The airstrikes in Syria and the war drive of American imperialism

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10 April 2017

In the aftermath of last week's cruise missile attack on Syria, the relentless logic of military escalation is driving decisions in Washington. The US political establishment and media are demanding that the action be followed up by a "comprehensive strategy" to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and escalate the confrontation with Russia.

The Trump administration's ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, declared on Sunday that "regime change [in Syria] is something that we think is going to happen." As for Russia and Iran, she said, "We're calling them out. But I don't think anything is off the table at this point… You're going to continue to see the United States act when it needs to act."

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham called on Sunday for the deployment of "five to six thousand" US troops to Syria and for economic sanctions against Russia. Assad, he said, is making a "serious mistake because if you are an adversary of the United States and you don't worry about what Trump may do on any given day, then you're crazy."

The chorus of calls for action against the Russian government came from both Democrats and Republicans. "They're accomplices," Republican Senator Marco Rubio said. "Vladimir Putin is a war criminal who is assisting another war criminal." His colleague, Democrat Ben Cardin, declared the UN Security Council should set up a tribunal to indict both Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin for war crimes.

Such rhetoric is the language of war. The denunciation of one or another foreign leader as a war criminal is the standard prelude to military action.

The United States is not alone in its incendiary provocations. All the imperialist powers in Europe have lined up to support the US strikes. British Defense Secretary Michael Fallon wrote on Sunday that Russia is "by proxy responsible for every civilian death last week"—claims that of course were not made in relation to the US massacre in Mosul last month.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is participating in a meeting of G7 foreign ministers in Italy beginning today, in which the US and its European allies are discussing an ultimatum that Moscow remove all its troops from Syria and cease support for the Assad government. Tillerson will repeat this demand in a face-to-face meeting with the Russian foreign minister in Moscow, reportedly accompanied by charges that Russia is complicit in "war crimes."

In one of the few comments pointing to the consequences of such positions, Georgetown University professor Colin Kahl wrote in the *Washington Post* on Sunday that if the US goes down the road of escalation, demands for regime change and no-fly zones, "the prospects of a military confrontation with Moscow are real." Yet this is precisely the road that the Trump administration, backed by the entire political establishment and the imperialist powers of Europe, is taking.

How will the US and its allies respond if Russia rejects an ultimatum to back down in Syria? Amidst the hysteria gripping the American ruling class and media, no one is asking how many hundreds of millions of people will be killed in a war with Russia, or if there will still be a habitable world in the aftermath of a nuclear conflagration.

As all of this is taking place, the US is escalating its war threats in Asia. The Trump administration deployed warships to the Korean Peninsula over the weekend, amidst media reports that the White House is considering "decapitation" strikes and other military actions against the North Korean government—which could happen as early as this week.

The level of recklessness of imperialist foreign policy has an objective basis. There are two interrelated factors that are driving it.

First, dominant sections of the military—which is now largely dictating Trump administration policy—are determined at all costs to reverse the retreat of the Obama administration from war in Syria in 2013, when an agreement was reached with Russia to oversee the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons. They see this as critical for maintaining US domination not only in the

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Middle East and Eastern Europe, but globally.

Writing in the *New York Times* on Sunday, Republican Senator Tom Cotton stated that the strikes on Syria "have gone a long way to restoring our badly damaged credibility in the world." Cotton proclaimed: "In one night, President Trump turned the tables. He showed the world that when the United States issues a warning, it will back up its words with action… With our credibility restored, the United States can go back on offense around the world."

Cotton's arguments make clear that the chemical weapons attack is yet another manufactured pretext for intervention. Time and again, imperialist accusations that war crimes had been committed were later proven to have been entirely fabricated to justify a neo-colonial and predatory agenda.

The Syrian government of Assad, whose forces have been on the offensive, had nothing to gain from ordering a chemical attack on his retreating enemies. The United States had obvious political motives. The CIA and military were looking for a justification to launch airstrikes on the Syrian government based on geostrategic considerations.

Now that they have done so, Cotton boasted: "Friend and foe alike have been reminded that the United States not only possesses unmatched power, but also once again will employ our power to protect our interests, aspirations and allies."

The second reason for the escalation of military operations relates to concerns over the deepening crisis and instability throughout Europe and within the United States. The European Union and NATO are fracturing amidst the rise of nationalist movements in the wake of Brexit.

The fight against Russia is to be a "unifying" theme. Chris Coons, the Democratic senator from Delaware, spelled this out in remarks at the Brookings Institution last week. Under the headline "Are we at war with Russia?" Coons declared that the "American-led international order" is under threat due to the actions of Russia, which "benefits directly from the election of European leaders who support narrow-minded nationalism and share its opposition to a cohesive European Union and a strong NATO."

According to Coons, "the regime of Vladimir Putin is achieving today what the Soviet Union set out to do in 1950… It is destroying unity in the West, isolating the United States, and alienating the Western people from our governments." It "has undermined Americans' trust in our institutions, in each other, and in the very credibility of our democracy."

The effort of Coons to attribute the breakdown of the EU and social discontent within Europe and the United States to the actions of the Putin government in Russia is patently absurd. Tens of millions of working people suffering from declining living standards do not need Putin to know that the political and economic system has failed them.

Within the United States, the Democratic Party—allied with the military and the intelligence agencies—is playing the leading role in fomenting anti-Russia hysteria to try to keep Europe in line and to direct internal social tensions within the United States outward toward military conflict. The Democrats have shelved their occasional criticism of the Trump administration's domestic policies. In the aftermath of the Syrian airstrikes last week they have rushed to praise the White House and are only demanding a more consistent policy against Assad and Russia.

Ominously, Coons worried about the fact that according to recent polls, "only half of all Americans believe Russia actually interfered in our presidential election," even after "the entire US intelligence community made it clear that Russia intervened in our electoral process." Congress must "comprehend the nature of our conflict with Russia and ensure the American people share that understanding."

And if people do not "share that understanding"? This is clearly then the result of "enemy propaganda" and illegitimate.

The American ruling class is right to be concerned about mass consciousness. The same contradictions of world capitalism that produce imperialist war also produce the objective basis for socialist revolution, in the form of the growth of the class struggle all over the world. In the United States, the consequences of the war drive against Russia will produce shock and outrage. There is a deep and abiding skepticism and hatred for the political establishment and media among broad sections of workers and youth.

The greatest danger, however, is that opposition is not politically organized. Decisions are being taken behind the scenes, with the population largely unaware of the cataclysmic consequences. In the media, there is a complete absence of any critical examination of the propaganda claims of the government. The entire spectrum of official politics supports the catastrophic war policy of American imperialism.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the US strikes on Syria, events are moving relentlessly in the direction of world war. That reality must animate the fight internationally for a politically conscious intervention of the working class to end imperialism and nation-state divisions and reorganize society on socialist foundations.

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