

POLITICS

Mattis Wanted Congressional Approval Before Striking Syria. He Was Overruled.

By HELENE COOPER APRIL 17, 2018

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis urged President Trump to get congressional approval before the United States launched airstrikes against Syria last week, but was overruled by Mr. Trump, who wanted a rapid and dramatic response, military and administration officials said.

Mr. Trump, the officials said, wanted to be seen as backing up a series of bellicose tweets with action, but was warned that an overly aggressive response risked igniting a wider war with Russia.

Friday night's limited strikes on three targets, which lasted under two minutes, were the compromise.

The debate reflects a divide between Mr. Trump and the defense secretary, who, like no other member of the cabinet, has managed to maintain a cordial relationship with the president even while reining him in.

Until this month, Mr. Mattis had a buffer at the White House in the former national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, who often deferred to the defense secretary, a retired four-star Marine general. The arrival of Mr. Trump's new national security adviser, John R. Bolton, means that buffer is gone.

Administration and congressional officials said the hawkish Mr. Bolton is not

expected to defer to the defense secretary; already, neoconservative members of the Republican foreign policy establishment have started to air concerns that Mr. Mattis is ceding strategic territory to Iran and Russia in Syria.

Mr. Mattis is widely viewed by global leaders as the strongest and perhaps most credible voice on foreign policy in an administration that has been rocked by firings and resignations among senior presidential advisers. The recent exits of both General McMaster and Rex W. Tillerson as secretary of state have focused more attention on Mr. Mattis's role in the cabinet.

On Tuesday, Mr. Mattis and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed lawmakers on Capitol Hill about the Syria airstrikes in closed-door meetings.

“We’ve got to put a check on this president, on any president, when it comes to Congress’s constitutional responsibility to wage war,” Representative Barbara Lee, Democrat of California, said in an interview on Tuesday. She called last week’s Syria’s strikes “illegal.”

As he pressed his case last week, before the allied strikes with Britain and France, Mr. Mattis lost the battle over getting congressional authorization. But he won the larger war.

Mr. Mattis prevailed in limiting the strikes to three targets that did not risk endangering Russian troops scattered at military installations around Syria. Nor did the 105 missiles hit Syrian military units believed to be responsible for carrying out an April 7 suspected chemical weapons attack on Douma, near Damascus.

In the end, the narrowly targeted strikes belied Mr. Trump’s description Friday night of a larger coordinated response that could take days or weeks.

“The combined American, British and French response to these atrocities will integrate all instruments of our national power — military, economic and diplomatic,” Mr. Trump said in an address to the nation as the strikes were underway. “We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops

its use of prohibited chemical agents.”

But there have been no additional strikes since then, and the Pentagon said no more are being planned. “This is a one-time shot,” Mr. Mattis said on Friday, calling the airstrikes “a very strong message to dissuade” President Bashar al-Assad of Syria from using chemical weapons against his own people.

Mr. Trump’s drumbeat of threats last week of a sharp response to the suspected gas attacks all but guaranteed that the United States military would strike Syria, according to two Defense Department officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Even so, Mr. Mattis pushed to get congressional authorization, according to people with knowledge of the internal debate. In several White House meetings last week, he underscored the importance of linking military operations to public support — a view Mr. Mattis has long held.

Col. Patrick S. Ryder of the Air Force, a spokesman for General Dunford, on Tuesday declined to discuss the internal debate between the Pentagon and the White House over the strikes’ reach before they were launched.

It marked the second public divergence of views between Mr. Trump and Mr. Mattis over Syria in the past two weeks.

Just days before the suspected chemical attack, the president said he was ready for the estimated 2,000 American troops currently in Syria to leave the battlefield, where they have been fighting alongside Kurdish allies against the Islamic State. Mr. Mattis and other aides quickly talked him out an immediate withdrawal.

Pentagon officials said there was also worry that congressional opposition to American military engagements that still rely on authorizations approved after the 2001 terrorist attacks could grow without getting Capitol Hill onboard before striking at Mr. Assad’s chemical weapons program.

Mr. Trump did not necessarily want to hit Syria hard enough to bring Russia into the war, administration officials said. But he did want to appear aggressive in his response.

“He just wants the big show,” said Derek Chollet, an assistant secretary of defense in the Obama administration. “So Mattis was probably pushing on an open door.”

Mr. Mattis is particularly concerned about overextending the American military in Syria. He does not want the United States to veer from its stated policy of focusing only on the fight in Syria against the Islamic State — and avoid delving into the country’s seven-year civil war.

Russian forces and Iranian militias have helped Mr. Assad remain in power against Syrian opposition fighters who accuse him of a brutal siege against the country.

“The strike was really just enough to cover the president politically, but not enough to spark a war with the Russians,” said Jon Soltz, a two-tour veteran of the Iraq war who is chairman of the liberal veterans group VoteVets. “It was clear the military had tight constraints on the operation, and that everybody in the military seemed to know that except the president.”

Mr. Mattis publicly disputed suggestions on Tuesday that the limited strikes amounted to little more than a public relations punch at Mr. Assad.

“The French, the United Kingdom, the United States, allies, all NATO allies, we worked together to maintain the prohibition on the use of chemical weapons,” Mr. Mattis said at the Pentagon. “We did what we believe was right under international law, under our nation’s laws.

“And I hope that this time, the Assad regime got the message,” Mr. Mattis said.

Thomas Gibbons-Neff contributed reporting.

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