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Russia downs US drone as NATO plans major escalation in Ukraine

On Tuesday, an American MQ-9 Reaper military drone crashed near the Russian coastline during an encounter with two Russian fighter jets 6,000 miles from US territory.

Whether the American aircraft was rammed by a Russian jet, as the Americans claim, or crashed after it was forced to take evasive action, as the Russians assert, it was the first time that the Russian Air Force had downed an American aircraft since the end of the Cold War.



MQ-9 Reaper drone [credit: US Air Force]

The crash marks yet another dangerous milestone in the spiraling war between the United States and Russia, which is expanding in intensity and metastasizing on a global scale.

In its press briefing, the Pentagon did not provide any meaningful information on the incident. It refused to explain where the drone was, what it was doing near Russian

airspace, whether it was armed, or what kind of mission it was performing, beyond “surveillance.”

The Pentagon did not deny claims by Russia that the drone had its transponder turned off and that it was headed toward Russian airspace.

A US official told the *New York Times* the aircraft was flying about 75 miles southwest of Crimea, which would have put it perhaps 100-150 miles from the Russian mainland.

US surveillance operations over the Black Sea and NATO airspace are a critical component of the operations of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which are not only funded and armed by the US military, but directed by it.

In February the *Washington Post* reported that nearly all long-range missile strikes launched by the Ukrainian military relied on targeting provided by the United States.

In October, Canadian Broadcasting Company reporter David Common flew aboard a NATO reconnaissance flight near the Ukrainian border. He noted that NATO “allies share this intelligence in real time with the Ukrainians.” He also stated that the airman “describe watching Russian radar signatures disappear after being engaged by Ukrainian jets and missiles.”

He concluded that this reality “does give you a sense of how NATO does have involvement, really, in the Ukrainian conflict.”

Pentagon spokespeople responded to Tuesday’s crash with platitudes bordering on the ridiculous. The crash was the result of “juvenile,” “unsafe,” and “unprofessional” action on the part of the Russian fighter crews, they claimed.

The flight was “routine,” as if providing targeting information for combat troops in the largest war in Europe since World War II was “routine.”

Such statements explain nothing. As Rand Corporation political scientist Samuel Charap explained, “I would bet the MQ-9 was operating in an area that was of particular military significance to Moscow.” He continued, “The Russians would have had a clear military reason for what they did—this wasn’t a random act of lashing out. And Russian pilots would have been following instructions from ground control, not freelancing.”

In order to understand this incident, it is necessary to understand its context.

On January 20, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley pledged that Ukraine and its allies would “go on the offensive to liberate Russian-occupied Ukraine.”

This sweeping declaration pledged the entire credibility of NATO and the United States to the military defeat of Russia.

But less than two months later, it has become clear that this goal is unlikely, even with the massive commitment of funds and military hardware that has already been deployed, without a massive expansion of US involvement in the conflict.

On Monday, the day before the downing of the drone, the *Washington Post* published its most pessimistic assessment of the conflict to date.

“Ukraine short of skilled troops and munitions as losses, pessimism grow,” the article was headlined. It stated, “The quality of Ukraine’s military force, once considered a substantial advantage over Russia, has been degraded by a year of casualties that have taken many of the most experienced fighters off the battlefield, leading some Ukrainian officials to question Kyiv’s readiness to mount a much-anticipated spring offensive.”

It added, “US and European officials have estimated that as many as 120,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed or wounded since the start of Russia’s invasion early last year.”

The Ukrainian forces are “suffering from basic shortages of ammunition, including artillery shells and mortar bombs, according to military personnel in the field.” A Ukrainian commander the *Post* interviewed said that the “few soldiers with combat experience” were “all already dead or wounded.”

The commander added, “There’s always belief in a miracle,” noting it might be “a massacre and corpses,” but “there will be a counteroffensive either way.” He described the turnover in his unit: “Of about 500 soldiers, roughly 100 were killed in action and another 400 wounded, leading to complete turnover.”

For the US and NATO powers, Ukrainians are nothing more than cannon fodder in the conflict with Russia. Even with the gargantuan US military investment in Ukraine, however, the present levels of mass death in the war, which British Defence Minister Ben Wallace said was approaching “First World War levels of attrition,” is tilting the balance of forces toward Russia, whose population is three times larger.

According to internal US government documents published as part of the Pentagon Papers, the preeminent reason for US involvement in Vietnam was to avoid a “humiliating defeat.” It is just such a prospect that the United States faces, unless it massively expands its involvement in the war.

Just such an expansion is being actively prepared. On Tuesday, just hours after the Pentagon announced the downing of the drone, *Politico* reported that a group of senators from both US political parties called on the Pentagon to prepare to send F-16 fighters to Ukraine.

Declaring that “we are now at a critical juncture in the conflict,” the senators called on the Pentagon to “take a hard look at providing F-16 aircraft to Ukraine.”

Ultimately, the achievement of the United States’ goals in the conflict are impossible outside of the direct deployment of NATO troops to the war zone.

But given the total lack of popular support for such an action, it will take some massive event to galvanize public support for the required intervention.

Whatever mission the US surveillance drone was flying, it was no doubt related to the Washington’s next steps in the conflict, which threaten to make all the blood spilled so far just a down payment.

This war, which has already had such horrific consequences for the peoples of the former Soviet Union, is rapidly spiraling out of control. It must be stopped. It is urgently necessary to build a mass international movement against the war, oriented to the growing struggles of the working class, and armed with a socialist program.

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