

Five Up / Five Down - Syrian Missile Strike, Part 2

Written by Matthew Murray

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MATTHEW MURRAY, APR 18 2017

The pedagogy of this piece, one of a series of thematic posts, is to pose an opinion forecast on elements that could be interpreted as upward/rising (UP) or downward/falling/getting worse (DOWN) trends or changes in relation to a specific event or phenomenon in IR. This week's second post is dedicated to the downward trends pertaining to the issue of the U.S. missile strike in Syria; you can find the previous post, here, examining upward trends related to the same issue.

Down –

The 1,000 Cuts of Credibility – Tweets Matter. The president may see little harm in broadcasting flippant political claims or positions. However his obvious hunting for desired media narratives matters when incidents like this arise. Assad will deny using chemical weapons and Russia will support that claim. If Trump creates a perception of reality through informational sources that are not rigorous or complete, his positions will be equally deficient. And even when they are not, one can still claim they are and have the evidence to support that claim. Trump's previous statements about Syria, even in light of Aleppo and a previous chemical attack (allegedly), are flatly endorsing a different position than the one articulated in this strike. This is exactly what foreign powers will begin to do against him, win the war of the perception of his intellect, knowledge, integrity and honesty. These are issues that will continue to create problems until the Trump presidency deals with its deep ethics issues and understands that having a poor ethical culture will always lead to strife, conflict and complications in all levels of what the executive branch needs to do. It will be easy for those who seek to undermine his actions to do so given the President's penchant for speaking or tweeting before contextualizing and consulting experts (even those who inconveniently counter his position).

Effectiveness In Capability – Syria can still use chemical weapons. It was a quick strike, however, it was unlikely to have been quick enough to end or even harm Syria's capabilities (and I'll imagine due to the aforementioned location, likely avoided a chemical stockpile by design). While at the same time being quick enough to not have allowed time for planning of a large scale continued internationally supported plan, which is likely needed to send the kind of message to Russia and Syria that is needed to change their approach to territorial security within the country. No plan and no strategy makes this just a blip on the radar of a confusing civil/regional conflict. It is ineffective in removing the threat which was used to justify the strike and only vaguely reduced the potential of future issues. It also does little to dissuade North Korea from escalations in provocative military activity and testing since the example here is that the response will be a slap on the wrist that will serve the regime's propaganda goals and legitimize potential future military actions as pre-emptively or defensively needed.

Effectivity in Political Power – Assad is going nowhere until the Russians have an equally friendly government/leader in place. Equally, a transition of authority could create a power vacuum which is as likely to be filled by a deeply troubling regime or regime(s) in a State spiraling toward failure, an outcome that is arguably worse than simply working toward transitional change. Equally, the international community should see little value in making the situation even worse through deposing a distasteful but recognizable and mildly accessible leader.

Diplomatic Problems – International Law requires international action, not unilateral action. A call, support and consent is not the same as action. The international community needed to act here and did not. Acting without it,

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particularly in a case where the action taken was ineffective at ending the threat, looks, as it should, self-serving. There was much to be gained and potentially much has been lost in these actions not coming from multiple international actors. This is not just in terms of action but also concerns how the world deals with inspections and incidents of use of weapons like this going forward in other theaters and situations. It equally places the U.S. in a position of being the de-facto world police force yet again, a position that comes with contradictory responsibilities and obligations, with both action and inaction in international arenas being equally pointed to as wrong. Truly a no win situation that more covert and subtle actions worldwide can help you avoid, if only to a certain degree.

Chemical Opportunity – Opportunity is the catalyst of misconduct. ISIL now knows that there are powerful chemical weapons (that should have been destroyed or removed but were not, due to obvious lapses in inspection processes) in the hands of a taxed military force in their region who may now be even weaker in being able to secure such weapons or worse yet, see potential advantage in allowing access to such weapons, either directly or through designed negligence, from falling into their hands under the understanding it will be used against certain actors. Such actions could help the narrative being propagated by Russia and Syria, that they did not release the chemical weapons if indeed they were used. Having an incident they can point to that was not their doing, would only strengthen their position. For ISIL however, this serves as a potential way to embroil two armed forces against each other knowing that if they can be used in a way that makes an actor other than themselves look culpable, it can deflect and diminish ISIL's issues militarily and achieving larger scale propaganda goals. Given creating an effective nerve agent requires only a basic knowledge of chemistry and some commonly available pesticides, this is something that should be higher in our international consciousness. At the very least, having WMD's in the neighborhood of this powerful guerrilla group creates an undue opportunity for truly awful consequences. Being proactive on this matter is needed here before something else happens.

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