

U.S. strikes win global praise; ratchets up Russia tension

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — The United States vowed Friday to keep the pressure on Syria after the intense nighttime wave of missile strikes from U.S. ships, despite the prospect of escalating Russian ill will that could further inflame one of the world's most vexing conflicts.

Standing firm, the Trump administration signaled new sanctions would soon follow the missile attack, and the Pentagon was even probing whether Russia itself was involved in the chemical weapons assault that compelled President Donald Trump to action. The attack against a Syrian air base was the first U.S. assault against the government of President Bashar Assad.

Much of the international community rallied behind Trump's decision to fire the cruise missiles in reaction to this week's chemical weapons attack that killed dozens of men, women and children in Syria. But a spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that the strikes dealt "a significant blow" to relations between Moscow and Washington.

At the United Nations, Russia's deputy ambassador, Vladimir Safronkov, strongly criticized what he called the U.S. "flagrant violation of international law and an act of aggression" whose "consequences for regional and international security could be extremely serious." He called the Assad government a main force against terrorism and said it deserved the presumption of innocence in the chemical weapons attack.

U.S. officials blame Moscow for propping up Assad. "The world is waiting for the Russian government



In this image provided by the White House, President Donald Trump receives a briefing on the Syria military strike from his National Security team after the strike at Mar-a-Lago on Thursday.

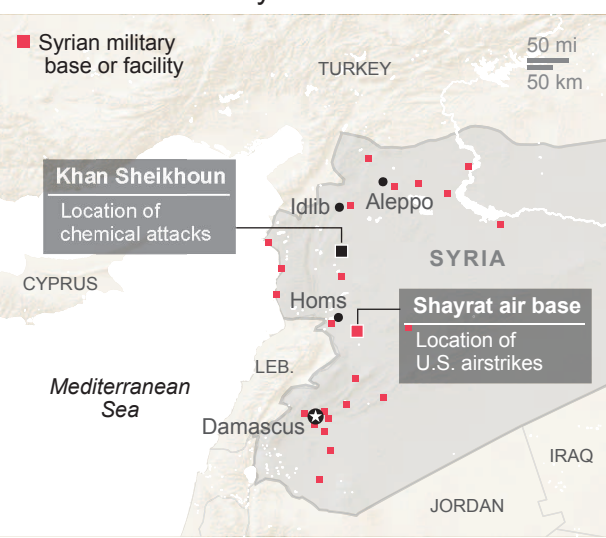
to act responsibly in Syria," Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., said during an emergency Security Council session. "The world is waiting for Russia to reconsider its misplaced alliance with Bashar Assad."

Haley said the U.S. was prepared to take further action in Syria but hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

In Florida with the president, meanwhile, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said: "We will be announcing additional sanctions on Syria as part of our ongoing effort to stop this type of activity and emphasize how significant we view this. We expect that those will continue to have an important effect on preventing people from doing business with them."

Thursday night's strikes — some 60 cruise missiles fired from two ships in the Mediterranean — were the culmination of a rapid, three-day transformation for Trump, who has long

US strikes after Syria chemical attack



SOURCE: Institute of the Study of War

opposed deeper U.S. involvement in Syria's civil war. Advisers said he was outraged by heartbreaking images of young children who were among the dozens killed in the chemical attack and ordered his national security team to swiftly

prepare military options. The decision undercut another campaign promise for Trump: his pledge to try to warm relations with Moscow. After months of allegations of ties between his election campaign and the Kremlin — the subject

Trump's military action unnerves GOP libertarians, Democrats

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's military strike against Syria drew strong pushback from an odd mix of libertarian Republicans, Democrats and the far-right conservatives who have long insisted on Congress' constitutional authority for acts of war.

Trump burnished an "America first" foreign policy during his 2016 campaign, warning that rival Hillary Clinton would dangerously order U.S. soldiers into international conflicts. He was often critical of former President Barack Obama's handling of the Syria crisis in 2013 and urged him at the time to seek congressional approval for any military action.

But the president said Thursday night that the airstrikes were in the "vital national security interest" of the U.S. and accused Syrian President Bashar Assad of having "choked" his own citizens in a chemical attack.

Trump's decision to launch the airstrikes on a Syrian military base represented an about-face at the start of his presidency and angered Republicans and Democrats, who said the Constitution gave Congress sole power to declare war.

They urged Trump to come to Congress to get authorization for military force.

"The Constitution is very clear that war originates in the legislature," said Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., a leader of the party's non-interventionist wing who challenged Trump for the GOP nomination.

Paul, who called the Syria strike unconstitutional, said Friday before a closed-door briefing for lawmakers that they weren't learning about the intelligence that led the president to order the strike until the day after the missiles were launched.

of current congressional and FBI investigations — Trump has found himself clashing with Putin.

On Friday, senior U.S. military officials were looking more closely at possible Russian involvement in the poison attack. Officials said a drone belonging to either Russia or Syria was seen hovering over the site after the assault earlier this week. The drone returned late in the day as citizens were going to a nearby hospital for treatment. Shortly afterward, officials say the hospital was targeted.

The officials, who insisted on anonymity in order to discuss the sensitive matter,

said they believe the hospital attack may have been an effort to cover up evidence of the earlier assault.

White House officials caution that Trump is not preparing to plunge the U.S. deeper into Syria. Spokesman Sean Spicer said the missile attack sent a clear message to Assad, but he avoided explicitly calling for the Syrian to leave office.

"The president believes that the Syrian government, the Assad regime, should at the minimum agree to abide by the agreements they made to not use chemical weapons," Spicer said when asked if Assad should step down.

Possible Trump, Xi showdown fails to materialize at Mar-a-Lago

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — What was billed as a showdown between the leaders of the United States and China over trade and North Korea ended with little sign of confrontation Friday — or of concrete progress in resolving their differences.

President Donald Trump had predicted a "very difficult" meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

After their first face-to-face at the Mar-a-Lago resort, he trumpeted they had developed an "outstanding" relationship.

U.S. officials said the two sides agreed to increase cooperation on trying to get North Korea's to abandon its nuclear weapons program, and China acknowledged the need for more balanced trade with the U.S.

But the two days of

meetings appeared heavier on optics than substance. The most powerful message for the Chinese leader may have been Trump's decision to launch U.S. missile strikes at Syria.

Those strikes added weight to Trump's threat last week to act unilaterally against North Korea's weapons program — although a much heavier risk would be required to take military action against the nuclear-armed North, which has its artillery and missiles trained on a key U.S. ally, South Korea.

The U.S. administration's first recourse is very likely to be economic — pushing China to crack down on Chinese banks and companies said to provide North Korea access to the international financial system.

In a possible harbinger of the kind of punishments Washington could inflict, a leading Chinese telecoms company, ZTE, was fined nearly \$900 million in March for shipping sensitive U.S.-made technology to Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions.

"They recognize that shows our clear determination to crack down on this sort of activity," Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross told reporters.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the U.S. and China "agreed to increase cooperation and work with the international community to convince the DPRK to peacefully resolve the issue and abandon its illicit weapons programs." DPRK stands for North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Tillerson said Trump and Xi noted the urgency of the threat of North Korea's weapons program and that they reaffirmed their commitment to a denuclearization of the divided Korean Peninsula.

On trade issues, Trump called for China to "level the playing field" for American workers, stressing the need for reciprocal market access.

He also noted the importance of protecting human rights, and asked China to adhere to international norms in the seas of East Asia, Tillerson said.

As a candidate and president, Trump has taken an aggressive posture toward China, labeling Beijing a "tremendous problem" and arguing that lopsided trade deals with China shortchange

American businesses and workers. Some \$347 billion of the \$502 billion trade deficit recorded by the U.S. last year was with China.

Trump said in a brief appearance before reporters Friday that he and Xi made "tremendous progress" in their talks and that he believes "lots of very potentially bad problems will be going away." He did not elaborate.

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