

Russian reactions to the air raids on Syria

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On the night of 13 to 14 April, armed forces from the United States, the United Kingdom and France bombed three sites in Syria connected with the production of the chemical weapons which the Assad regime had used on 7 April against the civilian population in Douma on the outskirts of Damascus. Russia was advised of the attack just before it took place via military communication channels, although with no indication of the specific targets. During the bombing, the Russian forces stationed in Syria did not attempt to repel them using their air defence systems (S-300 and S-400), despite the fact that the attacks took place within their sphere of operations.

Shortly after the attack, Gen. Anatoli Antonov, the Russian ambassador in Washington, said that similar actions would not be left without consequences, adding that "insulting the President of Russia is unacceptable and inadmissible". In turn, on the morning of 14 April President Vladimir Putin made a statement condemning the air strikes as "an act of aggression against a sovereign state" in violation of the UN Charter. He stated that "the US had used a staged chemical attack as a pretext", which would worsen the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Syria and would be "destructive for the entire system of international relations". The Russian President said that "history will set things right", and that the US "already bears a heavy responsibility for the bloody outrage in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya". President Putin announced that at Russia's initiative an extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council would be convened, which duly took place in the afternoon of 14 April. The Council rejected the Russian motion for a resolution condemning the bombing of Syria.

Gen. Sergei Rudskoy, the head of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces, said on 14 April that Russia may reconsider supplying Syria with S-300 missile defence systems, adding that Moscow had refrained from doing so a few years earlier at the request of "certain Western partners" (the systems of this type which are presently located on Syrian territory are owned by the RF armed forces; the speech was apparently referring to their possible sale to the Assad regime). This announcement was confirmed on 16 April in a BBC interview with the head of Russian diplomacy Sergei Lavrov. Russia, which is currently in control of Douma along with the Assad regime's forces, has refused to admit inspectors from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) into the area for several days – even though it had itself earlier demanded that.

Commentary

- One element of the Russian reaction to the raids was a massive disinformation campaign on electronic and social media. The most important theses promoted by this campaign ran as follows: in Douma on 7 April, a sham provocation was arranged by the Syrian opposition with the support of one of the Western special services; the raid on Syria was limited because Washington took fright at Russian warnings of a possible military response; the raids were largely a failure (the Syrian air defence forces took out 71 of the 103 missiles fired); the air strikes, which constituted a brutal violation of international law, served as *de facto* support for the terrorists.
- The air strikes by the United States and its allies on Syria, though very limited, damaged the prestige of the Russia authorities, which had sought to avoid them by political actions and propaganda (including threats). Russia's immediate reactions to the air raids have so far been rhetorical in nature. They can be described as routine and fairly restrained, weaker than those of a year ago after the US attack on the Syrian air base of al-Shairat. It seems that the Russian reaction is dictated by fear that the US is ready for a further escalation of the political conflict with Russia, both by conducting further attacks on Syria, and by imposing further sanctions against the Russian Federation.
- The escalation of the conflict with the USA is inconvenient for the Kremlin, as it is aware that it does not have the means to respond Washington in a way that could force the latter to revise its existing policy. On the other hand, the Kremlin has not lost hope that the meeting between Presidents Putin and Trump (announced by both parties, but as yet without a fixed date) could initiate a normalisation in Russian-American relations. For this reason, Russia's moderate reaction is intended as a signal to the US that it wants to stop the escalation of the bilateral conflict.
- At the same time, however, Moscow is offering a reminder that it has some potential to cause damage, which it could use against the United States if necessary, including its economic interests. This is intended to serve as a bargaining chip before the above-mentioned summit. A key element of this is the draft law on Russian counter-sanctions against the United States and possibly other Western states (in response to the extension of the US sanctions against Russia on 6 April), which is slowly making its way through the Russian parliament (its first reading has been scheduled for 15 May). In addition, according to the daily *Kommersant* on 18 April, at the beginning of the week the Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin signed a directive prohibiting the public corporations Roskosmos (space research and services) and Rosatom (civil and military nuclear energy) from signing contracts with entities from countries that have introduced or support sanctions against Russia (which could affect the plans to continue Russian-American cooperation in these areas).