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The US-Russian clash in Syria and the threat of war

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The initiation of air strikes by Russian warplanes against Islamist militia targets inside Syria, followed by Washington's bellicose denunciations, threatens not only to escalate the slaughter in Syria, but create the conditions for a far more dangerous military confrontation between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

Both the Obama administration and the Putin government claim that their militaries have been sent into Syria to wage war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as part of a broader fight against terrorism. Both are lying.

Washington, which spawned ISIS, has intervened in Syria to further the aims of US imperialism and its key regional allies--Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Persian Gulf oil monarchies and Israel. They seek to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and replace him with a puppet government subordinated to their interests.

Moscow's main aim in Syria is not to eliminate terrorism, but to keep the Assad regime in power—with or without Assad as its president—and thereby maintain its sole ally and foothold in the Middle East. Syria is the site of Russia's one naval port outside the former Soviet Union.

Two major foreign military forces, each claiming to be combating the same enemy, are, in fact, fighting for diametrically opposed aims. Scores of warplanes of hostile powers are carrying out military operations in a country barely larger than the US state of Missouri. The potential for armed clashes between them is undeniable.

The reasons for the Putin government's intervention in Syria are clear. It fears that if Washington succeeds in its campaign to overthrow Assad, that will serve only to escalate the US drive to encircle, weaken and ultimately dismember Russia itself. Thousands of Islamist fighters who have poured into Syria from Chechnya and other parts of the Caucasus will be sent home to lead separatist uprisings against Moscow, undoubtedly with backing from the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc. Moscow's brutal suppression of the Chechen population in the course of two wars has created fertile soil for such an operation.

The ouster of the Assad regime, moreover, would further Washington's drive to assert US hegemony over the entire oil-rich Middle East, while clearing the way for a new gas pipeline route that would provide Qatar with more direct access to the Western European market, undermining the interests of the Russian energy conglomerates.

While there is a defensive character to Russia's military intervention in Syria, it is nonetheless thoroughly reactionary. It is directed not at defending the people of Syria, or, for that matter, protecting working people in Russia itself. Rather, it is aimed at upholding the interests of the Russian ruling elite, which Putin's regime represents.

This class of criminal oligarchs, who enriched themselves through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the theft of state property, and the impoverishment of the Soviet working class, is organically incapable of carrying out any progressive action on the world stage. A comprador regime, it is unable to maintain any genuine independence from imperialism.

The reactionary character of Moscow's intervention was neatly summed up Wednesday by the Russian Orthodox Church, which proclaimed it a "holy battle."

That being said, Washington's denunciations of Russia's actions are beyond hypocritical. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter denounced Russia on Wednesday, charging that its air strikes amounted to "pouring gasoline on a fire."

The fire was set by Washington, the Saudi monarchy and the other reactionary oil sheikdoms that constitute the principal allies of US imperialism in the region. The Islamist militias the US claims to be fighting are their own creations, armed, funded and supported to serve as proxy ground troops in the war for regime-change in Syria, just as they did in Libya.

Carter and other US officials have indicted Russia for not restricting its air strikes to ISIS targets, but instead hitting other militias fighting against the Assad regime. "They attacked places where (ISIS) is not present," said Carter. His odd diction was aimed at covering up US concern for who was present—the al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. The so-called "vetted" rebels the US military has trained, armed and sent back into Syria have repeatedly turned over their weapons and joined al-Nusra soon after their arrival. So much for the "war on terrorism."

The US is engaged in a policy of endless war on a global scale that has destroyed one country after another, a fact that was driven home this week with the Taliban's seizure of the Afghan city of Kunduz and the announcement that some 10,000 US troops will remain there, 14 years after the US first invaded.

The prospect of this policy of global militarism spilling over into a direct confrontation with Russia is real and present. Last April, the Pentagon announced that it had altered the US rules of engagement in Syria to allow military action against any force that attacked US-backed "rebels." Washington's allies, meanwhile, have issued similar threats, with the Saudi regime threatening direct military intervention, and France, which began its own bombing campaign this week, declaring that its air strikes would be aimed not just at ISIS, but also at the Syrian regime, alongside which the Russians are fighting.

Meanwhile, the US and NATO have dramatically escalated their military presence and battle readiness across Eastern Europe in the wake of last year's Western-backed coup in Ukraine. Russia has also beefed up its forces near the country's western borders.

A quarter century after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the threat of a military confrontation igniting a nuclear war is greater than it has ever been in history.

The international working class must oppose the slaughter in Syria and the threat of world war by its own means. It cannot give the slightest support to the intervention of Russia or any other capitalist power. It is necessary, in the words of Trotsky, to "follow not the war map, but the map of the class struggle."

Workers must fight for the withdrawal of all foreign military forces from Iraq, Syria and the entire Middle East. The defeat of imperialist interventions like those carried out by the US in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria can be secured only by uniting the working class across religious, ethnic and national boundaries in a common struggle for the international socialist revolution.