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Washington threatens confrontation with Russia over Syria

By Bill Van Auken

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The Obama administration has ratcheted up tensions with Moscow over unsubstantiated claims of a Russian military buildup in support of the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Any expanded Russian presence on Syrian soil could lead to a “confrontation” with Washington’s “coalition,” which has been bombing Syria, supposedly with the aim of countering the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), US Secretary of State John Kerry threatened in a phone call to his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov over the weekend.

Kerry’s extraordinary threat of an armed confrontation between the world’s two largest nuclear powers was reiterated Tuesday by White House spokesman Josh Earnest, who voiced the US administration’s “concern” over the reports that “Russia may have deployed additional military personnel and aircraft to Syria.”

“These steps could lead to greater loss of life, they could increase refugee flows and risk confrontation with the counter-ISIL [an alternative acronym for ISIS] coalition that’s operating inside of Syria,” he warned.

The military threats from Washington have been accompanied by further provocations, with the US strong-arming the governments of Greece and Bulgaria to deny Russia the right to use their airspace for supply flights to Syria.

Bulgaria, like Greece a NATO member, announced Tuesday that it had refused requests for an unspecified number of Russian planes to fly over its territory en route to Syria. Greek Foreign Ministry sources revealed Monday that the Syriza party government in Athens had received a request from the US to take similar action. They said Washington had asked that Russian overflights be banned until September 24 on the grounds that they were carrying military supplies for Syrian government forces.

The actions drew an angry response from Moscow, with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov telling the Interfax news agency: "If anyone--in this case our Greek and Bulgarian partners--has any doubts, then they, of course, should explain what the problem is."

"If we are talking about them taking some sort of restrictive or prohibitive measures on the Americans' request, then this raises questions about their sovereign right to take decisions about planes from other countries--Russia in particular--crossing their air space," he said. "We explain where our planes are flying to, and what their purpose and their cargo is," he added, pointing out that such flights had long been routine.

Breathless US media claims about a potentially imminent Russian "intervention" in Syria boil down to statements from Pentagon officials speaking on condition of anonymity that there has been an increased number of Russian planes flying to Syria and that pre-fabricated housing has been erected there that supposedly could be used by the Russian military.

Russia's presence in Syria, where it supports the Assad government against ISIS and other Islamist militias seeking to overrun the country, is minimal in comparison to the efforts by the US to back the government in neighboring Iraq against these same forces. The actual issue is that Moscow's continued support for the Assad government is an impediment to the real aims of the US-led intervention in Syria, which is not the destruction of ISIS, but rather the overthrow of the existing regime and its replacement by a more pliant puppet of Washington.

Citing "American intelligence sources," the *New York Times* reported Tuesday that among the major US concerns was that "Russia is bolstering Syria's air defenses in some key areas." Enhancing air defense systems cannot be construed as a threat to what the US presents as its main aims in Syria—conducting an offensive against ISIS and protecting Syria's civilian population. It is a problem only if Washington and its allies are preparing to redirect their air power from sporadic strikes against ISIS targets toward a "shock and awe" campaign aimed at destroying and overthrowing the government of Syria--similar to the air wars previously carried out in Iraq and Libya.

The government of Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly sought to head off such an intervention and broker some kind of agreement to end the Syrian civil war on the basis of a power-sharing arrangement with sections of the opposition or a transitional government that would ease out Assad.

In September 2013, when Obama was on the brink of ordering an air war against Syria on the pretext of a poison gas attack falsely attributed to Syrian government forces, the Putin government made an alternative proposal, based on the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons,

that headed off a direct US war for regime-change. In the period leading up to this agreement, however, US and Russian tensions were sharply escalated, with warships from the two countries deployed in close proximity off the Syrian coast.

More recently, Moscow advanced a peace plan for Syria, calling for a joint campaign against ISIS by the US and its allies together with Russia, Iran and Syrian government forces, along with the formation of a new national unity government involving elements of the Assad regime, the Syrian opposition and Kurdish forces.

Talks between the Russians, the US and Saudi Arabia, however, were quickly deadlocked. The Saudi monarchy, which together with Qatar and Turkey has been a principal patron and funder of ISIS, the Al Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front and other Islamist militias, refused to accept any agreement that did not include the unequivocal overthrow of the Assad regime. Washington essentially backed up the Saudi royal family, its foremost ally in the Arab world.

As for Russia's role in Syrian developments, as a White House spokesman made clear over the weekend, its actions would be acceptable only to the extent that they were subordinated to the aims of Washington and its "coalition." The US has shown no interest, however, in incorporating Russia into this imperialist front.

These aims are, in any case, wholly inimical to the interests of the Russian state, which counts Syria as its last remaining Arab ally in the Middle East, a legacy of the Soviet Union's former influence in the region. It still maintains a naval station at the Syrian port of Tartus, the Russian military's sole base outside of the former USSR.

Russian oil interests have contracted with the Syrian government to exploit oil reserves located off Syria's coast. The state-controlled energy group Soyuzneftegaz has reached a 25-year agreement to this effect.

Moreover, turning Syria into a puppet state of the US and the Arab petroleum monarchies would transform the country from a potential pipeline link between Russia and the Mediterranean to the European market beyond into a route for a rival pipeline bringing gas from Qatar, which has poured billions into funding the so-called "rebels" seeking Assad's downfall.

For US imperialism, provoking the bloodbath in Syria has been just one more step in advancing its strategy of hegemony over the Middle East, the Eurasian landmass and the entire planet. That its intervention in Syria has led to direct threats of military confrontation with Russia is a function of this strategy, rather than any alleged Russian military buildup.

The trumped-up reports of such a buildup, along with the refugee crisis in Europe, are being exploited as pretexts for escalating the US-led intervention in Syria. Within the past few days, both France and Britain have announced plans for stepped-up bombing in Syria, and Australia is expected to soon follow suit.

The further eruption of imperialist militarism in Syria, along with the threats of confrontation with Russia, pose the danger that the US-led intervention in the Middle East is paving the way for a third world war.