

Tillerson in Moscow: Pushing on Syria where Obama failed

MOSCOW (AP) — The Trump administration veered toward deeper conflict with Russia Tuesday as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson arrived in Moscow, gambling that an unpredictable new president armed with the willingness to threaten military action gives the U.S. much-needed leverage to end Syria's carnage.

Yet there were no guarantees Tillerson's arguments would prove any more successful than the Obama administration's failed effort to peel Russia away from its Syrian ally. Tillerson's mission, coming days after 59 Tomahawk missiles struck a Syrian air base, also carries serious risks: If Russia brushes off the warnings, President Donald Trump could be forced into another show of force in Syria or see his credibility wane.

"I hope that what the Russian government concludes is that they have aligned themselves with an unreliable partner in Bashar al-Assad," Tillerson said before flying to the Russian capital, referring to Syria's embattled leader.

"The reign of the Assad family is coming to an end," he confidently predicted.

But Tillerson's claim is one President Barack Obama, too, argued for years, only to see Assad outlast his own term in office. And the Trump administration's nascent Syria policy seems to be increasingly centering on the same tactic Obama unsuccessfully employed: persuading Russia, Assad's staunchest ally, to abandon him.

The parallels haven't gone unnoticed by Russian President Vladimir Putin as U.S. officials have accused his military of knowing about Assad's recent chemical weapons attack ahead of time and trying to help cover it up. Calling for a U.N. investigation, Putin held to his claim that it was actually Assad opponents who introduced chemical weapons into Syria's harrowing civil war.

"We have seen it all already," Putin said. Jabbing at U.S. credibility, the Russian leader reminded reporters about unfounded U.S. claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, used to justify America's 2003 invasion.

The escalating dispute over last week's events in the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun has thrust Washington and Moscow into a level of tension rarely seen since the end of the Cold War. The animosity is especially striking given widespread speculation that Trump, who lavishly praised Putin during his campaign, would pursue rapprochement



AP Photo/Ivan Sekretarev
U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson steps out of a plane upon arrival in Moscow's Vnukovo airport, Russia on Tuesday.

with Moscow.

Even on Syria, the positions appeared to be hardening. Only a week ago, top Trump officials had spoken off deprioritizing past U.S. efforts to remove Assad from office and accepting the "reality" that 18 months of Russian military intervention had secured him in power. Since last Thursday's cruise missile strike, Tillerson and other U.S. officials appear to have reverted to the past administration's rhetoric of insisting that Assad is on the way out, without outlining any strategy for making that happen.

The Trump administration's change of heart, apparently spurred in part by the president's emotional response to the images of chemical weapons victims, also is serving another purpose: defanging the perception of coziness between Trump and Moscow. As the FBI and multiple congressional committees investigate potential collusion between Russia and Trump's campaign, the president can point to his hard-line stance on Assad as fresh evidence he's willing to stand up to Putin.

Asked about Putin possibly skipping a meeting with Tillerson, White House press secretary Sean Spicer said, "There is a bit of irony that for all of these talks that have been perpetuated about back channels and direct links, that now it's they won't meet with you." At a minimum, Tillerson will meet Wednesday with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and the two are expected to take questions from reporters.

As Tillerson landed in Moscow, senior White House officials briefed reporters on declassified U.S. intelligence they said disproved Russia's claim that rebels were responsible for the chemical weapons. In an accompanying four-page memo, the U.S. accused Russia of a disinformation

Trump's intelligence doubts parroted by Putin

President Donald Trump's frequent questioning about the integrity of his spy agencies is coming back to haunt him.

As his administration used U.S. intelligence to pressure Moscow over its support for Syrian President Bashar Assad, Russian President Vladimir Putin parroted back Trump's doubts about the reliability of U.S. spy agencies.

Trump used the same argument in December, when the intelligence community issued its official assessment that Russia interfered with the U.S. election. Rejecting the assessment, Trump comparing the analyses to the false claims in the lead up to the Iraq War.

"These are the same people that said Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction," the Trump transition team said in a statement.

Trump has picked other fights with intelligence agencies, blaming it for the leaks about his associates' Russia ties. During the transition, he ripped the intelligence community for being behind the leaks and even compared them to Nazi propaganda. Lately, he has blamed Democrats, suggesting that they were using them as an excuse for Hillary Clinton's defeat.

Those statements threaten to undermine the Trump administration's recent effort isolate Assad, in the wake of a chemical attack that killed dozens of Syrians.

U.S. officials have accused Russia of knowing about the attack ahead of time and trying to help cover it up. Putin has called for a formal United Nations investigation.

"Putin knows that Trump personally degraded U.S. intelligence credibility by attacking it over the Russian hacking and essentially going to war with the CIA and NSA," said Malcolm Nance, a veteran intelligence officer. He said Putin, a former director of Russian intelligence, "is now taking full advantage of the damage Trump caused with those attacks."

campaign and aiding Syria in covering up the gruesome attack.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told reporters at the Pentagon, "It is very clear who planned this attack ... and who orchestrated this attack."

During border visit, Sessions outlines immigration plan

NOGALES, Ariz. (AP) — Attorney General Jeff Sessions toured the U.S.-Mexico border Tuesday and unveiled what he described as a new get-tough approach to immigration prosecutions under President Donald Trump.

The nation's top law enforcement official outlined a series of changes that he said mark the start of a new era to rid American cities and the border of what he described as "filth" brought on by drug cartels and criminal organizations.

He announced the changes at a news conference following a morning tour of the border that included visiting a port of entry, where he exited an SUV in a white shirt and baseball cap before entering a restricted area. He later visited with Customs and Border Protection officers and agents.

Sessions credited Trump for a steep drop-off of border apprehensions this year and said the administration will bring more felony prosecutions against immigrants entering the country illegally.

"This is a new era. This is the Trump era," he said. "The lawlessness, the abdication of the duty to enforce our immigration laws, and the catch and release practices of old are over."

Sessions answered only a few questions from reporters following his remarks. He said all prosecutors would carefully protect the civil rights of people charged with crimes, and he defended Trump's proposed border wall, saying it will be another tool to fight illegal immigration amid efforts within the Justice Department and other branches of government to punish and deter border crossers.

"The barrier, the wall, will have a great and positive impact and will continue our

ability to follow through on a commitment to end the lawlessness," Sessions said.

Sessions has been expanding the Justice Department's role in the anti-immigration agenda of the Trump administration. But his speech Tuesday during his first visit to the border offered the most comprehensive look yet at his plans for federal prosecutions of those in the country illegally.

He directed the nation's federal prosecutors in a Tuesday memo to prioritize immigration-related cases, with an eye toward targeting people who cross the border illegally and those who come back after being deported.

Sessions urged federal prosecutors to intensify their focus on immigration crimes such as illegal crossing or smuggling others into the U.S., even though such prosecutions are already happening on a large scale. Half of federal arrests in 2014 were for immigration-related offenses, according to a Pew Research analysis released this week, based on the most recent federal statistics.

Critics blasted the initiatives announced by Sessions as fear-mongering and anti-immigrant rhetoric not rooted in facts.

Sessions made the announcement in Nogales, a border city that has witnessed a dramatic drop in immigrant and drug smuggling in recent years as more people enter the country in Texas, many of them Central Americans fleeing violence in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

The Border Patrol's Tucson sector, which comprises most of Arizona, saw about 65,000 arrests of immigrants last fiscal year, roughly half the number agents made in 2012, according to Border Patrol.



Sessions

BRIEFLY

Spicer apologizes for 'insensitive' reference to Holocaust

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer apologized Tuesday for making an "inappropriate and insensitive" comparison to the Holocaust in earlier comments about Syrian President Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons — remarks that drew instant rebuke from Jewish groups and critics.

Spicer said in an interview with CNN that he was trying to make a point about Assad's use of chemical weapons and gas against his people but "mistakenly made an inappropriate and insensitive reference to the Holocaust, for which there is no comparison. And for that I apologize. It was a mistake to do that."

During the daily White House briefing, Spicer told reporters that Adolf Hitler "didn't even sink to using chemical weapons." Critics noted the remark ignored Hitler's use of gas chambers to exterminate Jews during the Holocaust.

It was the second day in a row in which Spicer, President Donald Trump's main spokesman, appeared to struggle to articulate the president's foreign policy at a critical time.

During the briefing, Spicer delivered a garbled defense of his remarks in which he tried to differentiate between Hitler's actions and the gas attack on Syrian civilians.

"I think when you come to sarin gas, there was no, he (Hitler) was not using the gas on his own people the same way that Assad is doing," Spicer said. "There was clearly ... I understand your point, thank you. There was not ... He brought them into the Holocaust center I understand that."



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