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The Turkish coup, US militarism and the collapse of democracy

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One week after the abortive military coup to overthrow Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, there remains no doubt that Washington had a major hand in the bloody events that shook Istanbul and Ankara.

Turkish military commanders with the closest ties to the Pentagon have been directly implicated in the attempted overthrow, including the commander of the Incirlik air base, where the US stores its largest stockpile of nuclear weapons in Europe and from which it carries out its bombing campaign against Iraq and Syria. Multiple aircraft supporting the coup flew out of Incirlik under the eyes of the US military. After it became apparent that the coup would fail, the Turkish base commander asked the US for asylum.

It emerged Wednesday that a warning of the impending coup had come from Russia, which relayed intercepted radio communications between the coup plotters to Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, known as the MIT. The warning was shared with the Turkish president in time for him to flee barely a half an hour in advance of a special operations squad sent to the seaside resort where Erdogan was vacationing with the mission of either killing or capturing him.

Is it plausible that the CIA and the US military, with their massive deployment in the region and the world's most extensive electronic surveillance network at their disposal, would not have been aware of the same communications?

If they weren't relayed to the Turkish government by the American military and intelligence apparatus, the reason is clear. They were in on the coup plot. Obama didn't want Erdogan warned; he wanted him dead.

Then there was Washington's original reaction to the coup, which came from Secretary of State John Kerry, who was in Moscow. Kerry limited himself to expressing American hopes for "stability and peace and continuity within Turkey." There was no mention of defending a democratically elected government against military overthrow, not to mention any expression of concern for the fate of the country's president, Erdogan.

What precisely Kerry was referring to in voicing support for "continuity within Turkey" can only be understood in the context of the last 70 years of US-Turkish relations. In 1947, at the outset of the Cold War, the US promulgated the Truman Doctrine, committing itself to the defense of both Greece and Turkey against what it alleged was Soviet aggression.

US aid, military advisors and an aircraft carrier group were rushed to Turkey to assist it in rebuffing Moscow's demand for free passage through the Turkish Straits, the strategic passage connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. In 1952, Turkey was brought into NATO and, over the course of four decades, remained a pivotal country in the US military drive against the Soviet Union.

In the interests of maintaining this "continuity," Washington supported a series of military coups in Turkey, the first in 1960 against Turkey's prime minister, Adnan Menderes, whose fate (he was hung) was sealed after he turned to Moscow for economic aid.

Erdogan, first as prime minister from 2003 to 2014, and then as president, has posed similar problems. In the interests of securing the grip of his right-wing Islamist party, the AKP, he has pursued a nationalist policy that has repeatedly antagonized Washington. In 2003, Turkey refused to allow the US to use its soil to attack Iraq. In 2010, it failed to back the US drive for UN sanctions against Iran. And in 2013, it shocked Washington and NATO by announcing plans to purchase a Chinese anti-missile system.

Relations have further deteriorated over the war for regime change in Syria, where Turkey is the principal backer of Islamist militias tied to Al Qaeda, while Washington has increasingly solidified ties with Syria's Kurdish militia, which is in turn aligned with the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish movement with which Ankara is at war.

Most recently, there is Erdogan's apology to Moscow over the deliberate shoot-down of a Russian warplane in November 2015 and a move toward rapprochement with the government of Vladimir Putin.

In the wake of the coup, Erdoğan spoke with Putin well before a phone call with Obama. And, in a conversation Tuesday with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Erdoğan declared, “We are determined to resolve regional issues by joining hands with Iran and Russia, and with our efforts to return peace and stability to the region.”

US imperialism has no intention of brooking such a strategic realignment in the region. Resort to an attempted military coup was no doubt a criminally reckless policy. If it had succeeded, the likely result would have been a civil war and a death toll that would have made the bloody US-backed coup in Egypt pale by comparison.

US imperialism has already wrecked Iraq, Libya and Syria, killing and maiming millions in pursuit of its geo-strategic interests, so why not Turkey as well?

The tensions with Turkey have emerged in the context of a global eruption of American militarism. The coup took place barely one week after a NATO summit in Warsaw outlined plans to execute a massive escalation of military deployments on Russia’s western border and preparations for a direct, i.e., nuclear, confrontation with Moscow.

In Asia, US imperialism has made it clear it intends to use a ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration against Chinese claims in the South China Sea as the pretext for a major military escalation against Beijing.

To that end, the Obama administration dispatched Vice President Joe Biden to Australia to deliver bellicose speeches threatening China with US military might and, more pointedly, to instruct the Australians that, whether they liked it or not, they would be dragged into the US war preparations. “It’s never a good bet to bet against the United States,” he threatened.

The US is moving toward a military confrontation on a scale not seen since the end of the Second World War. It is determined to crush all obstacles in the path of its war plans. Great shocks are coming in the wake of the American November elections, if not even before.

The growth of militarism and preparations for world war are incompatible with the maintenance of democratic forms of rule anywhere on the planet. The drive to war is intensifying and accelerating a turn toward dictatorial methods in country after country, a turn that is rooted in the profound crisis of world capitalism and the unchecked growth of social inequality and class tensions in the wake of the 2008 financial meltdown.

In Turkey itself, the defeat of the imperialist-backed coup has spelled not some flowering of democracy, but the consolidation of a right-wing dictatorship in which Erdoğan has arrogated to himself the power to rule by decree, while carrying out the arrest and firing of tens of thousands of people thought to oppose him and moving to restore the death penalty.

In answer to moralizing capitalist critics in the West, the Turkish president has retorted that he is only doing the same thing as French President Francois Hollande, who is now ruling under what is becoming a permanent state of emergency, imposed on the pretext of combatting terrorism but directed against mounting social tensions and working class unrest.

Whether the abortive coup of July 15 marks the end of the attempts by the Turkish military to seize power is itself an open question. With fully one-third of its general staff under arrest, the country's armed forces are in a state of turmoil. Moreover, Washington is not about to passively permit Turkey to drift out of its strategic orbit.

The Turkish events have provided a stark lesson for the working class. It is impossible to defend basic social and democratic rights outside of a unified international struggle against imperialist war and militarism and the capitalist system in which they are rooted.