Before Risking Another War, Trump Needs To Give Diplomacy A Chance

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In the aftermath of Trump’s missile strike, congressional Democrats urged precaution while Republican leaders promptly urged President Trump to push for Assad’s ousting. The Democrats have apparently been proved correct in emphasizing precaution; President Bashar al-Assad’s allies have since threatened reprisals against any further assaults on the regime. This development doesn’t bode well for future success in handling the Syrian crisis. A miscalculated American intervention in Syria might worsen the country’s humanitarian crisis, drag America into another war in the Middle East, and leave a leadership void for myriad extremist groups.

The humanitarian situation in Syria is already appalling, with over 400,000 people killed since 2011. The Assad regime has showed little concern for innocent civilians when securing power. If the US toughens their assaults on the regime, a Russia-led retaliation could be imminent, leading to a possible confrontation between the US and Russia. Indeed, Russia and Iran have already committed to “respond with force to any aggressor or any breach of red lines from whoever it is and America knows our ability to respond well.” In this scenario, civilian casualties and internal displacement would certainly deteriorate further.

Some might say that Russia's recent threat is only a bluff. But, such an assertion would be ignoring precedent. Putin has been Assad's backbone, and he has emphatically stressed zero-sum intent in keeping him in power by vetoing UN sanctions at his own country’s economic peril. There is little chance Russia would desert Assad, given that his survival is a strategic win for their diplomatic stance against the US. Underestimating a response by the allied forces (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) risks a brutal retaliation on opposition held cities and this would not exclude the possibility of another chemical attack, in direct violation of President Trump’s chemical weapons red line. If this happens, and Trump decides to show strength, the US military might find itself committed to another prolonged war.

The president needs no reminder that the country has lost nearly 6,000 soldiers from previous missions in the Middle East with 26,000 civilian casualties in Afghanistan and more than 193,000 in Iraq. Committing the US military to another Middle East expedition is a decision many Americans would reject. Judging by their divided opinion on the strike in Syria, it is likely Congress rejects a full deployment. This could mean the president plays it relatively safe, and continues to arm opposition militias. Syria is presently a fertile ground for extremist groups, arming them is an undertaking that promises catastrophic consequences. The Obama administration committed a similar mistake in Libya by wrongfully arming jihadists to topple the Gaddafi regime.

Currently, the US has no convincing plan to stabilize the country, which is dominated by militias and extremist groups, particularly ISIS and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra. With Assad ousted, the leadership tussle would create another wave of unending conflicts, much like what happened in Libya. This is antithesis to the primary goal of intervention, which is ostensibly to stop the violent civil war.
Likewise, advancing on Syria promises to upsurge US military spending. Americans paid heavily for previous interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan — with their tax dollars and their soldiers. Using taxpayer money to fund a war they do not support is a politically risky decision for an administration still trying to shape its foreign policy.

If further American strikes would not guarantee the safety of innocent Syrians, the Trump administration should change its plans. Diplomacy remains the safest bet in achieving peace in Syria. Meeting Assad and Russia with military action will not turn the diplomatic tables in America’s favour, but will lead to more suffering for Syrians.

Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain is right when he said the Syrian airstrike “was appropriate but I would like to say, despite all the enthusiasm we see… if I might quote [Winston] Churchill, ‘It’s the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end.’ ”

It is noble to care about the plight of Syrians living under Assad’s regime, but achieving peace in the region, without further bloodshed, should be the top priority. Besides, previous American military intervention in the Middle East has already left far too many negative legacies that still haunt the region.

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