

Talks in Moscow fail to dispel rising US-Russian tensions

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13 April 2017

Five hours of talks Wednesday between US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and both Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov left relations between the two major nuclear powers at what both sides described as a low point.

Tillerson was sent to Moscow in the wake of last week's US airstrike against a Syrian airbase to deliver what was effectively an American ultimatum to the Putin government to cease its support for the government of President Bashar al-Assad and accept Washington's demand for regime change.

In a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart after the talks, Tillerson repeated Washington's claim, which is unsubstantiated by any objectively verifiable evidence, that the Syrian government was responsible for an alleged April chemical weapons attack that provided the pretext for the US military launching 59 cruise missiles less than three days later that killed 15 Syrians, most of them civilians.

"The recent chemical weapons attack was planned and executed by Syrian government forces," Tillerson said. "We are quite confident about that."

The Russian foreign minister, however, insisted that Russia had been presented with no proof of the US allegation and warned against any repetition of the American airstrike, which he described as a violation of international law. He said that Moscow rejected any "false choice, such as 'you are either with us or against us.'"

Lavrov also voiced Moscow's belief that Washington is giving support to the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, which is the dominant force in the area where the alleged chemical weapons incident occurred in Idlib province. "We have a persistent suspicion, which no one has yet been able to dispel, that Nusra is still being

guarded in order to use Plan B at some point and try to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad by force," he stated.

The strength of Al Nusra and similar Islamist militias employed as proxy forces in the Western-orchestrated war for regime change in Syria has been so diminished by a Russian and Iranian-backed government offensive, however, that any such "Plan B" would require a major US military intervention, posing the direct threat of a military confrontation with Russia and Iran.

Lavrov acknowledged that the discussions Wednesday centered on the US demand for regime change in Syria. "We discussed Assad today," he said. "I don't remember any positive examples of how a dictator was overthrown and everything was just fine afterwards." He went on to review the catastrophic consequences of US interventions from Yugoslavia to Iraq and Libya.

Earlier on Wednesday, both the US and Russian presidents made statements that reflected the continuously increasing tensions. In an interview with Fox News, President Donald Trump described Assad as an "evil man" and "an animal," warning that the Putin government's support for the Syrian government was "very bad for Russia."

And, in an interview broadcast on Russian television, Putin said that relations between the US and Russia were now worse than even under the Obama administration. "The level of trust at the working level, especially at the military level, has not improved, but most likely has been degraded," he said.

Putin dismissed US charges against the Syrian government over chemical weapons, insisting that the Assad government had destroyed its chemical stockpiles following a 2013 agreement brokered by Moscow with the Obama administration. He said that

the most likely explanation for the April 4 incident was either that a Syrian airstrike hit a chemical weapons depot of the Western-backed Islamist “rebels,” or that the incident was staged to create a pretext for attack. The day before, Putin said that Russia had intelligence that further such provocations were in the works with the aim of justifying more airstrikes.

Putin met with Tillerson Wednesday afternoon, after speculation that the Russian president would snub the US Secretary of State to demonstrate Moscow’s anger over the Syrian attack. It was not the first meeting between the two. Putin awarded Tillerson Russia’s “medal of friendship” in 2012, when the then-ExxonMobil executive signed deals with the state-owned Russian oil company Rosneft to exploit Russia’s natural resources to the joint benefit of American capital and Russia’s ruling oligarchy. The conflict ignited by the US-backed right-wing coup in Ukraine placed the deals on hold.

The one concrete result of the discussions in Moscow was the announcement that Putin had raised the prospect of reestablishing a “deconfliction” hotline between US and Russian military forces operating in Syria. Moscow announced the suspension of the arrangement, designed to prevent unintended clashes between US and Russian warplanes carrying out airstrikes there, following the US cruise missile strike.

In the joint press conference following the day-long discussions, Tillerson gave a faint indication of the dire implications of the rising tensions between Washington and Moscow. “There is a low level of trust between our two countries,” he said. “The world’s two foremost nuclear powers cannot have this kind of relationship.” In other words, a conflict in Syria spiraling out of control could lead to a nuclear conflagration.

Following the discussions in Moscow, Russia vetoed a resolution submitted to the United Nations Security Council by the US, Britain and France ostensibly supporting an investigation by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) into the alleged chemical weapons attack, but in language clearly indicting the Syrian government. Russia was joined by Bolivia in voting against the measure, supported by 10 members of the council. Three others, including China, abstained.

In the course of the Security Council debate, US Ambassador Nikki Haley warned Russia that “you are

isolating yourselves from the international community” by backing the Assad government.

Russia’s deputy UN envoy Vladimir Safronkov condemned the US and its allies for indicting the Syrian regime without presenting any evidence. “I’m amazed that this was the conclusion,” he said. “No one has visited the site of the crime. How do you know that?”

Syria’s UN Ambassador Bashar Ja’afari, meanwhile, said that his government had presented extensive evidence to the Security Council exposing the use of chemical weapons by the so-called rebels.

“Two liters of sarin were transported from Libya through Turkey to terrorist groups into Syria,” he said, adding that the Damascus government no longer has chemical weapons.

In Washington on Wednesday, Trump further escalated US pressure on Moscow, holding a joint press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in which he hailed the ratification of membership in the alliance for the former Yugoslav republic of Montenegro, and publicly embraced the US-led military alliance which as a presidential candidate he had described as “obsolete.”

“I said it was obsolete; it’s no longer obsolete,” Trump told the media, reflecting the sharp shift in the administration’s policy toward confrontation with Russia.

Stoltenberg praised the alliance for deploying four battalions of troops on Russia’s doorstep in the Baltics and Poland, including US forces.

Meanwhile, Russia announced the dispatch to the eastern Mediterranean of elements of its Baltic fleet, including the Admiral Grigorovich, a cruise-missile-armed frigate, and two Steregushchiy-class corvettes, also capable of firing long-range cruise missiles. They will join six other Russian warships and support vessels already deployed in waters off Syria.



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