

Russia, ISIS and Trump's Syrian U-turn

The moribund Obama formula for Syria—defeat the Islamic State and dethrone Assad—is suddenly back with a bang.



Published: 10th April 2017 01:00 AM | Last Updated: 10th April 2017 08:37 AM

📖 | A+ A A-

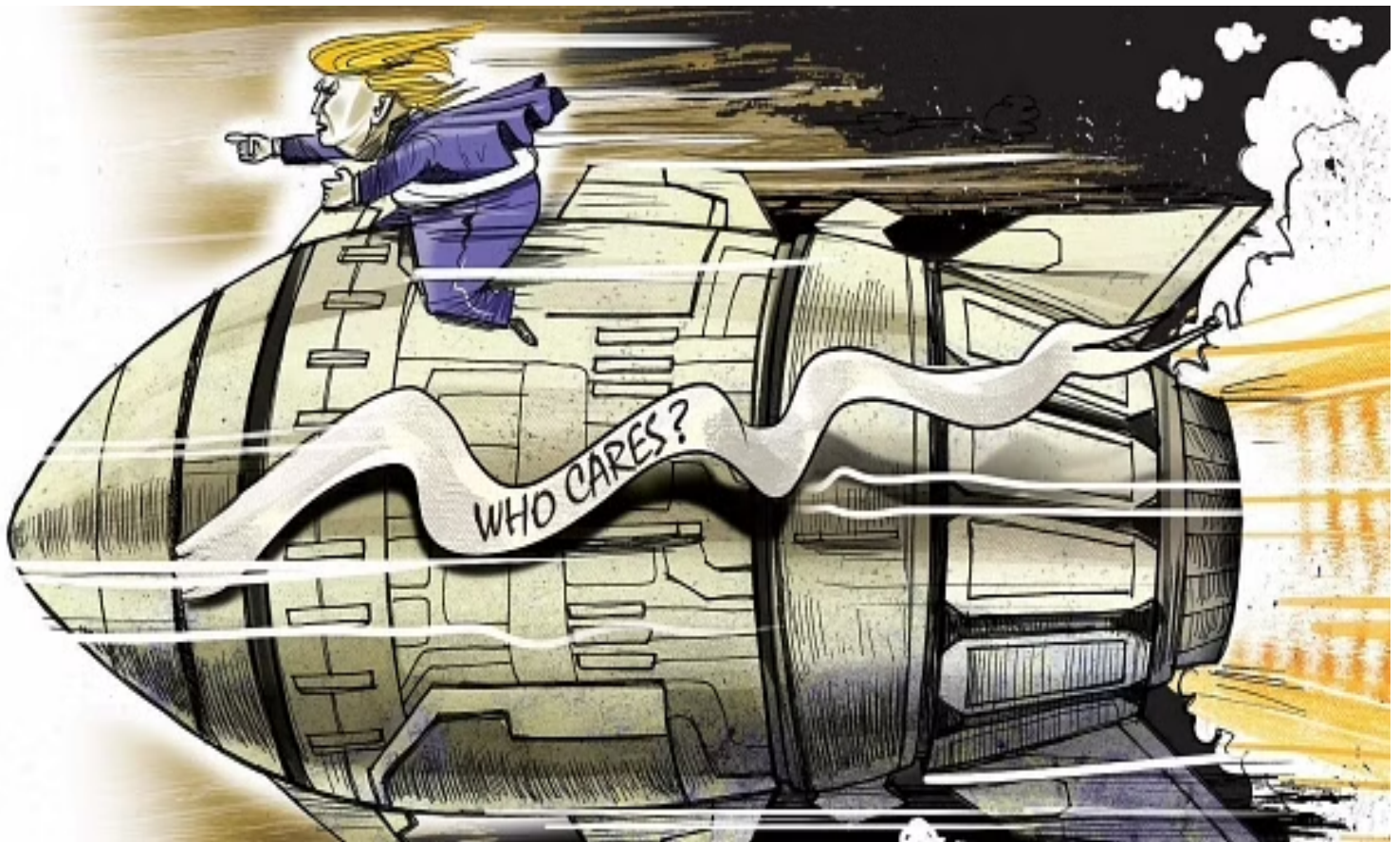


Illustration: Amit Bandre

By Sreeram Sundar Chaulia

US President Donald Trump's spur-of-the-moment decision to attack a Syrian government airbase on April 7 threatens to prolong an intractable armed conflict that has dragged on for six years. By targeting a key military installation of the Syrian state with 59 Tomahawk missiles, Trump has breathed life back into a failing insurgency against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and muddled the US' core purpose of eliminating the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

One reason for America's past failure to definitively trounce the IS and its ilk has been confusion of motives. Under the Barack Obama administration, there used to be two ill-matched goals of American policy. On the one hand, Washington wanted to oust the Shia Assad from power for losing his moral legitimacy by alienating the Sunni majority of Syria through brutal repression. On the other, Obama swore to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the IS and related terror organisations that had chosen Syria as their main base for a holy war.

Until 2015, the US and its allies like Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait armed Sunni rebels and jihadists to force Assad to cede control over most of Syria. The result was a weakened Syrian government unable to prevent the IS and al-Qaeda affiliates from establishing de facto states in vast tracts of ungoverned territory. If not for Russia and Iran pumping in emergency weaponry and troops to prop up Assad, there were occasions when he was on the verge of losing every inch left in his rump state.

Having first carved out an enabling space for jihadists and anti-regime guerrillas, the US and its allies then started aerial bombing to keep the IS under check from September 2014. This self-contradictory American behaviour produced a stalemate, with neither Assad and his backers Russia and Iran, nor the rebels or terrorists succeeding in consolidating power over the whole country.

It was a bloody balance in which the Syrian state and its adversaries kept on fighting and killing relentlessly to expand their respective zones of influence. Sceptics who grew tired of the war

suspected that the hidden objective of the US and its allies in the Middle East was to keep Syria burning and maintain its division into multiple fiefdoms without any one side gaining the upper hand.

Trump entered this warped scenario in January 2017 with a fresh mind and promised to go after the IS and its kin as his sole focus. His aides pronounced that since Assad had entrenched himself with Russian and Iranian support, Washington was going to accept him as a “political reality” and halt the quixotic Obama-era quest for his removal. Simultaneously, the US sent strong signals to Russia for joining hands against the scourge of IS.

By jettisoning regime change in Syria and working to accommodate Russian concerns, Trump positioned himself in his initial months in office as a hard-nosed practitioner of realpolitik who would train all his guns on the jihadi menace. But just as it seemed that a new configuration was emerging with the US, Russia, Iran and the Syrian state cooperating against IS and al-Qaeda, a controversial chemical attack occurred in the rebel-held Idlib Governorate of northern Syria.

Within 63 hours of that grave incident, whose timing exudes an air of unresolved mystery, Trump upended his outlook and suddenly declared in emotional tones that he will not tolerate babies being gassed allegedly by Assad’s air force. The US president, who had previously shown zero commitment to human rights and costly military action abroad, plunged into the Syrian war by frontally attacking Assad and challenging Russia and Iran.

This unexpected volte-face by an instinctive Trump has emboldened the plethora of anti-Assad rebels and terrorists who had been on the back foot since Russia had intervened in the conflict in 2015. Their pleas for greater US military assistance and involvement against Assad have finally been heard by the US administration, which avowed after the missile strikes that no peace is possible in Syria until Assad is overthrown.

US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley has restated the moribund Obama formula that defeating IS and dethroning Assad are both top priorities for the US from now on. Left unanswered is the old dilemma of what will fill the vacuum if Assad is forcibly ejected. The ambiguity suits al-Qaeda and the IS, whose holy warriors are lurking on the edges of government-held territory and waiting for a chance to invade the Shia heartland if Assad is toppled or on the ropes.

Symbolic American missile attacks on regime military assets and warnings to Russia to stay clear are music to the ears of jihadists. A tragic French phrase fits the current situation aptly: plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose (the more that things change, the more they remain the same).

Enraged by the US attack on the Syrian airbase, where Russia had stationed personnel and weaponry, Moscow has suspended coordination mechanisms with Washington that had hitherto helped to 'deconflict' the two sides. Russia is also enhancing deployment of hi-tech anti-missile systems to safeguard Syrian government military bases from future US attacks. These countermeasures will have the effect of slowing down the US-led coalition's assault on IS strongholds and give the terrorists room to regroup and defend themselves better.

The US proclamation that it is "prepared to do more" to deter Assad's alleged chemical attacks introduces supreme uncertainty and reduces chances of a US-Russia rapprochement. And if these two powers remain at loggerheads, the war in Syria will never cease. Trump's impulsive bid to don the mantle of a humanitarian interventionist to save Syrian babies could thus end up costing even more innocent Syrian lives.

***The author is Professor and Dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs
Email: schaulia@jgu.edu.in***