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Syria and the drumbeat of world war

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8 October 2015

With Russia having completed its first week of airstrikes in Syria, firing some 26 cruise missiles from warships deployed over 900 miles away in the Caspian Sea, an escalating drumbeat of warnings and threats of a far more dangerous conflict and even world war has come to dominate discussions within ruling circles in both the US and Europe.

French President François Hollande, who has ordered French warplanes to bomb Syria, warned European lawmakers Wednesday that the events in that country could spiral into a “total war” from which Europe itself would not be “sheltered.”

Seizing on alleged incidents involving Russian warplanes straying into Turkish airspace, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared, “An attack on Turkey means an attack on NATO,” implicitly invoking Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty, which commits members of the US-led military alliance to an armed response against an attack on Turkey or any other member state.

The Turkish government, which has been one of the primary sources of support for Islamist militias such as ISIS and the al-Nusra Front that have ravaged Syria, routinely violates the airspace of its own neighbors, carrying out bombing raids against Kurdish camps in Iraq and shooting down Syrian planes over Syrian territory.

Top NATO officials have also weighed in with bellicose denunciations of Moscow. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg charged that the alleged Russian incursion into Turkish airspace “does not look like an accident.” He continued, warning, “Incidents, accidents, may create dangerous situations. And therefore it is also important to make sure that this doesn’t happen again.”

Speaking in Washington on Tuesday, Navy Adm. Mark Ferguson, who commands NATO’s Allied Joint Force Command in Naples, Italy, accused Russia of building an “arc of steel” from the Arctic Circle to the Mediterranean Sea. This deliberate paraphrasing of Winston Churchill’s 1946 “Iron Curtain” speech turns the real relationship of forces inside out, obscuring the relentless encirclement of Russia by Washington and the NATO alliance in the wake of the Soviet Union’s liquidation 25 years ago.

Describing Russia as the “most dangerous threat” facing NATO, Admiral Ferguson called for an increasingly aggressive NATO posture toward Moscow, recommending the honing of the alliance’s “war fighting skills” and the deployment of military forces “on call for real world operations.”

Former high-level US officials, whose views undoubtedly reflect the thinking within powerful sections of the American ruling establishment and its vast military and intelligence complex, have also weighed in with calls for confrontation with Russia.

In a column published by the *Financial Times*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the Carter administration and a longtime US imperialist strategist, wrote that Russian attacks on CIA-backed Islamist militias “should prompt US retaliation.” Like others in Washington, he avoided mentioning that the most prominent of these militias is Syria’s Al Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front.

Brzezinski advised that “Russian naval and air presences in Syria are vulnerable, isolated geographically from their homeland” and “could be ‘disarmed’ if they persist in provoking the US.” Presumably, he inserted the quotation marks around “disarmed” to signal that he was employing a euphemism for “militarily obliterated.”

Similarly, Ivo Daalder, who was Obama’s ambassador to NATO until mid-2013, told *Politico*: “If we want to take out their military forces there, we can probably do it at relatively little or no cost to ourselves. The question is what will be Putin’s response. I think if you sit in the Situation Room you have to play this one out.”

Meanwhile, Frederic Hof, Obama’s former special envoy on a Syrian transition, compared Putin’s actions to those of Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, which brought the world to the precipice of nuclear war. “Like his predecessor over 50 years ago, he [Putin] senses weakness on the part of a US president. Like his predecessor, he risks discovering that trifling with the United States is not a healthy pursuit. But such a risk entails dangers for all concerned.”

Drawing out the ominous implications of these discussions, Gideon Rachman, the chief foreign affairs columnist for the *Financial Times*, compared the Syrian conflict with the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. He wrote: “A similar proxy war is under way in Syria today—with both the Russian and US air forces bombing targets in the country, and foreign fighters pouring in.”

He continued: “The countries that were backing opposite sides in Spain in the 1930s were fighting each other directly by the 1940s. The risk of the Syrian conflict leading to a direct clash between the Iranians and the Saudis, or even the Russians and the Americans, cannot be discounted.”

This danger exists because Russia’s intervention—launched in defense of the interests of the Russian state and the ruling class of oligarchs who represent Russia’s energy conglomerates—has cut across US plans to effect regime-change in Syria and redraw the map of the Middle East that date back decades.

The proposal to bring about regime-change in Syria by backing proxy forces on the ground was advanced two decades ago in a document entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm,” drafted for then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by a study group that included Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and David Wurmser. All three were later to gain high-level positions in the Bush administration, participating in the conspiracy to launch the US war of aggression against Iraq.

A recently released classified document obtained by WikiLeaks establishes that active US planning for regime-change predated the outbreak of the Syrian civil war by at least five years. The secret report from the head of the US Embassy in Damascus outlined “vulnerabilities” of the Syrian government that Washington could exploit. At the top of the list were fomenting “Sunni fears of Iranian influence” to cause sectarian conflict and taking advantage of “the presence of transiting Islamist extremists.”

Given that the document was written in 2006, at the height of Iraq’s sectarian carnage caused by the US invasion and Washington’s divide-and-rule tactics, these proposals were made with full awareness that they would provoke a bloodbath. Nearly a decade later, the bitter fruits of this policy include the deaths of some 300,000 Syrians, with another 4 million driven from the country and 7 million more internally displaced.

While cynically exploiting the suffering of the Syrian people to justify an escalation of US militarism, Washington is not about to let Russia derail its drive to impose its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and the entire planet.

The path to war with Russia is by no means accidental. From the outset, the US intervention to topple the regime in Damascus was aimed at weakening the principal allies of the Syrian government—Iran and Russia—in preparation for a direct assault on both countries.

More and more directly each day, the eruption of American militarism, rooted in the historic crisis of American and world capitalism, confronts humanity with the specter of a nuclear Third World War.