

## 11 APR 17: Press Conference by Secretary Mattis and Gen. Votel in the Pentagon Briefing Room

Source: Press Operations

STAFF: Good afternoon, everyone. For today's briefing, we're joined by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command in Tampa, Florida.

We will start with a few opening remarks, then proceed directly to your questions. We're planning to go for around 30 minutes.

With that, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JIM MATTIS: Well, thank you, Steve. We're on right now?

STAFF: Yes, sir.

SEC. MATTIS: OK. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I previously released a statement on the U.S. military's response to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. I thought this was an appropriate time now for General Votel and me to update you on the military action itself.

Last Tuesday on the 4th of April, the Syrian regime attacked its own people using chemical weapons. I have personally reviewed the intelligence, and there is no doubt the Syrian regime is responsible for the decision to attack and for the attack itself.

In response to the attack, our government began a deliberate process, led by the National Security Council, to recommend diplomatic and military options to the president. We met over several days and I spoke with some of our allies.

The National Security Council considered the near-century-old international prohibition against the use of chemical weapons, the Syrian regime's repeated violations of that international law, and the inexplicably ruthless murders the regime had committed.

We determined that a measured military response could best deter the regime from doing this again. As always, we examined how best to avoid civilian casualties in the execution of the strike, and our actions were successful. Based on these considerations, on 6 April, the president directed military action consistent with our vital national interests to deter the use of chemical weapons.

This military action demonstrates the United States will not passively stand by while Assad blithely ignores international law and employs chemical weapons he had declared destroyed.

We were aware of the presence of Russians at the airfield and took appropriate actions to ensure no Russians were injured in the attack.

Our military policy in Syria has not changed. Our priority remains the defeat of ISIS. ISIS represents a clear and present danger, an immediate threat to Europe and ultimately, a threat to the United States homeland.

In closing, the Syrian regime should think long and hard before it again acts so recklessly in violation of international law against the use of chemical weapons.

General Votel will now provide further information on the strike.

GENERAL JOSEPH L. VOTEL: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

As Secretary Mattis stated, the United States Central Command was directed to develop military options in response to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons. We did that and developed a target- strike package, with the goal being to eliminate those capabilities, including airframes, equipment and fuel supplies, that provided offensive military capacity for the regime from Shayrat airfield. We did not deliberately target personnel in these strikes.

Once the order was received, we targeted 59 locations on the airfield and struck 57 of those. We assessed that we achieved our stated objective and the regime's ability to generate offensive military capability from Shayrat airfield, which we assess, was the launching point for this chemical attack has been severely degraded.

We are obviously paying close attention in the environment in the wake of these strikes and remain appropriately postured to respond as necessary.

Meanwhile, we are focused on the defeat ISIS campaign, which remains our primary mission.

In closing, I want to commend the exceptional skill and professionalism of our military forces involved in this strike operation. They performed extraordinarily well and we are very, very proud of them.

SEC. MATTIS: Well thank you, General Votel. We can take your questions now.

Bob, let's start with yours.

Q: Secretary Mattis, thank you.

You mentioned that defeating ISIS in Syria is your main priority, but in light of the chemical attack, is it your view that the U.S. should take some additional steps, such as creating safe zones or no- fly zones or even attempting to or removing Bashar Al-Assad from power?

And if I can ask General Votel if he could bring us up to date on the prospects for sending additional troops to Syria to accelerate the campaign there?

SEC. MATTIS: Bob, the goal right now in Syria, and the military campaign is focused on accomplishing that, is breaking ISIS, destroying ISIS in Syria. This was a separate issue that arose in the midst of that campaign. The use by the Assad regime of chemical weapons, and we addressed that militarily. But the rest of the campaign stays on track, exactly as it was before Assad's violation.

Q: You don't see a point of doing safe zones or no-fly zones?

SEC. MATTIS: Those other issues that you bring up are always under consideration among allies, and certainly the president has options, but right now the purpose of this attack was singular, against the chemical weapons use.

GEN. VOTEL: Bob, I would just for the question directed to me, I would just say, I'm not going to particularly comment on anything we might do in the future here. Obviously, we remain engaged with the department here and on the way forward, and so -- we'll -- we'll let the leadership make those decisions here and then we'll act accordingly.

SEC. MATTIS: Barbara?

Q: It's for both of you gentlemen.

Mr. Secretary, you said I believe that Assad should think long and hard about doing this again. That seems like you are sending him a very direct military message. What message are you sending to Assad about this? Do you feel -- why do feel -- what message are you sending?

Why do you feel he chose to do this not until the Trump administration took office? Did he read the signals from administration officials that ISIS was no longer the top priority? While ISIS might be the priority, regime change was not. Do you feel that that's the signal he got, and are you sending him a new signal?

And for you, General Votel, although you don't talk about future military operations and ISIS remains a priority, how prepared are you, how prepared is Central Command to take on additional military targeting? Do you feel you know, even if you can't say where the chemical weapons are at this point?

SEC. MATTIS: Barbara, we believe that Assad has used chemical weapons several times over the last several years, violated the international law that has prohibited their use since 1925. Syria is a signatory to that international convention. For them to have done this several times recently over the last several years is what I mean by recently, you've got to ask him why he chose now to try it again.

I trust he regrets it now considering the damage done to his air force but when I say he should think long and hard about it, I'll just let the mission speak for itself on that score.

GEN. VOTEL: I would just say that as a Central Command commander, I'm very confident that we can respond to any directions or orders that the secretary or the president give us in the region.

Q: Do you know where his chemical weapons are?

GEN. VOTEL: Again, I'm not going to speculate on what we know or don't know here but again I remain very confident in our forces and our ability to respond when we're asked to do things.

Q: First to General Votel. Could you just bring us up to date about what measures you're taking in this kind of new, more tense environment to ensure protection of U.S. forces on the ground in Syria? And General -- Secretary Mattis, could you please let us know, how is what you're doing militarily in Syria fit into a broader strategy being developed by this administration?

How does the strike and the positioning of U.S. forces -- U.S.- backed forces on the ground help in a broader strategic sense?

SEC. MATTIS: Well, Phil, the broader strategy as you know is embedded inside a global strategy. And overall right now the Americans are making very clear that ISIS is in our crosshairs and that's what our conduct of the campaign in Syria is designed to take on, is take on ISIS and defeat them. This other effort that came up in the midst of that had to be addressed because it addresses a vital national interest of ours that chemical weapons not be used, that the bar not keep getting lowered by the Assad regime so this becomes commonplace.

We had to make a very, very clear statement on this.

GEN. VOTEL: I would just add that force protection of course is something we always pay attention to and as the environment always changes, we have to change with that so we're paying a lot of -- we continue to pay a lot of attention to that. As we execute this operation, I think we took very prudent measures to make sure that we -- our forces -- all of our coalition forces that were operating with us are -- were well-protected, were well aware of what was going on and we had prudent measures in place.

And what we have done is we've entrusted our commanders on the ground to, you know, with the authority and the decision-making capability to resume operations as they -- as they assess the environment and so I remain very confident in their ability to do that.

Q: (Inaudible) -- anything additional you can specify that you've done differently?

GEN. VOTEL: No, I don't think we've done anything differently that we haven't previously done in the past.

SEC. MATTIS: Jennifer?

Q: There have been mixed messages from the administration about whether you're calling for regime change in Syria. Are you prepared if -- are you calling for Assad to step aside, and are you prepared militarily if he were to step aside tomorrow?

General Votel, have you seen any evidence that the Iranians were involved in this chemical attack, Qasem Soleimani in particular? And any evidence that Assad is moving his chemical stockpiles around within Syria?

SEC. MATTIS: Jennifer, the strike that we're talking about here today was directed at the people who planned it, who held onto the weapons contrary to what they had promised the international community and United Nations when they said that they had gotten rid of all those weapons. And the reason for the strike was that alone. It was not a harbinger of some change in our military campaign.

GEN. VOTEL: I'm unaware that -- of any information regarding Iran's participation in this and I -- I think we've seen some information that the regime has moved some aircraft and other things around so I would imagine there's some movement of his equipment that has taken place. Whether it's chemicals or not, I don't think I can comment on that.

Q: I'd like to ask both of you if you believe that Russia had advanced knowledge of this strike and if Russia should be considered as complicit in this strike, the chemical weapons attack?

SEC. MATTIS: David, I can speak for both of us on that one. It was very clear that the Assad regime planned it, orchestrated it, and executed it. And beyond that, we can't say right now. We know what I just told you. We don't know anything beyond that.

Q: In this room on Friday, a briefer said that at the time of the attack, a drone was sighted over that building and we weren't sure whether it was a Russian or a Syrian drone. Has it been determined yet whether that drone was Russian or Syrian?

SEC. MATTIS: I don't know. I -- I will tell you that we have gone back through and -- and looked at all the evidence we can and it is very clear who planned this attack, who authorized this attack and who conducted this attack itself, that we do know, with no -- no doubt whatsoever.

Q: Mr. Secretary, why -- can you help us understand why the death of innocent men, women and children from a chemical weapon warrants a U.S. military response, but the deaths of far more women and children in Syria from conventional weapons such as barrel bombs does not warrant a military response?

SEC. MATTIS: I think what we have to look at here, Jamie, is a policy decision by the United States. There is a limit, I think, to what we can do. And when you look at what happened with this chemical attack, we knew that we could not stand passive on this.

But it was not a statement that we could enter full fledged, full bore into the most complex civil war probably raging on the planet at this time. So the intent was to stop the cycle of violence into an area that even in World War II, chemical weapons were not used on battlefields.

Even in the Korean War, they were not used on battlefields, since World War I; there's been an international convention on this. And to stand idly by when that convention is violated, that is what we had to take action on urgently in our own vital interest.

Yes, go ahead.

Q: General and Mr. Secretary for both of you, we were expecting a new counter-ISIL plan this spring with these developments. Does this delay that in any way? And what are your thoughts on -- on finding a way toward an endpoint for both the ISIS war and what should happen in Syria, with regard to your military campaign and the rest of the whole of government campaign that, general, you've been asking for?

SEC. MATTIS: Well, the counter-ISIL plan has been put in skeleton form; it's being fleshed out now. This has got to be done in a methodical way, where we look at each element of it. A couple weeks ago, Secretary Tillerson had 60, 68 nations in town with his counterparts as the fellow foreign ministers.

And they are working on the stabilization efforts in Syria; this is not the United States working alone. It's very, very complex security situation and it's one that we're going to have to address in a very methodical manner.

And it's not something you can simply add water to a dehydrated plant and it's suddenly a full-fledged plan. This is hard work and it's going to take time.

GEN. VOTEL: I would just add on the part of the question directed to me here, I think you know, the campaign plan remains where we thought that it would be at this particular point. We're obviously engaged in very, very difficult fighting in both Mosul and around the Raqqa area, which is where we expected to be at this time.

And -- and we -- we anticipate that the fighting would be difficult at this particular part and I think that's exactly what we're seeing, so again, I certainly won't put a timeline on this. It does -- it'll ultimately prove us to be wrong but I -- but I think this is proceeding about the way that we expected it would, at this point.

SEC. MATTIS: Go ahead.

Q: Mr. Secretary, if I can ask you about North Korea, the Vinson strike group has now been redirected towards the Sea of Japan in the coming weeks. General Brooks is no longer coming to testimony later this month.

Has tension ratcheted up just recently in the past few days and can you explain why, what has changed just in the past couple of days or week?

And then General Votel, if I could ask you, Secretary Mattis mentioned about that Assad has used chemical weapons several times over the last several years. What chemicals have you seen there, are we talking about chlorine or something more specific?

SEC. MATTIS: Yes, I can answer the question, you asked him about my answer, if you wish, right. (Laughter.)

SEC. MATTIS: We have, of course, we've seen chlorine. It's been documented by independent medical authorities. They've been using chemical weapons. So those -- you're correct. That's what we were looking at.

As far as the...

Q: Nothing -- no other nuclear agents that you -- I'm sorry -- no other nerve agents that you've seen since, other than the chlorine in the last several years, besides this one attack...

(CROSSTALK)

SEC. MATTIS: I believe you're correct, but this time, it was not chlorine, quite clearly. And we know that for certain. There's no doubt. This is a medical fact.

As far as the movement of the Vinson, she's stationed there in the western Pacific for a reason. She operates freely up and down the Pacific, and she's just on her way up there because that's where we thought it was most prudent to have her at this time. There's not a specific demand signal or specific reason why we're sending her up there.

Q: (Inaudible) unusual for us to know about a ship movement in advance. That was sort of what -- what got everyone's attention. So why was that? I mean, why was it put out in advance? Was it just to signal to North Korea that there would be a show of presence there?

SEC. MATTIS: I believe it's because she was originally headed in one direction for an exercise, and we canceled our role in that exercise, and that's what became public. We had to explain why she wasn't in that exercise.

Yes, here?

Q: Thank you, Secretary Mattis.

I wanted to ask you about the status of the de-confliction line. When was the last time you talked to the Russians on it? And what has its absence meant for U.S. pilots and coalition pilots? Are they in a more defensive posture at present?

GEN. VOTEL: Let me address that. I'm not going to discuss the de-confliction line in any particular detail. But I would emphasize to you, I remain very confident that we are continuing to operate in a very safe and effective manner in the air. The de-confliction line has been very useful for us in the past as a venue for professional airmen-to-airmen exchange. And it was useful for us on the night of the strike, both in our pre-notification to the Russians and in our immediate communication that we had afterwards.

Q: Are you not talking about the de-confliction line because it's not being used?

GEN. VOTEL: No, that's not what I'm saying.

SEC. MATTIS: No, the operation goes on. It's well de-conflicted. The operations are going quite safely right now.

Q: Secretary Mattis, you're a student of history. You're a student of strategy. You've talked about red lines. The president has talked about red lines. The Russians have talked about red lines. At what point is there a danger of this spiraling out of control and to conflict between two nuclear-powered countries?

SEC. MATTIS: I don't believe I've talked about red lines. I generally shy away from it myself. I recommend Assad be rather cautious about violating international law with chemical weapons. I suppose that could be considered a red line. So I won't argue the point.

It will not spiral out of control. As you know, Secretary of State Tillerson is in Moscow. We maintain communications with the Russian military and with the diplomatic channels. It will not spiral out of control.

Q: What gives you that assurance? I mean, the Russians have been very clear in their rhetoric. If you -- I'll take your point that you have not said the word "red lines." The Russians have. They're saying that another response like the one you launched on April 6th would be a red line for them. How are you so confident that this isn't going to spiral out of control?

SEC. MATTIS: Well, I'm confident the Russians will act in their own best interests, and there's nothing in their best interests to say they want this situation to go out of control.

Yes, ma'am?

Q: As you consider the U.S. force posture after ISIS is defeated in Mosul and Raqqa, are you contemplating maintaining U.S. bases or a U.S. base in Iraqi Kurdistan so as to be able to check any further resurgence of an ISIS-like group?

SEC. MATTIS: The short answer is we are in consultations with the Iraqi government about what -- what the stabilization phase looks like. There have been no decisions. There have been no offers made either way. We're in consultation. We're talking about what the tactical situation will probably look like.

As you can tell, some of that would be assumptions right now since we have an active enemy still in the Euphrates River Valley, in Tal Afar, and of course the ongoing fight there in west Mosul. So, it would be premature to come to conclusions about that now, or even enter into the specifics about it now, until we actually have this enemy on the run out of there.

But we would be willing to engage with the Iraq government on how this should look in the future.

Q: Has the White House given the military authority to preemptively strike at Syria if in fact you had knowledge of a looming chemical attack?

And then I had a North Korea question.

SEC. MATTIS: No.

Q: But you've not been given authority to preemptively strike if you know in advance of a Syrian attack?

SEC. MATTIS: No, we have not.

Yes?

Q: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. Does the U.S. view chlorine -- barrel bombs filled with chlorine now as a chemical weapon? And the -- the second question, if I may, are there -- going back to North Korea, are there any feasible or straightforward military actions that the U.S. could take that wouldn't immediately spiral into a broader regional conflict?

SEC. MATTIS: Yeah, I -- I don't want to speculate about North Korea military actions. It would -- we owe some confidentiality as we discuss with our allies this situation that we -- we face up there. But as far as barrel bombs with chlorine, I mean, chemical weapons are chemical weapons. So, that -- that is the issue if you're talking about the strike we took.

It is not about whether it's delivered with an artillery shell or it's delivered by a helicopter with a barrel bomb, or a fighter aircraft with a bomb. It's about chemical weapons.

And we've made clear where we stand on that. President Trump has made it exceedingly clear where the United States stands on that sort of malfeasance.

You guys got lots of questions here today.



My gosh, young lady, you've been very patient the whole time. Go ahead.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. I was hoping you can clarify something.

In your statement yesterday, you said the cruise missile strikes took out 20 percent of Syria's operational aircraft. There was some confusion over that statement. Can you clarify it and explain how much of a blow it was to Syria's overall capabilities?

And General Votel, we're in the process of isolating Raqqa right now. Does the coalition and the -- our partner forces there have what they need to begin the offensive on Raqqa? And what -- what more resources do they need?

SEC. MATTIS: Yeah, the Syrian Air Force is not in good shape. It's been worn down by years of -- of combat plus some -- plus significant maintenance problems. We thought it was -- I thought it was about 20 percent. I think it's around 20 aircraft were taken out, which probably equates to about that, although I probably shouldn't have used the 20 percent.

We're trying to provide information as it comes in. And this is one of the challenges of trying to get it accurate but get it out as quickly as we can actually give you some fidelity.

But it's -- it's around 20 aircraft. And that damage to the Syrian Air Force is pretty severe, as you can tell.

GEN. VOTEL: You know, with respect to what's going in Raqqa, I think we have the capabilities we need to do what we're doing right now, which is the isolation of Raqqa. And I -- I think you're -- I think we're seeing that play out every day.

Right now, as I -- as our partners on the ground very effectively isolate this particular area as we move forward, obviously, the secretary and I and others are in consultation here on what additional resources we need. And I'll -- I'll just leave it at that. We're -- we're -- we're talking about what we need.

STAFF: ...will be the last one.

SEC. MATTIS: The new (inaudible) hate you for skipping the rest of them. (Laughter.)

STAFF: All right, sir, we'll go with Ms. Nancy Youssef.

Q: Thank you very much. Mr. Secretary, I just wanted to clarify something you said earlier because it's an important point.

Is it your convention that chemical weapons -- if it's a barrel bomb holding chlorine, chemical weapons only being that with the use of a nerve agent that is a chlorine then a barrel bomb would not necessarily lead to U.S. strikes, but that the use of a nerve agent, that that's the distinction you're making? I just want to make sure I'm understanding the point you were making earlier.

SEC. MATTIS: Right. I -- I just want to say very clearly that the use of chemical weapons contrary to the Geneva Convention that Syria has signed up for, using chemical weapons that Syria agreed under U.N.

pressure to remove from their arsenal, those chemical weapons that the Russians certified were gone, that if they use chemical weapons, they are going to pay a very, very stiff price. OK?

Hey, thanks very much, ladies and gentlemen. I appreciate your time here and I waiting this afternoon to talk. Thank you very much.

Q: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.