

The US escalation in Syria and the threat of world war

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In the wake of Sunday's US shoot-down of a Syrian fighter plane and the following day's warning from Russia that it will treat all American warplanes flying west of the Euphrates River as targets for its surface-to-air missiles, the threat of an armed confrontation between the world's two largest nuclear powers is now greater than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis nearly 55 years ago.

This threat, which carries with it the grim prospect of the annihilation of humanity, is the product of a calculated escalation on the part of US imperialism.

The downing of the Syrian fighter marked the first time in this century that a US warplane has shot down the plane of another country. The last instance of such aerial combat took place in 1999 during the US-NATO war against Serbia, when an American fighter plane shot down a Serbian MiG.

The gravity of the event was underscored Tuesday with Australia's announcement that it is grounding its planes that have been flying over Syria. Australia was one of the few members of the US-led "anti-ISIS coalition" that made any significant contribution to the increasingly murderous US air campaign against both Iraq and Syria. While the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, responded to the Russian threat with bravado, extolling the ability of US pilots to "take care of themselves," the Australian military clearly believes that one of its planes could be brought down.

The escalation of the conflict continued Tuesday with a US warplane shooting down an Iranian drone in southeastern Syria.

What will be the consequences if a Russian surface-to-air missile battery fires on a US plane seen as posing an imminent threat to Moscow's forces on the ground in Syria, or, for that matter, if a US warplane "painted" with the radar of a Russian SAM site takes preemptive action?

No one knows. Complacent US foreign policy

"experts" insist that the last thing either Washington or Moscow wants is a nuclear conflagration, and, therefore, it will not happen. This fallacious argument is then employed to justify unbridled US aggression.

The supposed rationality of capitalist ruling classes has again and again proven no deterrent to the outbreak of catastrophic wars. As former defense secretary Robert McNamara recalled in the documentary "Fog of War," during the Cuban missile crisis, "Rational individuals"—Kennedy, Khrushchev and Castro—"came that close to total destruction of their societies."

In a number of ways, the current situation is even more combustible than that in 1962. At that time, the demand of the fascistic Air Force chief of staff, Gen. Curtis LeMay, that he be allowed to bomb Russian missile sites in Cuba was overruled by President Kennedy. Today, US military policy in Syria, and for that matter in Iraq, Afghanistan and across the globe, has been delegated by Trump to a cabal of active-duty and recently retired generals, headed by Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis, as well as to area commanders, whose outlook, in most cases, does not differ from that of LeMay.

A glimpse of their attitude toward the Syrian crisis was provided by a recent forum of the Council on Foreign Affairs featuring the longtime Pentagon advisor on both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, Kimberly Kagan.

Kagan, who now heads the Institute of the Study of War, first invoked the tired pretext of the "war on terror" as the justification for the US intervention. Syria, she asserted, represented a "vital national security threat" because it was "exporting terror and terror groups from its borders." She acknowledged that ISIS posed a threat, but went on to insist that Al Qaeda posed an even greater danger because it had been allowed to carve out "its own safe haven in Idlib province."

The hypocrisy is staggering. Syria is not an "exporter" of terror, but rather the victim of the Al Qaeda-linked militias that were unleashed upon the country by the CIA

and Washington's regional allies in a war for regime change. As for Al Qaeda's "safe haven," it has been defended by the US, which has repeatedly denounced the Syrian government and Russia for bombing these so-called "rebels" and insisted that only ISIS can be targeted.

Kagan dispensed with her twisted arguments about terrorism to concentrate on the real concerns within the US military and intelligence apparatus. Iran and Russia posed a "long-term strategic threat" to the US, she argued, because of their military presence in Syria, challenging American dominance of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

The threat was to be dealt with by the US military seizing for itself "a base of operations in what is eastern Syria, along the Euphrates," from Raqqa in the north to the Iraqi and Jordanian borders to the south. One of the aims of the American intervention, she stated, would be to "energize Sunni populations in the Euphrates River zone, which has been a hotbed of ISIS support, but before it, Al Qaida support." In other words, Washington will seek to reignite the sectarian war for regime change based on Sunni Islamist militias, but this time with American "boots on the ground."

How many US troops will this operation require? "I don't know," Kagan said. "It's not 150,000 guys. But it's got to be enough to be present and to extend presence forward." Key to this military adventure, she added, was to "prepare for what the Russians and the Iranians will try to do to respond."

In other words, what is being prepared—behind the backs of the American people and without any debate, much less a shred of legality—is another full-scale Middle East war directed not just at Syrian regime change, but at confronting Iran and nuclear-armed Russia.

Nor is this conflict confined to the Middle East. Also reported on Tuesday was a Russian jet armed with air-to-air missiles intercepting a US RC-135 spy plane over the Baltic Sea near the strategic Russian military base at Kaliningrad, with the two planes reportedly coming within five feet of each other. Each side accused the other of operating dangerously.

Meanwhile, NATO held a ceremony in the former Soviet Baltic republic of Latvia to mark what it said was the full deployment of a 4,500-strong "deterrent force" on Russia's border. The Pentagon recently deployed B-2 stealth bombers and other aircraft as well as Army units to the region for "exercises." Russia has reportedly countered with a buildup of its own on its western border.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said he didn't see any "imminent threat" of an armed confrontation in the Baltic region, but Russia's ambassador to NATO, Alexander Grushko, described the "military dynamic" as "dangerous."

The American media has treated the escalating confrontation in the Middle East and the heightened tensions in the Baltics as virtual nonissues. At the first White House press briefing held in over a week, press secretary Sean Spicer made no statement regarding recent US military actions in Syria and the assembled poodles of the press corps didn't ask him a single question on the growing war danger.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, working in close sync with the Pentagon and the CIA, has conducted an unrelenting campaign of anti-Russian hysteria aimed at creating a new, ostensibly liberal, constituency for war among privileged layers of the middle class. Democrats have endorsed every new act of military escalation in Syria, demanding only that the Trump administration present a "comprehensive" plan for war and, in some cases, calling for the passage of a new authorization for use of military force to legitimize military aggression.

The efforts of the Democratic Party and the pseudo-left organizations that orbit it notwithstanding, the same crisis of US and world capitalism that gives rise to war also produces its opposite, the growth of the class struggle and ripening of the objective conditions for socialist revolution. The most urgent task is the development of a mass political movement of the working class in opposition to war and its source, the capitalist system.

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