Kerry’s “blunder” delays, but does not end, Obama's drive to war

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10 September 2013

Obama administration officials scrambled Monday to preserve Washington’s pretext for war on Syria, after both Moscow and Damascus welcomed an apparently off-hand remark by US Secretary of State John Kerry that US aggression could be avoided if the regime of President Bashar al-Assad surrendered its chemical weapons.

Asked by a CBS reporter at a joint press conference Monday with British Foreign Secretary William Hague in London if there was anything that could forestall the planned US war on Syria, Kerry responded: “Sure. He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week. Turn it over, all of it, without delay, and allow a full and total accounting for that. But he isn’t about to do it, and it can’t be done, obviously.”

Kerry’s summary dismissal of this proposal notwithstanding, it was swiftly taken up by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who declared following a meeting with his Syrian counterpart, Walid al-Moallem, “If the establishment of international control over chemical weapons in that country would allow avoiding strikes, we will immediately start working with Damascus.” He said that Moscow would call upon its Syrian ally to place all chemical weapons under international control, agree to their destruction and sign the international treaty banning the weapons.

The proposal was then embraced by Moallem and the Syrian government. “Syria welcomes the Russian proposal out of concern for the lives of the Syrian people, the security of our country and because it believes in the wisdom of the Russian leadership that seeks to avert American aggression against our people,” the Syrian foreign minister said in a statement. This position was quickly echoed on the web site of the Damascus regime’s news agency, SANA.

United Nations General Secretary Ban Ki-moon also announced later in the day that he was drawing up plans for implementing the proposed turnover and destruction of the chemical weapons and would call for the Security Council to approve them.

The apparent breakthrough, raising the prospect of forestalling a war that polls show is opposed by at least two-thirds of the American people and overwhelming majorities worldwide, was clearly seen by the Obama administration and the US ruling establishment as a disaster.

A senior US official told CNN that Kerry’s comments represented a “major goof” and “clearly went off-script,” coming directly before a major media blitz by President Barack Obama to pressure Congress into approving an Authorization of the Use of Military Force resolution that would clear the way for a massive bombing campaign against Syria.

A State Department spokeswoman stressed that Kerry had only been speaking “rhetorically.” She dismissed the response of Russia and Syria as a “stalling tactic” that had to be treated with “deep skepticism,” adding that it was “even more important that Congress votes to authorize the President to use military action against Syrian regime targets.”

The response prompted questions from reporters as to whether a war against Syria was “a fait accompli” no matter what the Assad regime does and whether the US just wanted “to punish the Syrians no matter what they do.” Another asked whether Kerry had just been “bluffing and actually the Russians and Syrians called his bluff.”

The initial official reaction to what reporters began to cynically describe as Kerry’s “rhetorical non-proposal” only served to expose that chemical weapons and the allegations that the Syrian regime used them on August

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21 were never anything more than a provocation and a pretext for a war that US imperialism is pursuing for its own predatory interests.

The Obama administration has presented nothing but assertions and accusations about the August 21 attack to link it to the regime. Russia has presented its own evidence demonstrating a previous chemical weapons attack was carried out by the so-called "rebels," the Western-backed and Al Qaeda-led militias attacking Syria, and has drawn parallels to last month's incident.

These anti-regime elements, who have suffered a series of military defeats in recent months, had everything to gain from the attack, which had all the hallmarks of a provocation staged precisely to provide the pretext for a US military intervention on their behalf.

In an interview with Charlie Rose on a broadcast Monday night on PBS television, Assad charged that the Obama administration had failed to present "a single shred of evidence" to substantiate its case for war, while insisting that the Syrian government's own soldiers had been attacked with chemical weapons.

He compared the Obama administration's claims unfavorably with "the big lie that Colin Powell said in front of the world on satellites about the WMD in Iraq before going to war." Powell at least had presented "false evidence," he said, while Kerry and Obama have presented none at all.

By late Monday, when Obama gave television interviews to the major US television networks and cable news channels, the administration reworked its line. Given the overwhelming popular opposition to the war, the evident difficulty the White House is facing in pushing the AUMF through Congress and its international isolation, it was evidently decided that flatly rejecting the Russian-Syrian acceptance of Kerry's "non-proposal" was untenable. Instead, it was to be presented as a positive development secured through the threat of military aggression.

Speaking to CNN, Obama claimed that resolving the chemical weapons issue through an international agreement "would be my preference." He quickly added, "On the other hand, if we don't maintain and move forward without a credible threat of military pressure, I don't think we'll actually get the kind of agreement I'd like to see."

Similarly, he told Fox News that it was now even more vital than ever that Congress authorize a US attack on Syria. "I think it is important for us not to let the pedal off the metal when it comes to making sure they understand we mean what we say," said Obama.

Monday's unfolding events recall nothing so much as the machinations of the Bush administration at the end of 2002 and beginning of 2003 after Saddam Hussein, contrary to US expectations, allowed UN weapons inspectors back into Iraq and acquiesced to an ever-more onerous inspection regime in a bid to forestall a US invasion.

In the end, the Bush administration brushed all of it aside—including inspectors' statements that they were receiving ample cooperation and finding no evidence of weapons of mass destruction—and invaded anyway to pursue aims that had nothing to do with WMD or terrorism.

Obama, who was elected thanks in large measure to the immense hostility of the American people to this war based upon lies, is already far down the same road. Like his predecessor, he is determined to provoke a war on false pretenses to pursue US imperialism's strategic aim of hegemony over the oil-rich and strategically vital regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Even more than Iraq, the war against Syria, which is aimed as well against its allies Iran and Russia, poses the threat of a regional and even global military conflict.

The Russian-Syrian offer of chemical disarmament and the US response have not lessened the threat of war. The coming weeks will see US attempts to scuttle any such peaceful settlement and, if necessary, another provocation by the Al Qaeda "rebels" to hasten military intervention.

Another and even more catastrophic Middle East war can be stopped only through the revival of a genuine antiwar movement based upon the mobilization of working people, students and youth independently of both major parties and the Congress in a struggle against the Obama administration and the capitalist system, the source of militarism, social inequality and the relentless assault on democratic rights.

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