

The Impending Clash Between the U.S. and Russia

By Mike Whitney, Counterpunch, 8 April 2017

President Donald Trump's missile attack on the Shayrat Airfield in Western Syria was a poorly planned display of imperial muscle-flexing that had the exact opposite effect of what was intended. While the attack undoubtedly lifted the morale of the jihadists who have been rampaging across the country for the last six years, it had no military or strategic value at all. The damage to the airfield was very slight and there is no reason to believe it will impact the Syrian Army's progress on the ground.

The attack did however kill four Syrian servicemen which means the US troops in Syria can no longer be considered part of an international coalition fighting terrorism. The US is now a hostile force that represents an existential threat to the sovereign government.

Is that the change that Trump wanted?

As of Friday, Russia has frozen all military cooperation with the United States. According to the *New York Times*:

“In addition to suspending the pact to coordinate air operations over Syria, an accord that was meant to prevent accidental encounters between the two militaries, Russia also said it would bolster Syria's air defense systems and reportedly planned to send a frigate into the Mediterranean Sea to visit the logistics base at the Syrian port of Tartus....

Dmitri S. Peskov, a spokesman for President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, said that the cruise missile strikes on Friday represented a “significant blow” to American-Russian ties, and that Mr. Putin considered the attack a breach of international law that had been made under a false pretext. “The Syrian Army has no chemical weapons at its disposal,” Mr. Peskov said.” (New York Times)

The missile attack has ended all talk of “normalizing” relations with Russia. For whatever the reason, Trump has decided that identifying himself and the United States as an enemy of Moscow and Damascus is the way he wants to conduct business. That, of course, is the President's prerogative, but it would be foolish not to think there will be consequences.

Russia's Minister of Defense Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov issued a statement saying:

“All the accusations against Damascus that it violated the Chemical Weapons Convention of 2013 given by the USA as reasons for the strike are groundless. The Russian Defence Ministry has repeatedly explained that the Syrian troops had not used chemical weapons....

It is to be stressed that in the years 2013-2016 the Syrian government undertook all measures to eliminate chemical weapons, its delivery systems, production facilities. All chemical weapons stocks have been eliminated. The components for their production have been transported from the Syrian Arab Republic to the enterprises of the United States, Finland, Great Britain, and Germany where they have been destroyed.”

This is a hotly contested issue and one that requires greater clarification. The rational approach would be for the UN to send a team of chemical weapons and forensic experts to the site of the bombing to try to figure out what really happened. Trump decided he couldn't be bothered with such trivialities as a formal investigation. He was more interested in projecting the image of a strong and decisive leader which is why he decided to shoot first and ask questions later. His action was applauded by leaders around the world including Angela Merkel, François Hollande, Recep Erdogan of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel none of who believe that the United States should have to get the nod from the UN Security Council before bombing a sovereign country.

I don't know who is responsible for the chemical attack at Khan Shaikhoun, but there is an interesting interview on Thursday's Scott Horton show that suggests that things may not be what they seem. In a 14 minute interview, former CIA officer and Director of the Council for the National Interest, Philip Giraldi, explains what's happening behind the scenes in the Middle East where “military and intelligence personnel,” “intimately familiar” with the intelligence, say that the narrative that Assad or Russia did it is a “sham.”

I have transcribed a 5 minute segment of the interview here— *not because it provides conclusive evidence one way or the other*— but because curious readers will find it intriguing. (Any mistakes in the transcript are mine.)

Philip Giraldi— I am hearing from sources on the ground, in the Middle East, the people who are intimately familiar with the intelligence available are saying that the essential narrative we are all hearing about the Syrian government or the Russians using chemical weapons on innocent civilians is a sham. The intelligence confirms pretty much the

account the Russians have been giving since last night which is that they hit a warehouse where al Qaida rebels were storing chemicals of their own and it basically caused an explosion that resulted in the casualties. Apparently the intelligence on this is very clear, and people both in the Agency and in the military who are aware of the intelligence are freaking out about this because essentially Trump completely misrepresented what he should already have known — but maybe didn't—and they're afraid this is moving towards a situation that could easily turn into an armed conflict.

Scott Horton— Tell me everything you can about your sources or how you are learning about this?

Philip Giraldi— Okay. These are essentially sources that are right on top of the issue right in the Middle East. They're people who are stationed there with the military and the Intelligence agencies that are aware and have seen the intelligence. And, as I say, they are coming back to contacts over here in the US essentially that they are astonished at how this is being played by the administration and by the media and in some cases people are considering going public to stop it. They're that concerned about it, that upset by what's going on.

Scott Horton— So current CIA officers are thinking about going public right now?

Philip Giraldi— They are, because they're that concerned about the way this thing is moving. They are military and intelligence personnel who are stationed in the Middle East and are active duty and they are seeing the intelligence the US government has in its hands about what happened in Syria, and the intelligence indicates that it was not an attack by the Syrian government using chemical weapons... There was an attack but it was with conventional weapons—a bomb—and the bomb ignited the chemicals that were already in place that had been put in there by the terrorist group affiliated with al Qaida.

Scott Horton— You say this thing is moving really fast. How fast is this thing moving?

Philip Giraldi— It's moving really fast. Apparently the concern among the people who are active duty personnel is that the White House is anticipating doing something to take steps against the Syrian government. What that might consist of nobody knows. But Trump was sending a fairly clear signal yesterday and so was our ambassador to the UN.

about the heinousness of this act. Trump talked about crossing numerous “red lines” and they are essentially fearful that this is going to escalate . Now bear in mind, Assad had no motive for doing this. If anything, he had a negative motive. The Trump said there was no longer any reason to remove him from office, well, this was a big win for him. To turn around and use chemical weapons 48 hours later, does not fit ant reasonable scenario, although I’ve seen some floated out there, but they are quite ridiculous.” (The Scott Horton Show)

I think you’ll find that listening to the whole show is worth the time.

Giraldi’s observations are persuasive but not conclusive. There needs to be an investigation, that much is certain. (The show was taped before the missile attack, which does show that Giraldi was right about “how fast” things were moving.)

Media analysts appear to be surprised that Russia hasn’t responded militarily to Thursday’s attack. Some even see it as a sign of weakness. But Moscow’s approach to Washington’s impulsiveness has been fairly consistent for the last decade or so. With as little fanfare as possible, Moscow goes about its business and works discreetly to protect its interests. Unlike Trump, Putin is not a man who likes to attract a lot of attention to himself. He likes to operate off the radar. Even so, Russia has a coherent policy in Syria (fighting terrorism and preserving the sovereign government) and it’s not going to veer from that policy. Most Americans don’t seem to understand that. Russia’s not going to budge, which is why the Kremlin cut off cooperation with Washington, shored up its missile defenses in Syria, and moved a frigate to the Mediterranean. Moscow does not want a broader conflict, but it will be prepared if one breaks out.

The Russians are concerned about Trump’s sudden escalation, but they’re not surprised. They have spotted a pattern in US war-making and they’re able to comment on it quite calmly despite its terrible implications. Here’ more from the Russian Minister of Defense:

“The US administrations have changed but the methods for unleashing wars have remained the same since bombardments of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya. Allegations, falsifications, grandstand playing with photos and test-tubes with pseudo results in

international organizations became the reason for initiating aggression instead of an objective investigation.”

Lie, bomb, kill, repeat. Konashenkov doesn't sound surprised at all, does he? It's a pattern, a deadly, frightening pattern. The only thing that changes is the names of the victims.

And here's another thing readers might find interesting: The Russians have an impressive grasp of Washington's global strategy, in fact, their analysis is vastly superior to anything you'll read in either the western journals or the establishment media. Here's a short clip from a recent speech by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov:

“The concept of managed chaos appeared long ago as a method of strengthening US influence. Its basic premise is that managed chaos projects should be launched away from the United States in regions that are crucial for global economic and financial development. The Middle East has always been in the focus of politicians and foreign policy engineers in Washington. Practice has shown that this concept is dangerous and destructive, in particular for the countries where the experiment was launched, namely Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan...In Iraq, Syria and Libya, this chaos was created intentionally.

...Responsible politicians have come to see that the managed chaos theory is destroying life in many regions. Some parties can benefit in the short term from fluctuations on the raw materials markets provoked by the revolutions orchestrated by external forces, but this theory ultimately backfires at its engineers and executors in the form of massive migration inflows, which terrorists use to enter these countries. We can see this in Europe. Terrorist attacks have been staged even in the United States. The Atlantic Ocean has not protected it from the terrorist threat. This is the boomerang effect.” (Lavrov)

“Managed chaos”. Brilliant. That's Washington's foreign policy in a nutshell. That's why there's been no effort to create strong, stable, secular governments that can provide security for their people in any of the countries the US has destroyed in the last 16 years, because this long string of failed states that now stretches from North Africa, through the Middle East and into Central Asia (The 'arc of instability') create a permanent justification for US military intervention as well as strategic access to vital resources. So why waste money and time on nation building when nation building runs counter to Washington's strategic

objectives? Instead, decimate the nation state wherever you go, and leave the people to scratch out a miserable hardscrabble existence for themselves while fending off the relentless violence and persecution of tribal elders or local warlords.

Is that a fair assessment of US foreign policy?

Indeed, it is. And the Russian leadership understands the far-reaching implications of that policy. They know that Washington's ambitions could result in a war between the two nuclear-armed adversaries. They fully understand that.

Even so, they're not going to budge. They're not going to let Syria become another Iraq. They're not going to let that happen.

So, it's all coming to a head. The unstoppable force is fast approaching the immovable object. There's going to be a collision.

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