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Pompeo signs US-Greek military alliance and threatens Iran, Russia, China

Aggressive US and European foreign policy is intensifying the risk that great-power conflict over the Balkans and the Middle East can trigger global war. This is what emerges from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's six-day tour of Italy, ex-Yugoslav republics of Montenegro and Macedonia and Greece. After Trump aborted US military strikes on Iran in June ten minutes before they provoked all-out war between the United States and Iran, Pompeo's tour focused on threatening Iran and its nuclear-armed allies, Russia and China.

Pompeo traveled amid an explosive crisis in Washington and its relations with its nominal European and Turkish NATO "allies." Much of his time on the trip was instead taken with questions on what he heard while on Trump's call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and whether it could be used to further the campaign to impeach Trump. Though Washington announced \$7.5 billion in trade war tariffs against Europe during Pompeo's tour, he did not bother to visit the three largest European economies: Berlin, London and Paris.

The heart of Pompeo's trip, however, was a relentless denunciation of Iran, Russia and China, and the signing of a US military treaty with Greece targeting these countries and an ostensible NATO ally of America, Turkey. Examining Pompeo's remarks Saturday in Athens, it is impossible not to recall how, after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, such Balkan conflicts triggered the outbreak of World War I.

The Balkans, Pompeo declared, “remain an area of strategic competition.” He blamed the bloodshed and conflict provoked by three decades of US-led NATO wars in the region on Iran and its allies.

Pompeo denounced “the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose terrorist proxies have destabilized the Middle East, turned Lebanon into a client state, and helped create a refugee crisis that continues to impact Greece to this day.” He also denounced “malign Russian influence, both within Greece and within your nation’s neighbors,” and China for allegedly “using economic means to coerce countries into lopsided deals that benefit Beijing and leave its clients mired in debt.”

Pompeo then publicly bragged about the hypocrisy of his own presentation of the drive for US military control of the region—as a disinterested favor done to Greece. He said, “Look, it’s a bit selfish: America needs to keep Greece successful to help secure the Eastern Mediterranean.”

Pompeo’s brief for war is a pack of lies that does not even convince the secretary of state himself. It is not Iran that has set the Middle East aflame, but decades of NATO wars, US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and NATO’s use of Al Qaeda forces since 2011 for a proxy war for regime change in Syria. Then, in 2014, Berlin and Washington backed a fascist-led coup in Ukraine that plunged the country into civil war, nearly provoked war with Russia and led to an arms race in Europe.

Responsibility for the millions of deaths in these wars and the tens of millions of refugees they created, lies not with Iran or Russia, but with Washington and its European allies.

Today, Washington’s hopes to militarily dominate Eurasia lie in tatters. Last month, Trump implied that the only way to US victory in Afghanistan was to annihilate the country with nuclear bombs. He boasted that he could win the war “in a week” but did not want to, as “I just don’t want to kill 10 million people.”

Since 2011, the Syrian conflict has evolved into a proxy war between Washington, the European imperialist powers, the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, and their Islamist and Kurdish militia proxies, on the one hand, and the Syrian government backed by Iran, Russia and China on the other. The war led to a crushing defeat of the US-aligned forces, bottled up in pockets in northern Syria, and led to a surge in US-Turkish tensions. While Kurdish militias face attack from Turkey, the Islamist militias face attack from Syrian government forces backed by Russia.

US trade war threats and naval operations in the Indian and Pacific Oceans aiming to isolate China and halt its economic growth before it overtakes America also directly impact Europe. Much of Pompeo's trip was devoted to attacking China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Eurasian infrastructure. He pressed Macedonia to abandon a BRI-funded highway and Italy to abandon its official support for the BRI, approved earlier this year in Rome, and deny Chinese firm Huawei access to Italian Internet infrastructure.

With relentless war threats against Iran and its alliance with Greece, Washington is making clear that it will not tolerate these setbacks and is responding aggressively with a new escalation.

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The run-up to Pompeo's signing of the US-Greek military alliance saw growing discussion in military circles of global strategic competition in the Balkans, and particularly over access to Greek military bases. In July, US Ambassador to Greece Geoffrey Pyatt told *Stars and Stripes* that the US naval base in Greece at Souda Bay, used in the war in Syria, is "pretty much full." US military officials added that they are concerned over Chinese investment in the port of Piraeus in Athens: "If we want to pull a ship, a warship, into Piraeus, China can say no."

Speaking before Pompeo's visit, Pyatt explained US policy as follows: "In an era of renewed great power competition and the largest hydrocarbon discoveries of the past decade, this global crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa has returned to the forefront of American strategic thinking. After years of taking the Eastern Mediterranean for granted, the United States has stepped back to take a considered, whole-of-government look at how we advance US interests..."

This led to the signing Saturday of the US-Greek mutual defense cooperation agreement. This indefinite agreement, which its supporters claim no longer requires Greek parliamentary approval, would expand the US Sixth Fleet naval base in Crete, create drone bases in central Greece, and create a military base and natural gas facility in Alexandroupoli. This last base would allow US natural gas to be shipped to Greece and then, via gas pipelines that remain to be built, across the Balkans, breaking Russia's gas monopoly in the region.

Militarily, the Alexandroupoli base threatens both Russia and the Balkans, and Iran and the Middle East. It would allow Washington to send forces into the Balkans without traveling into the Black Sea through Turkish- and then Russian-controlled waters. Greek

defense analyst Efthymios Tsiliopoulos told *Al Jazeera* that with the Alexandropouli base, Washington could “support operations to the Balkans much more quickly than other ports.” He added that US troops in Greek bases are “easily deployable” to the Middle East. The Pentagon could also use these bases to block ships carrying refugees trying to flee across the Aegean Sea from the Middle East to Greece and Europe.

Amid a resurgence of conflicts between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus and oil drilling rights in the eastern Mediterranean, Pompeo unambiguously endorsed the Greek position against Turkey. Stressing that he had met with Greek, Cypriot and Israeli officials, Pompeo said: “We've made clear that operations in international waters are governed by a set of rules. We've told the Turks that illegal drilling is unacceptable.”

The warning must be sounded: preparations for a new, global conflict are accelerating. Encouraged by a pro-war consensus inside the ruling classes of America's European allies, both major parties in Washington plan to respond to the crisis of US imperialism's world position with further military escalation. The NATO powers have set a course to catastrophe that cannot be halted except through the independent intervention of the working class against this decades-long imperialist war drive.

A deafening silence prevailed throughout Pompeo's tour on the danger of a US war with Iran and the implications of such a war for Europe. However, Tehran has repeatedly stated that it would reply to a US attack by bombing US bases across the region that are in range of its missile forces. This could include US military bases in Greece, which can be hit by long-range versions of Iran's Shahab-3 ballistic missile.

War would be all the more likely to spread quickly due to the upsurge of military tensions in Europe since the 2014 coup in Ukraine, as NATO deployed troops against Russia. Since June, NATO military exercises collectively involving tens of thousands of troops have taken place in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden, as well as Portugal and Scotland. Next year's Defender 2020 exercise in Germany and Eastern Europe, involving tens of thousands of troops, including 20,000 US troops, is set to be the largest NATO war game in 25 years.

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