

Russia threatens counter-strikes on US forces in Syria

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14 March 2018

Amid rapidly escalating provocations against Russia by the US, Britain and other allies, General Valery Gerasimov, the chief of general staff of the Russian Armed Forces, vowed on Tuesday to attack any forces that directly or indirectly target Russian troops operating in Syria.

Gerasimov told a gathering of his top commanders: “If the lives of Russian officers are threatened, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation will retaliate against missile and launch systems.”

The general’s statements are a direct warning that Russia will attack American warships or airbases that are responsible for any strikes. They were made in response to a series of unsubstantiated accusations by American officials that the Russian-backed Syrian government has used chemical weapons in its operations against US-backed rebel militias.

On April 6, 2017, such allegations were used as the pretext by the Trump administration to fire dozens of cruise missiles against one of the Syrian military’s main airbases. According to reports at the time, Russia was informed shortly before the attack, so it could evacuate any personnel it had in the vicinity.

On Sunday, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis cited unconfirmed reports of chlorine attacks on the rebel-held Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta and threatened the Syrian government with retaliation if they were confirmed. He said that President Donald Trump had “full political maneuver room” to take whatever decision he believed was appropriate.

“It would be very unwise for them to use weaponized gas. And I think President Trump made that very clear early in his administration,” Mattis told reporters before landing in Oman. “Either Russia is incompetent or in cahoots with Assad. There’s an awful lot of reports about chlorine gas use or about symptoms that could be

resulting from chlorine gas,” he added.

French President Emmanuel Macron joined in chorus, declaring on Monday that France was also prepared to launch targeted strikes against any site in Syria used to deploy chemical attacks that result in the deaths of civilians. He accused Russia of not doing enough to permit relief efforts into eastern Ghouta.

According to Reuters, Macron said: “The day we have, in particular in tandem with our American partners, irrefutable proof that the red line was crossed—namely that chemical weapons were used to lethal effect—we will do what the Americans themselves did moreover a few months ago; we would put ourselves in position to proceed with targeted strikes.”

The same day, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, declared that “when the international community consistently fails to act, there are times when states are compelled to take their own action.” Threatening US attacks, she stated: “It is not the path we prefer, but it is a path we have demonstrated we will take, and we are prepared to take again.”

While the US and other imperialist powers denounce the Syrian offensive against armed groups in Ghouta as a violation of the cease fire ordered by the UN Security Council, Damascus and Moscow argue that they are fighting terrorist groups not protected by the ceasefire.

Russia’s UN envoy Vassily Nebenzia countered Haley’s accusations with claims that Russia has evidence that the Islamist extremist rebel grouping al-Nusra used chlorine gas in Ghouta, to provide the US and its allies with a pretext to launch air strikes against government forces. Advising against any such attacks, he stated: “Steps are being weighed which could hit regional stability very, very hard.”

Gerasimov’s blunt warning the next day that

American forces will be directly attacked if they threaten Russian personnel follows the US air strikes in February that killed dozens, and possibly more than 100 Russian military contractors working with the Syrian government.

The proxy war in Syria has brought the militaries of the world's two largest nuclear armed powers to the point of open conflict. In a measure of the dangers, General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, reportedly held discussions Tuesday with his Russian counterpart Gerasimov. A spokesman for Dunford would only tell media that they had discussed "issues of mutual concern" and had both agreed to "keep the details of their conversation private."

Further adding to the tension, the Turkish government is stepping up its operations in northern Syria against Kurdish nationalist People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, which Ankara considers to be a terrorist group and an extension of Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Turkey's military and its proxy force in Syria, the so-called Free Syrian Armee (FSA), have encircled the northern town of Afrin, where some 700,000 people are now under siege. Reports suggest they are preparing a full-scale assault.

In a written statement, the Turkish General Staff said yesterday that the centre of Afrin has been surrounded since Monday following the seizure of "critically important areas."

Since the beginning of the operation on January 20, "a total of 3,393 terrorists have been neutralized," the statement claimed. The Turkish authorities use the word "neutralized" for those who are killed or captured or have surrendered during the fighting. It reported that 43 Turkish troops have been killed and 156 were injured in the Afrin offensive.

Ankara insists that it is carrying out the operation within the framework of international law and its self-defense rights under the UN charter. Turkey's Western allies, however, have repeatedly indicated that Turkey should stop the attack on Afrin, referring to the UN Security Council's decision on February 24, which demanded a 30-day ceasefire across Syria without delay.

In a phone conversation on February 26, French President Emmanuel Macron told his Turkish

counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan that the UN call for a ceasefire also applied to Afrin. The conversation came a day after phone calls between Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the Syrian crisis.

Yesterday, Reuters reported that a top Syrian Kurdish official has accused Turkey of settling Turkmen and Arab families in villages seized in the Turkish army's campaign in the Kurdish-dominated Afrin region. He denounced it as a policy of "demographic change"—a claim rejected by Turkish officials as "absolutely false."

As it intensifies its offensive on Afrin, Ankara is seeking to get the Trump administration to order the withdrawal of YPG militants and their US military trainers and advisors from the northern Syrian town of Manbij.

Speaking to reporters on a flight to Moscow yesterday, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Cavusoglu said that Turkey and the US would decide on a plan to "safeguard" Manbij during talks between himself and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on March 19. Tillerson has since been sacked by Trump, placing a question mark over whether any talks will go ahead.

Directly raising the prospect of Turkish forces clashing with American troops, Cavusoglu reiterated that Turkey will "carry out a military operation" if talks with the US failed to bring about a YPG withdrawal from Manbij.



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