

US, Russian military meet amid warnings over war threat

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15 October 2015

US and Russian military officials held a third round of video conferences Wednesday in a bid to hammer out an agreement on procedures aimed at preventing accidental confrontations between their respective warplanes operating over Syria.

The meeting was held in the wake of a reported incident last Saturday in which US and Russian jets came within miles of each other in Syrian airspace, according to the Pentagon.

“Visual contact took place,” said Col. Steve Warren, a spokesman for the US military in Baghdad. “All pilots conducted themselves appropriately and everyone went about their business. But this is dangerous, right?...There’s always going to be some risk if there are uncoordinated actors in the battle space.”

A statement from the Russian defense ministry said that “positions became closer on key provisions” of a joint agreement on operations, but indicated that a deal has yet to be reached.

The videoconferences on “deconflicting” the Syrian airspace are being held in lieu of more expansive and higher-level talks proposed by Moscow, but rejected by Washington.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that he had proposed sending a delegation led by Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev and including high-ranking Russian military and civilian officials to Washington to discuss a closer coordination of US and Russian operations in Syria, but that US officials rejected any such talks.

“It seems to me that some of our partners have mush for brains,” commented Putin. He added that in the wake of US claims that Russia was bombing “moderate” Syrian militias instead of the supposed common enemy, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

(ISIS), Moscow had requested that the Pentagon provide coordinates of areas that “we shouldn’t target,” but had received no response.

A Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, recounted Washington’s warnings against Russian airstrikes hitting positions of the “Free Syrian Army,” a supposedly “moderate” opposition force. The refusal of the US to provide any information as to the location of these forces, she said, led to the inescapable conclusion that it is “a fake organization which is much talked about without being seen.”

The source of these tensions lies in the diametrically opposed aims being pursued by US imperialism and the Russian regime under the common pretext of battling ISIS and “terrorism.” Washington’s fundamental objective remains the same as when it first joined Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in instigating the Syrian civil war: regime change. It wants to oust the government of President Bashar al-Assad and impose a puppet government as part of its drive to impose US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Russia, on the other hand, has intervened with its two-week-old bombing campaign in a bid to prop up Assad and prevent the loss of its sole ally in the Middle East and its one military base outside the former Soviet Union, the naval station at the Syrian Mediterranean port of Tartus.

Underlying the dispute over Russia’s targeting and the refusal of the Pentagon to indicate what targets it does not want hit is the dirty secret that Washington is relying on the al-Nusra Front, Syria’s al-Qaeda affiliate, and similar sectarian militias armed and funded by the CIA, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, as the main proxy forces in the war for regime change.

Russia has repeatedly bombed these forces, providing air support for a broad counter-offensive by Syrian

government troops aimed at driving back the Islamist militias from the northern city of Hama, as well as the Damascus countryside and in areas of the provinces of Idlib and Latakia.

Concerns that the antagonistic aims of Moscow and Washington and the close proximity between US and Russian military operations could trigger an armed clash between the world's two largest nuclear powers found fresh expression Wednesday in a warning made by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in advance of a four-day trip that is to take him to Iran, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

Steinmeier said he wanted to "urgently caution the US and Russia not to militarily engage in a way that in the end could lead to a conflict." He added that the aim of his trip was to "build bridges between Iran and Saudi Arabia so that it becomes conceivable that in the end we can get all the regional partners we need at one table." Saudi Arabia has been a principal backer of the war for regime change in Syria, while Iran is Syria's closest ally.

The German foreign minister's comments reflected the growing divisions between Berlin and Washington over the Syrian war. The US has repeatedly sought to exclude Iran from any talks on Syria. The crisis gripping US policy in the region has opened up increasing rifts within the members of the NATO alliance.

Most dramatic have been those involving Turkey, which ostensibly joined the war on ISIS, offering the US use of Turkish airbases for strikes on Syria, while sending its own warplanes to bomb primarily Kurdish targets in both Iraq and Syria. Washington initially signaled its support for these actions, claiming that Turkey was responding to "terrorist" attacks by the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party).

At the same time, however, the US has sought to utilize the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria as ground forces to attack ISIS, including in a planned offensive to overrun Raqqa, the northern Syrian city that serves as the de facto capital of the Islamist militia.

The 50 tons of arms and ammunition that the Pentagon airdropped into Syria earlier this week were reportedly intended for the YPG and smaller Arab forces with which it is aligned.

The YPG and its political arm, the Democratic Unity

Party (PYD), are aligned with the PKK in Turkey. They have also declared their support for the Russian bombing campaign.

Further complicating the already volatile situation in Syria, the Turkish government Wednesday called in both the US and Russian ambassadors to warn them against providing any support to the Syrian Kurdish forces against ISIS.

"We have a clear position. That position has been conveyed to the United States and the Russian Federation," Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said in a televised statement. "Turkey cannot accept any cooperation with terrorist organizations which have waged war against it."

"Just as the United States and other friendly allies fight against al-Qaeda linked groups, Turkey is determined to fight against the PKK and its affiliates," Davutoglu added.

Turkey, which has been a principal backer of the Islamist militias in Syria, has repeatedly pressed for the imposition of a "no-fly zone" over a swath of Syrian territory along the Turkish border with the aim of using it as a cover for attacking the Kurdish forces and driving them away from the frontier.

The clash over this issue places Ankara and Washington on a potential collision course, with the prospect of Turkish jets being sent to bomb Kurdish forces in Syria even as American warplanes are providing them with air support.



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