

Five Up / Five Down - Syrian Missile Strike, Part 1

Written by Matthew Murray

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MATTHEW MURRAY, APR 15 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 post is dedicated to the U.S. missile strike in Syria; here, I will examine the upward trends first, before moving on to the downward trends in the next post.

UP –

Change in Posture – In the wake of a particularly dubious foreign invasion by the Bush administration, the Obama administration openly sought to reduce overt interventionist actions around the world. This is not to say that the executive branch was abstaining from tipping the scales around the world in various conflicts and areas, they were, but these actions were often taken quietly and discretely. The consequence however, was that without the perceived fear of rebuke, the behavior of state and non-state actors has become more aggressive and is increasingly flaunted in the face of international law, both formal and customary. There is something symbolically important about not standing behind a cloudy drone strike or black-op or training/armament program and instead placing the action and position out in the open for all to see. This strike, no matter the problems with it, does show that the American military machine is awake again in a non-covert way and ultimately, most rational state actors will not seek to provoke it. Particularly when its commander is so seemingly inconsistent and can use such events to galvanize interests elsewhere in his political agenda.

Russian Impunity – Russia has taken an increasingly aggressive military and clandestine posture in the past several years which has come with very little in the way of consequences worldwide, save a few terrorist/insurgent incidents, sanctions/economic penalties and reputational consequences. However, the internal political gains of these actions for Russia's elite class have and will continue to outweigh these small attacks or soft power plays by foreign governments. The Russian spin on this incident is likely to be a mix of selective international precedent touting (sovereign statehood) and selective media expression to achieve a favorable narrative of victimization of themselves and Syria. We have already begun to see this, and for Russia to selectively cling to international law in this case while patently and openly ignoring or violating it in other arenas diminishes such narratives and their rhetorical value. However outwardly dismissive the Russian government may be, the ease in which this attack happened underlines that the message here is clear and received at least symbolically. It has been widely reported that the Russians were warned of the attack which ought to show us two things. The first of these is that this was a face saving compromise of a type, one that neither side likes, but both can accept. The second is that any assumption that the Russian/Trump coziness is a myth due to what seems like an action against their interests is premature. This attack actually allows both sides to keep the power/interest tension status quo. The public hears a lot of rhetoric about the displeasure of one side against the other, but as of yet, there has been little or no change in how the two sides are actually interacting outside of "talk". Though in showing how Trump will act, it may lead to a change in the observable nature of Russian actions but equally tells them much about how to draw the United States into positions internationally which could prove to increase not reduce proxy conflict between the countries. Although Russia is likely displeased with Assad's actions, taking the sovereign nation protection arguments to the edge of their philosophic viability, it has exposed some of the Trump administration's techniques and approaches which may have more value long term to their interests than simply stopping a symbolic and minor missile attack.

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North Korea – Activities by foreign actors will be met with force. Couple this with the timing of a China visit and discussions over North Korea, the messaging here is clear and likely to be somewhat effective, more to China than North Korea. Unlike Syria, North Korea seeks to achieve military strike capability directly against the United States and regional allies. Naval positioning near Japan is nothing new, but in the present climate sends quite a different message than it did before. Strikes against North Korea would be considerably easier to justify and sustain, a fact that should not be lost on China or North Korea. It is important to keep in mind that the nature of the Armistice agreement in Korea and tenuous nature in which it stands presently, could make action considerably easier to justify compared to Syria. Though the Trump administration likely overestimates how easy it is to influence or “deal” with a rogue or contrary regional actor (something likely true outside of this specific case), stepping up the urgency and tone of what is expected or needed in this case, particularly from the largest actor in providing North Korea it’s nominal economic viability, China.

Congress and the “My Toy” problem – This incident should raise some concern in congress that they ought to reclaim some greater authority in the war powers. Given the tone and volatility of the president, reclaiming or framing the capabilities of the president to strike rather than simply defend U.S. interests overseas is something that both sides of the isle may see some consensus on. This should be heightened given the potential for the conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Location, Location, Location – So you are going to launch a largely symbolic strike against a foreign actor as a form of vaguely retributive action. Well, one advantage to being a real estate mogul and media savvy self-promoter is knowing the value and importance of geography and visibility. No one can ever say a Trump property is subtle and this attack embodied that attribute of his personality, so it should surprise no one he chose it. It was loud, visible, over the top and importantly, very close to population and infrastructure centers. Trump’s seeming imperviousness to being embarrassed by his actions seems to mean he will make them and be rather unabashed at how loud and obvious they are. If nothing else, his actions will not be as hidden as the previous administration.

Stay tuned for the next post in this series, where I examine the downward trends for the U.S. missile strike in Syria.

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