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President Trump's decision to strike Syria in April 2017 was not rooted in doctrine or deliberative process. It was the outcome of a collision between a crisis that demanded a moral response, a presidency shaped by unilateral instinct, and a moment that called for global performance. Three forces of credibility, emotion, and strategy formed the crucible. The missiles fired that night told a story that extended beyond the battlefield.

First, the strike reasserted executive credibility after the perceived failure to enforce President Obama's 2013 red line on chemical weapons. Trump, then a critic, now sought to avoid the appearance of weakness. As the case study notes, "Obama telegraphed weakness and indecision" (Gvosdev et al., 2019, p. 407). In contrast, Trump acted quickly and unilaterally, reinforcing the advantage of presidential initiative. As Howell (2003) explains, "the president moves policy first and thereby places upon Congress and the courts the burden of revising a new political landscape" (p. 8).

Second, the strike responded to equal parts of emotion and strategy. The graphic images were harrowing, covering children struggling to breathe, frothing at the mouth, and their bodies contorted in ultimate anguish. "When you kill innocent children... that crosses many lines," Trump said (Gvosdev et al., 2019, p. 409). Media coverage and internal advocacy, including

from Ivanka Trump, amplified the sense of urgency. As Faulkner (2023) explains, “media and public opinion can become important enablers, or checks, on various policy decisions” (p. 2).

The emotional imagery translated into direct state action.

Finally, the decision was strategic theater. The strike came over dinner with President Xi Jinping of China. This timing delivered the resolve not only to Syria, but to Beijing, Moscow and allies.

As Charbonneau (2023) observed, “states... must also seek legitimacy for their actions and authority within the international system” (p. 6). This was strength on display, carefully choreographed for maximum effect.

Overall, President Trump’s 2017 strike on Syria was motivated by a desire to reclaim presidential credibility in the aftermath of the 2013 red line crisis, an empathetic reaction to the chemical warfare victims, and a strategic maneuver to influence international perception. The strike was characteristic of unilateral executive power, circumventing congressional deliberation in keeping with constitutional precedent, and activating interagency input, while being heavily influenced by both domestic forces and international norms. It was not a strategic shift. It was a signal. One heard around the world.

References

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