Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson head to a meeting in Moscow.Reuters/Maxim Shemetov

A week has passed since US President Donald Trump rained 59 Cruise missiles down on Al Shayrat airfield north of Damascus, in retaliation for the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens. But we are not much closer to answering the question: what next?

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit to Moscow late this week hardly answered that question, with the two sides agreeing to disagree – but not necessarily agreeably – on Syria's responsibility for the chemical weapons attacks.

"There is a low level of trust between our two countries," Tillerson told reporters after meetings with Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister and with President Vladimir Putin.

This might be regarded as an understatement.

Tillerson also re-stated what had been the position of the Obama administration: a resolution of the Syrian crisis could not involve President Bashar al-Assad.

Where all this leaves Australian policy on Syria is unclear beyond a hardening of Canberra's position on Assad continuing to hold power.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has called for the Syrian leader to go, and indeed face war crimes charges.

Turnbull's liberal interventionist line posed some problems for Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who has been on the record for several years insisting that Assad should be part of any transition arrangement.

Now Bishop says Australia's position on Assad is "hardening", thus indicating a shift.

If nothing else, she is displaying characteristic nimbleness in bringing herself into line not only with her leader's position, but that of an evolving American attitude. During Trump's first 100 days, his administration has been more antagonistic towards the Damascus regime.

At last the penny seems to have dropped with the Canberra foreign policy establishment – conspicuously light on for Middle East expertise – that Assad cannot be part of any solution that hopes to bring order to his civil war-ravaged country.

In any case, the Syrian pieces may well have moved far beyond being put back together again and we will be looking at best at a sort of Dayton Accords Bosnian solution in which the country becomes cantonised.

But all that is far off, as warring factions continue to tear each other and the country apart. Assad has demonstrated there are almost no limits beyond which he will go to defend his regime.

From Canberra's perspective, these are testing moments in a broader chess game as Australian policymakers seek to make sense of a Trump foreign policy not only towards Syria and the wider Middle East, but in a confrontational US stance towards North Korea.

It is much too soon to begin talking about a Trump Doctrine , but whatever was said on the campaign trail by an "America First" candidate intent on avoiding foreign entanglements that position now seems to be fungible.

Based on Trump's actions in Syria and his threats against Pyongyang, backed up by the deployment of an American battle group, what is emerging is an apparent willingness to use force, or at least employ the threat of force overtly to advance US foreign policy interests.

How then should an Australian government respond to what is shaping as a significant departure from business as usual under a restrained Barack Obama administration, whose preferred approach was to use drone strikes and other such methods to assert American foreign policy interests more subtly?

Australian policymakers would be advised to proceed with extreme caution. Turnbull and his advisers should be especially wary of any moves that would involve Australia more deeply in Middle East conflict.

Australian military forces are in the region to help the Iraqi government stabilise Iraq, not become enmeshed in a vicious civil war in Syria beyond limited air strikes against Islamic State strongholds in central and eastern Syria.

Turnbull and his national security team need to be mindful of the risks involved in any sort of deeper engagement, including especially the commitment of ground troops.

Syria is a mess, and a treacherous one.

What remain unclear is whether the Trump missile attack was a one-off strike aimed at sending a message to Assad not to resort to chemical weapons again, or whether it will be followed by other such actions.

At this stage, it seems to be of a piece with missile strikes that Bill Clinton launched against Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan when those countries crossed a line, in Washington's view. But you can't be sure.

What is the case is that Trump's warning shot has got Moscow's attention.

As things stood, Vladimir Putin more or less had his way in Syria in a loose alliance with Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, in support of the toxic Assad regime.

Now, Moscow has been put on notice. There are limits to Western tolerance of Assad's war against his own people, in which more than 400,000 have died and half the country's population of 22 million displaced.

This brutal campaign has involved the widespread use of barrel bombs and other such cluster devices that inflict carnage on those in the vicinity. These devices have been used mercilessly, and have drawn the condemnation of governments and human rights organisations under various Geneva conventions.

Putin may be willing to put pressure on Assad to forego the use of chemical weapons again, but it is hardly likely he would abandon him, or his regime.

Russia has too much invested in Syria, including an agreement on Mediterranean berthing rights for its navy, use of airstrips and other such facilities, and perhaps most important the message Russian involvement delivers to the rest of the Middle East.

Russia is back four decades after it was bundled out of Egypt by President Anwar Sadat, and is not about to withdraw.

What vastly complicates Western policy in Syria is how to sanction Assad on one hand and deal with Islamic State on the other, without the country unravelling completely, thus enabling a jihadist takeover.

Western policymakers tell us the aim is to "defeat'' IS, but what does this mean?

IS might be pushed out of Mosul in northern Iraq and its stronghold in Raqqa, but it will not be "defeated'' in any formal sense. There will be no armistice agreement in which both sides negotiate a truce.

Whether we like it or not IS, or whatever its mutations, will remain a threat to regional peace and stability, and further afield a continuing terrorist menace across the globe.

What we have on our hands is a generational struggle. This is all the more reason to hasten slowly in Syria outside an internationally-backed settlement involving the US and Russia that would end the bloodshed.

This would represent the best case outcome, but how to fashion such an arrangement given Moscow's resolute support for Assad is the question.

A bloodstained Assad or his immediate henchmen should not be part of these transitional arrangements. Their place is before a war crimes tribunal at The Hague.

_This column has been corrected. The paragraph beginning "Australian military forces are in the region …" went on to read "air strikes against Islamic State strongholds in central and western Syria". It has since been corrected to central and eastern Syria." _

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