resolved in a peaceful way. But in order for that to happen, North Korea's posture has to change before there's any basis for discussions.”

The Trump administration is not about to engage in a drawn-out process of forcing the Pyongyang regime to the negotiating table on US terms. A senior White House official told the media earlier this week that “the clock has now run out [on North Korea] and all options are on the table.” In other words, if China fails to deliver quickly, the US will resort to other measures.

NBC News reported yesterday that a White House review of US strategy for North Korea was now complete and a number of military options were under active consideration—including returning US nuclear weapons to South Korea, “decapitation” attacks to kill North Korean leaders and covert sabotage inside North Korea.

The report weighed up the pros and cons of each of these three reckless actions that would heighten tensions and threaten to provoke all-out war on the Korean Peninsula, without the slightest consideration for the millions that would lose their lives. It also indicated that preparations were underway.

Citing multiple top-ranking intelligence and military officials, NBC News stated that “on the military side... the three options with the highest impact still constitute the next steps.”

Chinese President Xi undoubtedly understood the threat involved in the US strikes in Syria. As US Secretary of State Tillerson told the press after the attacks, “This clearly indicates the president is willing to take decisive action when called for.”

Xi was placed in the invidious position of being told by Trump over the dinner table that the US military had just launched strikes on Syria—something that Beijing has publicly opposed and that could potentially involve conflict with Russia, with which China has close political and military ties. Trump publicly announced the attacks after Xi had left the dinner.

The Chinese response to the US military action has been decidedly muted. Foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying condemned the alleged chemical weapon attack on a rebel-held

village inside Syria, which was used as the pretext for the strikes. However, she did not blame the Syrian government and called for an “independent and comprehensive UN investigation.”

Hua said China called for “relevant parties to stay calm, exercise restraint and avoid doing anything that might raise tensions.” In an implicit criticism, without naming the US, she said: “China never interferes in the internal affairs of other countries” and “always opposed the use of force in international relations.”

At an emergency session of the UN Security Council yesterday, Chinese ambassador Liu Jieyi made no mention of the US airstrikes on Syria, appealing instead for a political solution to the protracted civil war that has been fomented by the US and its allies.

The low-key Chinese response to the blatant act of US aggression, even as the Chinese president is meeting with Trump, underscores the sordid character of Xi’s horse-trading behind the scenes as he seeks a deal with Trump that will halt the US threats of trade war and military action against China.

Xi’s silence on the US strikes while meeting with Trump could exacerbate tensions within the Chinese leadership. Layers of the bureaucratic apparatus have pushed for a stronger Chinese response to the US military build-up in Asia. Xi is seeking to consolidate his grip on power as he pushes for a second five-year term at the Chinese Communist Party congress later this year.

While North Korea was at the top of the agenda, Trump undoubtedly pressed Xi aggressively across a range of issues, especially trade. Secretary of State Tillerson told the media that Trump called for China to “level the playing field” for American workers and stressed the need for reciprocal market access.

Trump also demanded that China adhere to international norms in the seas of East Asia, a reference to the dangerous flashpoints between China and its neighbours in the South China and East China Seas.

Despite Trump’s claims to have made “tremendous progress” in US relations with China, his meeting with Xi sets the stage for an acceleration of tensions with China even as the US recklessly risks triggering a war in the Middle East that draws Russia and other powers into a broader conflagration.