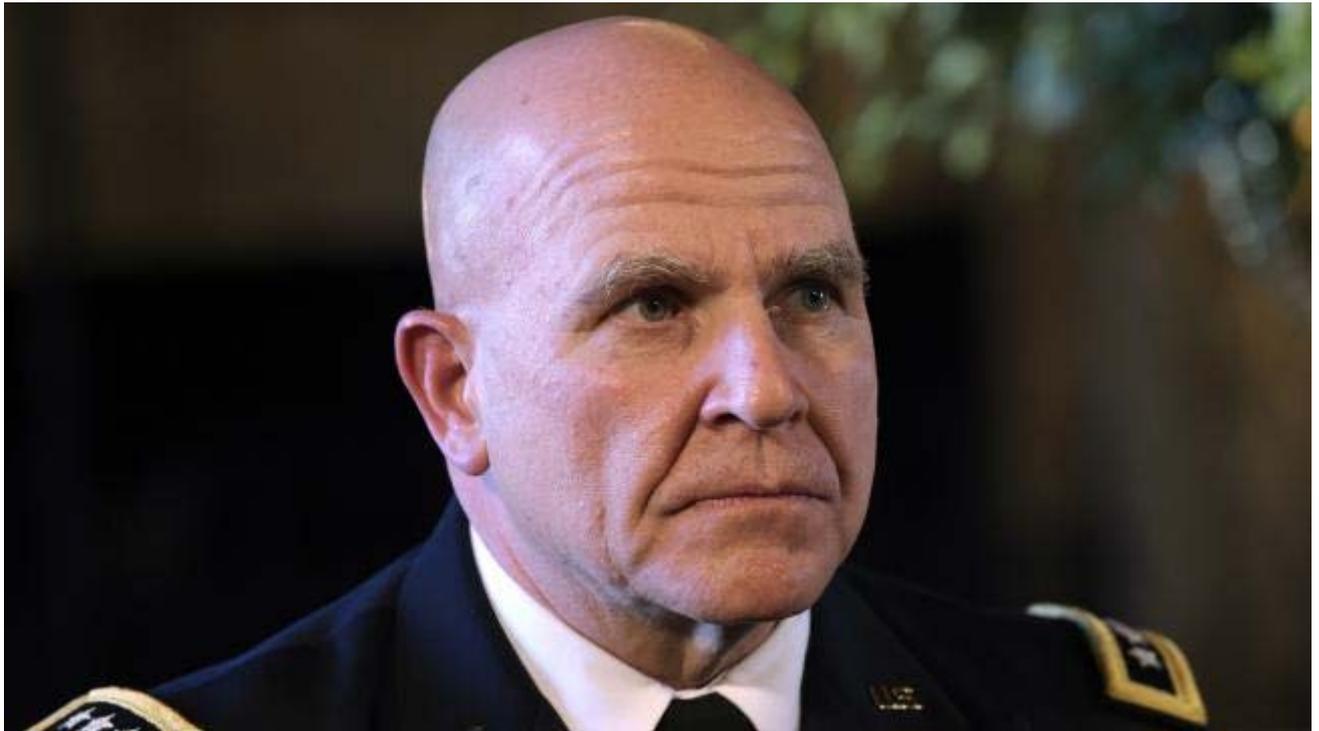


Syria: US will not remove Assad alone, says McMaster



US national security adviser H.R. McMaster. Picture: AP
Cameron Stewart, The Australian, 12:00AM April 11, 2017

The US has declared it will not act alone to remove Bashar al-Assad from power as it took a hard line on Moscow to abandon Syria's President.

US national security adviser HR McMaster said while Assad would not be a part of any political solution to Syria's civil war, Washington would not take unilateral action to remove him. "It's very difficult to understand how a political solution could result from the continuation of the Assad regime," General McMaster said. "Now we are not saying that we are the ones who are going to effect that change. What we are saying is, other countries have to ask themselves some hard questions. Russia should ask themselves ... 'Why are we supporting this murderous regime that is committing mass murder of its own population?'"

His comments were the clearest sign that Friday's missile strike against Assad's forces was not the start of a US military campaign to oust the dictator. The US fired 59 ballistic missiles on the Syrian air base used to launch the chemical-weapons attack that killed more than 80 people last Tuesday. US President Donald Trump said the attack was aimed at deterring Assad from using chemical weapons.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the removal of Assad would be part of an international diplomatic effort but was less of a priority for the US than the defeat of Islamic State in Syria. "The issue of how Bashar al-Assad's leadership is sustained or how he departs is something that we will be working with allies or others in the coalition," he said. "We're asking and calling on Bashar al-Assad to cease these (chemical) weapons. Other than that there is no change to our military posture. We've seen what that looks like when you

undertake a violent regime change in Libya and the situation in Libya continues to be very chaotic.”

Trump administration officials raised the pressure on Russia to abandon its support for Assad ahead of Mr Tillerson’s visit to Moscow tomorrow.

Mr Tillerson said he would push Russian officials to honour its 2013 promise to secure Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile. “Why Russia has not been able to achieve that is unclear to me,” he told the US-based ABC network. “Clearly they’ve been incompetent, and perhaps they’ve just simply been out-manoeuvred by the Syrians.”

He added: “I’m disappointed because I think the real failure here has been Russia’s failure to live up to its commitments under the chemical weapons agreements that were entered into in 2013,” Mr Tillerson said.

Republican Senator John McCain said the US should not treat the missile strike as a “one time deal”. “There’s a lot of war crimes that are taking place. And another aspect of this that I do not agree with the Secretary (of State) is that you have to just concentrate on ISIS,” Senator McCain said. “We can walk and chew gum.”

US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said Friday’s strike was a message to Assad and - Russia. “This was something that needed to tell Assad: Enough is enough,” Ms Haley said. “And this is something to let Russia know: You know what? We’re not going to have you cover for this regime anymore. And we’re not going to allow things like this to happen to innocent people.” “What we are going to say (to Russia) is: ‘Look, when you have a violation of the chemical weapons issue, and you’ve got a violation of Security Council resolutions over and over again, and you vetoed, seven times, to protect this war criminal, we’re going to call you out on it.”

General McMaster said Russia could be part of a solution in Syria, but the US was prepared to take further military action if Assad’s actions justified it. “The President will make whatever decision he thinks is in the best interest of the American people,” he said.

A joint command centre made up of the forces of Russia, Iran and militias supporting Assad denounced Friday’s strike. “What America waged in an aggression on Syria is a crossing of red lines,” said a statement. “From now on we will respond with force to any aggressor or any breach of red lines from whoever it is and America knows our ability to respond well.”

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the US strike was a “a strategic error, and a repeat of the mistakes of the past”. “The Islamic Republic has shown that ... it does not back off and its people and officials ... do not retreat in the face of threats,” state news agency IRNA quoted him as saying..