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The US attack on Syria: A prelude to wider war

Andre Damon

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In the day that has passed since the United States carried out an unprovoked and illegal attack on a Syrian air field, it has become clear that this event is only the prelude to a much broader military escalation, with the potential for a direct clash with nuclear-armed Russia.

On Friday, the US media and political establishment, as if with one voice, not only applauded Trump's action, but called for its expansion. Former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton declared, "It is essential that the world does more to deter Assad from committing future murderous atrocities." The day before the attack, Clinton called for bombing Syrian airfields and reiterated her support for setting up a no-fly zone, which top US generals have said would lead to war with Russia.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi praised Trump's move, while calling on Congress to pass a new authorization for the use of military force to give further action greater legitimacy. Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham released a statement calling on Trump to further escalate the war in Syria. Trump must move to "take Assad's air force...completely out of the fight," they wrote, and create "safe zones" in the country, which would entail the deployment of substantial numbers of ground troops.

The delusional and warmongering mood in the media was summed up by MSNBC commentator Brian Williams, who absurdly cited lyrics from Leonard Cohen: “I am guided by the beauty of our weapons.” He was so transfixed by the “beauty” of the Tomahawk missiles that he repeated the word three times. CNN’s Fareed Zakaria proclaimed that with the launching of the airstrikes, “Trump became president of the United States.”

All of these statements were underpinned by a universal acceptance of the transparent lie that the strikes were in response to allegations that the Syrian government, with the support of Russia, used chemical weapons on Tuesday against the village of Khan Sheikhoun. The Syrian government’s denial of responsibility was dismissed, and the fact that US-backed forces have used such weapons in the past and blamed it on the government simply ignored.

As for the blatant illegality of the US attack on Syria, this was treated as a nonissue. At Friday’s UN Security Council meeting, Syria’s ambassador to the United Nations called the strikes a “flagrant act of aggression,” in violation “of the charter of the United Nations as well as all international norms and laws.”

In response, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley simply declared, “When the international community consistently fails in its duty to act collectively, there are times when states are compelled to take their own action.” In other words, the US reserves to itself the right to wage aggressive war against any country it chooses, whatever the pretext.

This line was echoed in the media, with *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, the eternal propagandist of “humanitarian” war, declaring, “President Trump’s air strikes against Syria were of dubious legality... But most of all, they were right.”

To understand the real motivations behind the airstrikes on Syria, it is necessary to place them in a broader historical context.

The United States has been continually at war for over a quarter century. In each of these wars, the US government claimed that it was intervening to prevent some imminent catastrophe or topple one or another dictator.

In 1991, the US invaded oil-rich Iraq, nominally to stop atrocities planned by the Iraqi military against the population of Kuwait. Then came the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, nominally to prevent ethnic cleansing by President Slobodan Milosevic.

In 2001, the Bush administration invaded Afghanistan, based on the false pretext that the Taliban was harboring the perpetrators of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Next came the second invasion of Iraq, justified by false claims that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction.”

Under Obama, the US bombed Libya and had its Islamist proxies murder President Muammar Ghadaffi after claiming that his troops were planning to carry out an imminent massacre in Benghazi.

In all of these wars, humanitarian pretexts were employed to carry out regime-change operations in pursuit of the United States' global geostrategic interests. They have resulted in the deaths of more than a million people and the destruction of entire societies. In the effort to reverse the long-term decline of American capitalism, the US ruling class has bombed or invaded one country after the next in regional conflicts that are rapidly developing into a confrontation with its larger rivals, including China and Russia.

Now, once again, the American people are expected to believe that the US is launching another war to save, in the words of Donald Trump, "beautiful babies."

In relation to Syria, the horrific bloodshed and refugee crisis are the products of a five-year-long CIA-stoked civil war aimed at bringing down the government of Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Iran and Russia. In 2013, allegations of a chemical weapons attack falsely attributed to the Syrian government were used to demand airstrikes. The Obama administration ended up backing down, confronting broad popular opposition and the unexpected defeat in the British parliament of a resolution authorizing military intervention.

Dominant sections of the military and political establishment, however, considered Obama's agreement with Putin to be a terrible climbdown, a loss of face that had to be reversed.

In the months since Trump's election and inauguration, the Democrats' accusations that he was a "Siberian candidate" and a "Russian poodle" were aimed primarily at forcing a more aggressive policy in Syria and against Russia, in line with the demands of the CIA and military establishment.

The partial resolution of the bitter conflict within the ruling class over foreign policy does not mean that the US will not also escalate military intervention in Trump's preferred region for military intervention, Asia. NBC News carried a prominent segment Friday evening reporting, "The National Security Council has presented President Trump with options to respond to North Korea's nuclear program—including putting American nukes in South Korea or killing dictator Kim Jong-un." Any such action could quickly develop into an all-out war in the Asia Pacific.

What is perhaps most striking is the indifference of the political establishment and media to public opinion. The propaganda is so blatant, so repetitive, it is as if they are operating based on a script—which they are. Broad sections of the population largely take it for granted that the government is peddling falsehoods.

Through the operations of the Democratic Party and its organizational affiliates, however, mass opposition to war has been politically demobilized. There remains a gulf between the level of consciousness of broad masses of the population and the extreme danger of the world situation. This must be reversed, through the systematic and urgent development of a mass political movement of the working class, in opposition to imperialist war and its ultimate cause, the capitalist system.