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BORIS JOHNSON, MP

Foreign Secretary

AM: Despite President Trump's bloodcurdling threat when the missile attacks came on Syria it was carefully targeted and less devastating than many expected. Most of the target sites were reportedly evacuated beforehand, so what really were we trying to achieve, and is President Trump now right when he says mission accomplished? The Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson is with me.

AM: I guess that is the crucial question. What was the mission and have we really accomplished it?

BJ: There's one overwhelming reason why this was the right thing to do, and that is to deter the use of chemical weapons, not just by the Assad regime, but around the world. And I think one of the most distressing things about the events of the last few years has been the growth, the contemptuous growth in the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian theatre of conflict. And you can imagine that people around the world are looking now and saying, well finally someone stood up against that and the world said enough to the use of such weapons. It's one of the great achievements of the modern world that we've banned chemical weapons. A hundred years, virtually, that prohibition has been there and now the UK, France, America have stepped forward to vindicate that.

AM: But it's also clear that because we had to warn the Russians in advance what we were doing so we didn't kill lots of Russians and start World War III, they will have told Assad, he has moved stuff out. Do you think he still has weapons capability of that nature?

BJ: I can't answer that question. Clearly the strikes were successful on three important sites, but the overwhelming

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purpose, the mission was to send a message that after years now in which we've seen a series of chemical weapon strikes, four of them are by the way authenticated by the OPCW, joint investigative mechanism. Dozens of other attacks of which we have testimony, finally the world has said enough is enough. And I think it's important to understand the limits of what we're trying to do. This is not about –

AM: Not trying to end the war.

BJ: That's right, Andrew and I think that this is not going – we must be honest – this is not going to turn the tide of the conflict in Syria. One can hope that it encourages the Russians to get Assad to the negotiating table in Geneva, to get a political process properly going, but that is as it were an extra. The primary purpose is to say no to the use of barbaric chemical weapons.

AM: And I want to come directly back to that, but before we do I guess the question on a lot of people's lips today is, is that it now? Because President Trump has talked about being locked and loaded. Are we locked and loaded if Assad uses chemical weapons in a week's time or a month's time or three months' time, will we do the same thing again? Is this the beginning of a process or is it the end of something?

BJ: Well, we must hope that it is a deterrent obviously.

AM: Hope, yes.

BJ: Of course. And I believe it's been a successful mission, I believe it's a timely, appropriate and commensurate mission. We can't tell –

AM: But if in three weeks we get a chemical attack –

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BJ: - we can't tell how the Assad regime will respond. I believe it was the right response to what happened in Douma. The evidence was overwhelming as people were discussing just now on your show.

AM: The Sunday Times, yes.

BJ: On the Sunday Times. The smell of chlorine, the sight of that regime helicopter in the air, no one else has helicopters; no one else would be capable of dropping a barrel bomb of chlorine in that way. The evidence was absolutely overwhelming. It was timely, it was proportionate and to get to the legal question, it will, I believe – if it acts as a deterrent –

AM: There is a genuine debate about this isn't there?

BJ: - if it acts as a deterrent, which I hope it will, it can alleviate further humanitarian suffering.

AM: But if the Assad household, an unlikely though, it watching this programme and they want to know – if they use chemical weapons again will they face other attacks?

BJ: Well, there is no proposal on the table at the moment for further attacks because so far, thank heavens, the Assad regime has not been so foolish to launch another chemical weapons attack. If and when –

AM: If they do – if they do?

BJ: If and when such a thing were to happen then clearly, with allies we would study what the options were.

AM: Now I think the other thing that's worried a lot of people around the country is we were so close to the Russians in all of

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this, Russian submarines were tracking our submarines; Russian troops were very, very close to some of the places we might have attacked and so forth. I know the hot line was going between Trump and Putin, but nonetheless, how close did we get to a confrontation with the Russians? Are you also worried about how serious and dangerous this is now getting?

BJ: Well I think it was very important for everybody to communicate very, very clearly to the Russians, to the Iranians, to the Assad regime what this was about. This was about chemical weapons. This was about three particular sites; this was about our determination to send a signal to act as a deterrent. And yes it was sensible therefore to have conversations and to de-conflict as far as was possible –

AM: So we told the Russians what we were going to do?

BJ: - and I can't say operationally exact what the contacts were but it was very important for them - in the currently understandably strained relations post Salisbury between us and Russia, for them to understand the limits of what we're trying to do. So this is not about regime change, as you say. It's not about trying to turn the tide of the conflict in Syria, it's the world sending a signal about the use of chemical weapons. We've seen the erosion of that taboo taking place in the last five, seven years. We've got to stop that erosion. We've got to re-erect the boundary in human psychology against the use of chemical weapons.

AM: And you've been very clear that that is what this was about and nothing else, so to be absolutely clear Assad, who seems to be winning the war, more or less mopping up opposition at this point, can carry on killing people with barrel bombs and machine guns and bombs of all kinds as long as he doesn't use chemical weapons?

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BJ: I'm afraid that is the unhappy corollary of this. That if we say that we are limiting our action to chemical weapons our particular desire to reinforce that prohibition, which is what this is all about, then yes of course it follows that the rest of the Syrian war must proceed as it will. And there's no doubt about what you say, Assad is determined to butcher his way to a kind of Carthaginian peace in Syria. It will be a great thing if the Russians – and it's only the Russians I'm afraid, not the Americans alas, but only the Russians, if the Russians put the pressure on him to come to the negotiating table in Geneva.

AM: Have you spoken to Mr Lavrov since this happened?

BJ: I'm afraid to say that contacts with the Russians have not been good but there is regular discussion at, as you can see, at the P5 level in the UN Security Council.

AM: Because again a lot of people would say this is the moment above all for the British government and the Russian government to start negotiating, to start talking again properly.

BJ: Yes, and well, as I say there are abundant contacts at the military, the security and the military - as you will have seen on the TV in the P5 in New York and we get our points over to the Russians, they understand very clearly where we're coming from, and so when it came to this particular action, there's been no doubt, we were making clear to Russia what we were trying to achieve and what we were not trying to achieve.

AM: Mr Lavrov has suggested that Britain faked these attacks, that Britain was also responsible in some sense for faking what happened in Salisbury, all these allegations are coming out. Does that make it impossible for you to have a conversation with him?

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BJ: No. We will continue to engage with Russia, of course that's right. I was struck that your previous guest did not seek to dismiss these suggestions with quite the vigour that you might have expected, since it is plainly an utterly preposterous and deranged suggestion to say that either that Britain was involved in what happened in Salisbury, which is blatantly offensive, or that we were somehow involved in what happened in Douma, which is absolutely demented.

AM: Looking at the timing of what's happened, a lot of people are asking themselves whether the hurry to make these attacks was to avoid having a Commons vote before they happened.

BJ: No, I don't believe that can be sustained at all. I think the imperative clearly was to get something done that was balanced, that was proportionate, that was effective in degrading Assad's chemical weapons capability. But in doing it in such a way as to protect the security of our armed services to enable them to do it with the despatch and efficiency that they need. And there is abundant precedent, there is abundant – as you know the Cabinet Manual and the doctrine of the prerogative power makes it absolutely clear that the NEC had a discussion, the Cabinet had a discussion – and as you know the Prime Minister will be making a statement in the House of Commons tomorrow which will be an opportunity for parliamentarians to hold the Executive to account on this matter.

AM: Jeremy Corbyn says that he would like a debate and a vote. Would you welcome that?

BJ: Well, as I say the Prime Minister is going to be making a full statement tomorrow. I know that the Speaker tends to allow virtually everybody who wants to make their point, to ask a question, to intervene in such matters, to have their say, there will be abundant time for people to get their points of view across.

AM: But if the Opposition use their parliamentary powers for an emergency debate followed by a vote, would the government oppose that?

BJ: That would be a matter for the usual channels and for the Speaker and for parliamentarians.

AM: Would you oppose it?

BJ: Well, let's see what the opposition propose.

AM: All right. Let's turn back to the Skripal poisoning case. The evidence has been suggested, been very, very strong. We heard the interview from the Head of Porton Down when he was less categorical perhaps than we expected about the origins of the Novichok. You were much criticised for an interview you gave to German television in which you said you had absolute categorical assurances from Porton Down. What exactly did you mean?

BJ: Yes, well thank you for asking that because this happened over Easter. And I was being very clear. I thought I was being very clear to Deutsche Welle, the German programme which is that Porton Down told us in absolutely no uncertain terms that this was a military grade Novichok agent.

AM: So they knew what it was.

BJ: - of a type – and furthermore of a type that had been produced and stockpiled in the former Soviet Union. And I said are you sure about that? And they said they were absolutely certain that that was what it was. Now it is not the business of Porton Down and I don't know whether it's even possible for them to identify the origin of a – anymore than you might be able to identify the origin of a sample of sulphuric acid, but as the OPCW

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confirmed just this week, last week, it was indeed military grade Novichok of a type that as I said to you on your show a while back, had been stockpiled likely for assassination purposes by Russia in the last ten years.

AM: And had you seen the evidence about all the allegations from the security services about it being tested on door handles and the Skripals being pursued for five years as well?

BJ: At that stage we hadn't seen that particular piece of evidence which has only emerged as you in the last few days from the National Security Advisor, but it is quite extraordinary in view of the weight of evidence now, Novichok used in assassination attempts on door handles. The hacking of Yulia Skripal's mobile phone. To continue to deny the likelihood of Russian involvement, of state sponsored assassination attempt I think is quite extraordinary and a sort of blindness to reality I find very, very perplexing.

AM: Okay but this is –

BJ: - defiant refusal to accept that the Kremlin could be responsible.

AM: We're getting in subordinate clauses here. What I was going to ask you is that this has taken us to a point where our relationship with Russia is as bad probably as it ever was during the Cold War, people have been talking about 1963 and the confrontation over the Cuban Missile Crisis and it being of that order. What is the way back from here?

BJ: I think it's a very important point and look, don't be in any doubt, it's not something that we relish, any more than I relish the use of military strikes in Syria by the UK, the US and France. No one wants to do this, we had to do this to reinforce the point

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about chemical weapons. With Russia, I went to Moscow in December. We held out the hand of engagement. We want to engage with Russia, of course we do, but I'm afraid that the Russians give us every possible signal and evidence that we also have to beware. And that, I'm afraid, is ...

AM: Are you concerned about some of the things they are now saying after these strikes in Syria about there being some kind of revenge attacks, that people talk about our NHS facilities, our electrical facilities being vulnerable to a Russian cyber attack, are you concerned about that?

BJ: I think we have to take every possible precaution and when you look at what Russia has done, not just in this country in Salisbury but the attacks on TV stations, on the democratic processes, on the critical national infrastructure, of course we have to be very, very cautious indeed. But I want to stress we do not – we in the UK do not seek an escalation. Absolutely not. That was why it was so important to get our message over to Russia, over to everybody involved that our response is limited to saying no to chemical weapons.

AM: CHOGM, the Commonwealth heads of government conference is coming up very shortly. It's been suggested that this is a moment for the British government to start to apologise for some of the wrongs that we perpetrated, as British states over the years to other Commonwealth countries. Do you agree that them?

BJ: Well that hasn't been suggested to me by any Commonwealth leader, foreign minister or Sherpa of the summit that I've met so far. Nobody has yet come up with this brilliant proposals. I think it may have emanated from the Labour Party, unless I miss my –

AM: It may have done.

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BJ: It may have emanated by the Liberals – but anyway it's not a proposal

AM: Your agin it?

BJ: - it's not a proposal that as I understand carries much support amongst the 53, and it's going to be a great summit. It's going to be – you've got countries, some of the fastest growing economies in the world, 2.4 billion people and we're going to have a – I think it will be a great opportunity for us to rebuild old friendships.

AM: And would you like to see the Prince of Wales taking over as Head of the Commonwealth in due course?

BJ: That is a matter for the 53 to decide.

AM: Finally, you'll have seen Patrick Stewart perhaps earlier on saying that there's going to be this new campaign, the People's Vote. To bring back – and it seems perfectly reasonable – to bring back the terms that have been negotiated, the actual deal, nothing unspecific, nothing vague, nothing hypothetical, the real deal and let people vote on the real deal. Why not?

BJ: Well, well. I mean we are going to – people had a vote, it was a great vote and they voted with a substantial majority to leave the EU. We're now trying to deliver on that mandate from the people. I think we'll get a great result and we'll be able to - not only to have a gigantic free trade deal with our friends and partners across the Channel, but to adapt – Patrick, he had something in Star Wars didn't he? Will be able to boldly go again –

AM: Be able to boldly go but –

BJ: Will be able to boldly go again to areas that perhaps we've neglected over the last 45 years.

AM: Full of dangerous alien spacecraft waiting to zap us.

BJ: Places where – no, no, on the contrary. Friendly, wonderful places where we can renew old friendships rebuild relationships and develop fantastic new free trade deals. And a lot of that is going to be on the table at the Commonwealth Summit next week – this week.

Ends