

US, NATO step up threats to Russia over Syria

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Leaders of NATO openly threatened a military response against Russian forces in Syria Tuesday, after a series of incidents involving Russian warplanes operating along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Speaking in Brussels, in the course of a state visit to several Western European countries, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan claimed that Russian fighters had violated his country's air space. "An attack on Turkey means an attack on NATO," he said, although he stopped short of citing Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty, which calls for an armed response by NATO to any attack on a member country like Turkey.

In a separate appearance in Brussels, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that the alleged Russian intrusion into Turkish airspace "does not look like an accident," adding that the incidents "lasted for a long time," and not mere seconds, as Russian officials said in describing the first instance, on Saturday.

"Incidents, accidents, may create dangerous situations," Stoltenberg continued. "And therefore it is also important to make sure that this doesn't happen again."

Only the Saturday incident has been confirmed by both sides: a Russian fighter jet crossed the Turkish border in the Hatay region, which projects into Syria along the Mediterranean coast to within 18 miles of Latakia, where the Russian warplanes are based. Russian officials said the action was inadvertent and due to bad weather, and lasted only a few seconds.

The second incident allegedly also involved an incursion into the Hatay region, but few details have been revealed about it, except that it involved a Russian fighter-bomber attacking a position in Idlib province, in Syria's northwest, held by rebel forces fighting the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Turkish officials claimed a third incident on Monday,

when an unidentified MiG-29 fighter jet locked its radar for four and a half minutes on eight Turkish F-16 jets that were on patrol on their side of the border, in apparent preparation to open fire. Both Syria and Russia operate MiG-29s.

A Russian spokesman said that Saturday's accidental intrusion was being exploited for propaganda purposes. "The impression is that the incident in Turkish air space was used to plug NATO as an organization into the information campaign waged by the West to distort the aims of the operations carried out by the Russian air force in Syria," Alexander Grushko, Russia's deputy foreign minister, told Itar-Tass news agency.

NATO general-secretary Stoltenberg cited the movement of Russian naval and ground forces into Syria, as well as fighter jets. "I can confirm that we have seen a substantial build-up of Russian forces in Syria: air forces, air defenses, but also ground troops in connection with the air base they have, and we also see an increased naval presence," he said.

Based on its analysis of video footage made public by the Russian defense ministry, the Russian website lenta.ru reported Monday the delivery of advanced Krasukha-4 electronic warfare systems to the Russian forces in Syria. These would make possible the jamming of airborne radars and drones operated by the US and other imperialist powers carrying out air strikes on Syria.

US and Russian defense officials have agreed to hold more talks on so-called "deconfliction," to reduce the chances of a direct clash between US and Russian warplanes, which are both engaged in bombing nearby parts of Syria. Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov said that there will be a videoconference with the Pentagon in the next few days.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is currently

visiting US bases in Western Europe, including Moron de la Frontera in Spain and Sigonella in Sicily, before a NATO ministerial meeting set for Brussels on Thursday. During the Italian stopover Tuesday he warned that violations of Turkish airspace would “cause us further to strengthen our posture with respect to Russia,” without spelling out any specific action.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported Tuesday that US officials have concluded that Russia is deliberately targeting Syrian rebel groups trained and armed by the CIA for air attack. Referring to bombing raids on the headquarters of one CIA-backed group, an unnamed “senior U.S. official” told the *Journal*, “On day one, you can say it was a one-time mistake. But on day three and day four, there’s no question it’s intentional. They know what they’re hitting.”

The Obama administration and the American media have sought to conceal the fact that the CIA-backed forces include Islamic fundamentalist groups, including the al-Nusra Front, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria. In other words, there is no actual conflict between Russian claims to be targeting “terrorists” exclusively, and US government claims that CIA-backed groups are being hit.

The rising tensions between Washington and Moscow were expressed in a column published Sunday in the *Financial Times*, the leading British business daily, written by Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser in the administration of President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) and a longtime advocate of a US strategy to secure domination of Eurasia by breaking up Russia into several component states.

Warning that American credibility throughout the Middle East and globally was at stake, Brzezinski declared, “In these rapidly unfolding circumstances the US has only one real option if it is to protect its wider stakes in the region: to convey to Moscow the demand that it cease and desist from military actions that directly affect American assets.”

The response to Russian attacks on CIA-backed Syrian groups, he argued, was “prompt U.S. retaliation. The Russian naval and air presences in Syria are vulnerable, isolated geographically from their homeland. They could be ‘disarmed’ if they persist in provoking the US.”

How 50 Russian warplanes, supported by several thousand soldiers and a half-dozen naval vessels, could

be “disarmed” without significant bloodshed, Brzezinski did not say.

Any action along these lines by the US and NATO forces would bring with it the risk of a wider clash between nuclear-armed powers, with potentially incalculable consequences.

One indication that the Obama administration is preparing a more aggressive intervention in the Syrian conflict comes in a report by the *New York Times* that Obama has authorized direct military resupply of 20,000 Syrian Kurds and an associated group of 3,000 to 5,000 Syrian Arab fighters for an attack on Raqqa, the capital of the ISIS-controlled region in eastern Syria.



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