

Tensions “highest since Cold War” as US secretary of state arrives in Moscow

By Bill Van Auken
12 April 2017

Relations between Washington and Moscow have entered “their worst period since the end of the Cold War,” the Russian Foreign Ministry warned Tuesday in a statement released in connection with the arrival of US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

The threat of a direct clash between the two nuclear-armed powers has been posed in the starkest terms in over half a century following the airstrike last week in which US destroyers fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles into a Syrian air base where a Russian unit is stationed.

The Foreign Ministry statement condemned the airstrike, carried out on the pretext of an alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria’s Idlib province on April 4, as “an act of aggression against a sovereign state committed in violation of international law.”

The statement pointedly referred to the string of disastrous US interventions in the Middle East, affirming that Moscow hoped to “learn what the United States will do in Libya, which has been split by NATO’s military intervention, just as Iraq. What plans do our American colleagues have for Yemen, where US weapons are used to bomb cities, killing civilians and aggravating the humanitarian catastrophe?”

The bitter tone of the statement reflected the disillusionment of the government of President Vladimir Putin, which had pinned its hopes on the election of President Donald Trump paving the way for improved relations with Washington and improved conditions on the world stage for the ruling capitalist oligarchy that the Kremlin represents.

Instead, relentless pressure by predominant factions within the US military and intelligence apparatus, amplified by an hysterical anti-Russian campaign conducted by the Democratic Party and the leading elements of the corporate media, have brought about a

sharp reversal of the positions put forward earlier by Trump on Russia and Syria, culminating in the attack on the Syrian air base.

In a sign that the Russian government still holds out hopes for a shift in the US line, the statement blamed “the irresponsible policies of the Obama administration” for escalating tensions by “trying to restrain the growth of Russia’s influence in international affairs and undermine its economic development through sanctions.”

Washington, however, continued to spell out a hard line in relation to Moscow even as Tillerson was making his way to Russia. Before leaving a Group of Seven (G7) foreign ministers representing the major capitalist powers, Tillerson, the former ExxonMobil CEO, asserted that “it is clear to all” that the Russian-backed government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad “is coming to an end.” He went on to warn that Russia could either maintain its alliance with “the Assad regime, the Iranians, and Hizballah” or “realign with the United States, with other Western countries and Middle East countries who are seeking to resolve the Syrian crisis;” i.e., accept the Western drive for regime change in Syria and the assertion of unchallenged US hegemony over the Middle East.

Tillerson also accused Moscow of having failed to assume its responsibilities as a guarantor of a 2013 agreement brokered by Russia in which the Obama administration backed down from earlier threats of military strikes against Syria in return for Syria’s chemical disarmament. He alleged that Russia either “failed to take this obligation seriously” or “has been incompetent.”

In reality, Syria’s chemical disarmament was overseen by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, with the US military participating

directly in the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons materials.

Meanwhile, the White House ratcheted up the attacks on Russia over the alleged Syrian gas attack, with one official speaking on condition of anonymity Tuesday alleging that Moscow was complicit. “How is it possible that their forces were co-located with the Syrian forces that planned, prepared and carried out this chemical weapons attack at the same installation and did not have foreknowledge?” the official stated.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer bizarrely heated up the rhetoric at a Tuesday press conference comparing Assad unfavorably to Adolph Hitler, claiming the latter never employed chemical weapons. When asked for a clarification, Spicer responded that the Nazi leader “was not using the gas on his own people,” but rather had “brought them into the Holocaust center.”

Washington has yet to present any substantive evidence to the United Nations, the US Congress, much less the American and world public, substantiating its allegations that a Syrian warplane dropped chemical munitions on the town of Khan Sheikhun, which is held by Al Qaeda-linked “rebels.”

Nor have American officials indicated any motive for the Assad regime to carry out such an attack, provoking an entirely predictable reaction of Western aggression, under conditions in which his forces have routed the Islamist militias that were armed and funded by Washington and its allies. The incident has all the earmarks of a CIA provocation staged in collaboration with Al Qaeda elements, who have carried out previous chemical attacks in both Syria and Iraq.

Russian President Vladimir Putin Tuesday charged that the alleged chemical attack was a manufactured pretext for US aggression, similar to “the events in 2003, when US envoys to the Security Council were demonstrating what they said were chemical weapons found in Iraq.”

Putin went on to say that Russia had “information that a similar provocation is being prepared...in other parts of Syria including in the southern Damascus suburbs where they are planning to again plant some substance and accuse the Syrian authorities of using (chemical weapons).” He made the statement alongside Italian President Sergio Mattarella, who was in Moscow for talks. At the G7, Italy opposed US-British proposals

for an ultimatum to Moscow on Syrian regime change as well as fresh economic sanctions.

Tuesday afternoon, US Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis, a recently retired Marine general, and Gen. Joseph Votel, the chief of US Central Command, gave a Pentagon press conference on last week’s US strike on the Syrian air base.

While both Mattis and Votel deflected reporters’ questions about Russia’s role in Syria and US plans for regime change, Mattis issued a clear threat to the Syrian government, declaring that it would pay a “very, very stiff price” in the event of another chemical weapons attack.

All that is required is for the Al Qaeda elements and their CIA sponsors to stage such an incident for another—and undoubtedly far larger—act of US aggression.

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