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Rex Tillerson's Visit to Moscow

A Glass Half Full

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Most reports on U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Moscow earlier this week have focused on the negative. Commentators have decried the inability of the United States and Russia to find a way forward in Syria and Ukraine, highlighting the harsh rhetoric from both Moscow and Washington surrounding Wednesday's meetings. U.S. President Donald Trump [told a press conference](#) <sup>[2]</sup> immediately afterward that relations between the two countries "may be at an all-time low," repeating a phrase used by Tillerson at his own joint press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow. Lavrov used that press conference to lambaste Washington for recent U.S. military interventions and past attempts at regime change. Although Trump's Thursday morning whiplash [tweet](#) <sup>[3]</sup>—which included "Things will work out fine between the U.S.A. and Russia" and "there will be lasting peace!"—may have been a bit too optimistic, Tillerson's visit actually achieved some successes.

We need to start by putting the visit in context. On April 7, just four days before Tillerson arrived in Moscow, the United States launched its first ever strike against the regime of Syrian President (and Russian military ally) Bashar al-Assad. It did so after determining that Syrian military airplanes were responsible for a chemical weapons attack three days earlier in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, a rebel-held area of Idlib province. Both of these events were astonishing. Assad brazenly violated the global Chemical Weapons Convention, which he joined under Russian pressure in 2013. And Trump—who had decried U.S. military intervention abroad throughout his election campaign and had [tweeted](#) <sup>[4]</sup> in all caps to former U.S. President Barack Obama in 2013, "Do not attack Syria...if you do, many very bad things will happen"—seemed to turn on a dime, as 59 U.S. cruise missiles landed on Syria's Shayrat air base.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson cancelled his own scheduled visit to Moscow after the Idlib chemical weapons attack, [saying](#) <sup>[5]</sup> that London "deplore[s] Russia's continued defense of the Assad regime." But Tillerson soldiered on. And despite repeated indications from the Russian side that President Vladimir Putin might break with protocol and not meet with Tillerson, in the end they did meet, for over two hours, in a meeting that Tillerson [characterized](#) <sup>[6]</sup> as "productive" and in which both sides spoke "frankly."

In [diplomacy-speak](#) <sup>[7]</sup>, "frank" means argumentative, but "productive" implies that the two sides made some progress. Indeed, at a time of high tensions when [some experts](#) <sup>[8]</sup> fear that war might break out between the United States and Russia over Syria, the act of talking can, in itself, be an accomplishment. The best way to avoid an unintended escalation is to keep channels of communication open, and Tillerson and his Russian counterparts did just that, [announcing](#) <sup>[6]</sup> plans to establish "a working group to address smaller issues and make progress toward stabilizing the relationship." It appears that Russia also backtracked on its earlier suspension of the hotline facilitating military "deconfliction"—or the avoidance of accidental clashes—between U.S. and Russian forces on

Syrian territory. Moscow had officially stopped recognizing the 2015 military-to-military memorandum of understanding with the United States on safe operations in Syria after the U.S. airstrike, but Lavrov said [6] during the meeting that “President Putin confirmed our determination to put it on track again.”

Then there was the question of investigating the Syrian chemical attack. Lavrov still insisted that Russia had not seen any evidence that the Syrian military was responsible, but pointedly did not repeat Putin's earlier claim: that the U.S. justification for the air strike resembled [9] its ultimately unsupported justifications for invading Iraq in 2003. Lavrov instead called for an international investigation of the Syrian events, leaving room for the possibility that the U.S. air strike might indeed be ultimately seen as warranted by Moscow. (In a later joint press conference with Iran and Syria, Lavrov unfortunately said [10] he saw “growing evidence” that the Idlib chemical attack was staged, so it remains to be seen whether Russia and the United States will in the end agree about the facts on the ground.)

Of course, Thursday's attempt to bring such an investigation to the United Nations Security Council failed miserably. Russia's Deputy Permanent Representative Vladimir Safronkov jabbed his finger in the air at his British counterpart and spoke [11] to him in a manner typically used in Russia by a parent to a child. It wasn't quite the 1960 Cold War performance of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev banging (or at least brandishing [12]) his shoe at the United Nations, but Russia did veto the resolution. Safronkov claimed the resolution had condemned the Syrian government before the facts were established. Indeed, the resolution called for [13] very intrusive investigative measures—such as the release of military flight logs and commander names—that would be a significant violation of Syrian state sovereignty, and may have been designed as a political ploy to push Moscow to veto and isolate itself internationally. While Bolivia voted with Russia, ten members of the Security Council supported the resolution, and China (in another surprise) abstained, rather than joining the Russian veto as it typically has in the past.

Beyond all the theater, though, a real investigation is moving forward at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), the organization in The Hague that is responsible for overseeing compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention. And its Turkish director-general, Ahmet Uzumcu, said [14] preliminary results indicate that the United States' accusation is credible. Although the media are once again concentrating on the “diplomatic skirmishes” between Washington and Moscow at an emergency meeting of the OPCW, we shouldn't lose sight of the substance of the ongoing international expert investigation of the Syrian attack—and the fact that an investigation might never have gained Russian support if not for the Tillerson meeting in Moscow.

As the meeting in Moscow progressed, an even worse crisis seemed to be brewing in North Korea. Kim Jong Un announced plans to possibly test a new nuclear weapon as early as this weekend, and Washington has implied [15] that it may take unilateral military action if Kim does so, especially if China fails to step in and restrain Kim's actions. It was therefore heartening to hear Lavrov say [6] that Russia remained committed to “the denuclearization of the peninsula through negotiations,” and hoped for ideas that might unite “our Chinese colleagues, too.” Cutting through all of the sharp rhetoric of recent days, this might be a sign that renewed great power cooperation can put pressure on Pyongyang.

All of these things are small steps forward, but no one with any real knowledge of the situation had expected a major breakthrough in U.S.-Russian relations. The interests of the two countries simply fail to intersect on too many issues around the world. Meanwhile, internal U.S. congressional investigations of the Trump campaign's ties to Russia have complicated any hopes for a new reset anytime soon. With Tillerson's visit, the United States may have gained about as much as could be hoped for in current circumstances.

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- [9] <http://thehill.com/policy/international/russia/328254-putin-syria-strikes-like-second-iraq-war>
- [10] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-04-14/russia-says-evidence-growing-syria-chemical-attack-was-staged>
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- [12] <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/26/opinion/did-he-bang-it-nikita-khrushchev-and-the-shoe.html>
- [13] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/12/world/middleeast/united-nations-resolution-syria-russia-united-states.html>
- [14] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/us-berates-syria-at-opcw-meeting-on-syria-chemical-attack/2017/04/13/38478442-204c-11e7-bb59-a74ccaf1d02f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/us-berates-syria-at-opcw-meeting-on-syria-chemical-attack/2017/04/13/38478442-204c-11e7-bb59-a74ccaf1d02f_story.html)
- [15] <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-may-launch-strike-if-north-korea-reaches-nuclear-n746366>