

Amid threat of US-Russia clash in Syria

NATO warplane buzzes jet carrying Russian defense minister over Baltic Sea

By Barry Grey
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Even as the United States escalates tensions with Russian forces in Syria to the point of direct conflict, its reckless aggression along Russia's western border is increasing the danger of a military clash between the two nuclear powers in Europe.

On Wednesday, a NATO F-16 buzzed a Russian jet carrying the country's defense minister in international air space over the Baltic Sea. Just three days previously, a US jet brought down a government plane in Syria, the first such attack since the beginning of the US war for regime-change in 2011. The US action prompted Moscow, whose military forces are backing the Syrian regime, to announce that it will henceforth target US aircraft flying over the western part of that country. Russia also said it would cut off the "deconfliction" hot line that has been used to prevent clashes between US and Russian planes operating in Syria.

In yesterday's incident, a warplane of the US-dominated military alliance approached the Russian aircraft as it flew to Kaliningrad, a western Russian enclave between Lithuania and Poland on the Baltic Sea, where Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu was scheduled to meet with Russian military officials. An Su-27 escort fighter got in way of the NATO plane and tilted its wings to show its weapons, whereupon the intruding NATO plane flew off.

The highly provocative move by NATO was only the latest example of increasingly frequent encounters between US-NATO and Russian warplanes in the Baltic region, particularly in the vicinity of Kaliningrad, Russia's western-most military outpost. On Monday, an American RC-135 spy plane flying toward the Russian border made what Moscow called a "provocative turn" toward a Baltic Fleet Su-27 that had been scrambled for an interception mission.

In a statement issued Wednesday, NATO acknowledged the incident involving Shoigu's plane and the fact that it occurred in neutral air space. Far from offering an apology, however, the Western alliance said it had acted

appropriately, implying that it was free to act in a similar manner in the future.

After landing in Kaliningrad, Shoigu accused the West of endangering global security, saying, "Some countries are seeking to use military force as a tool to achieve geo-political goals."

Dangerous encounters between NATO and Russian warplanes are virtually daily occurrences, particularly in the Baltic region. The entire area has been turned into an armed camp as a result of the US-NATO offensive along Russia's western border launched after the US- and German-backed coup in February 2014 that overthrew the elected pro-Russian government and installed a rabidly anti-Russian, ultra-right regime in Kiev.

On Monday, Lithuania's Ministry of Defense announced that over the previous week, NATO had intercepted 32 Russian military aircraft approaching allied airspace above the Baltic Sea. Between June 12 and 18, it said, NATO and allied jets had scrambled nine times to escort Russian fighter and bomber jets. The intercepts targeted Russian military flights to and from Kaliningrad.

Any one of these incidents could result in a fire-fight or collision, whether by intention or accident, which could quickly ignite a full-scale war between nuclear powers, threatening the incineration of the planet.

Washington is pushing the confrontation with Russia as part of its strategy of removing Moscow as an impediment to its drive for supremacy over the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia and dominance over the Eurasian continent, which it considers essential to taking on its biggest rival for global domination, China.

The current rash of NATO-Russian encounters in the air over Eastern Europe and the Baltics comes in the midst of a series of expansive war games and military exercises along NATO's eastern flank. These involve tens of thousands of troops from countries both in and outside of the military alliance, along with warplanes, tanks, ships and virtually all

of the paraphernalia of war.

For most of June, the US Army is holding its annual series of summer war drills with local allies in the Baltic region called Saber Strike.

Earlier this month, NATO held its annual BALTOPS (Baltic Operations) exercise in Poland and Germany, deploying 6,000 troops from 14 countries, including Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the UK, the US, Finland and Sweden. Some 50 ships and submarines and over 50 aircraft were mobilized, including B-1 and B-52 bombers.

Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* tabloid featured an on-the-spot photo report of a beach-storming exercise in Ustka, Poland, on the Baltic Sea, in which the newspaper enthusiastically wrote: "Soldiers and vehicles charged ashore as aircraft whizzed by overhead in a terrifying display of force." The article quoted US Navy Admiral Christopher Grady as saying, "What we want to do is practice and demonstrate the ability to deliver sea control and power projection at and from the sea."

Another exercise directed against Russia, called "Noble Jump 17," was held this month in Circu, Romania. Designed to test NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, it drew troops from the UK, the US, Romania, the Netherlands, Albania, Spain, Poland and Norway.

In addition to the endless series of war games and military exercises, a total of four combat groups involving 6,000 soldiers are being deployed to the Baltic states and Poland, constituting a de facto permanent deployment, in violation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed 20 years ago. In addition, a separate 10,000-strong brigade is being installed in Romania and a tank brigade is being deployed by the US in Poland that will consist of 10,000 troops.

The regime of President Vladimir Putin has no viable or progressive answer to the offensive of the imperialist powers, led by the United States. It represents the capitalist oligarchy that amassed its initial wealth by plundering the state property that was privatized following the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It combines military adventures of its own, undertaken as a defensive response to Western aggression, with pleas for a deal with Washington and the European powers--a reactionary mix based on virulent Russian nationalism and hostility to all efforts to unify the working class in Europe and internationally.

Last fall, in response to US-NATO provocations, Russia deployed nuclear-capable ballistic missiles to Kaliningrad. Over the weekend, in the midst of the current NATO buildup on its borders, it held the first of two planned military exercises with Chinese naval vessels in the Baltic Sea. A second show of force is scheduled for late July,

following US President Donald Trump's visit to Poland ahead of the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany.

On Tuesday, a day before the NATO threat to Shoigu's plane, Trump met with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko at the White House. A few hours before a joint appearance of the two leaders, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced that Washington had imposed new sanctions on Russia for its alleged aggression in Ukraine.

The measure added 38 more individuals and entities to the list of those previously targeted for reprisals, bringing the total to 160 individuals and 400 companies. The assets of those newly sanctioned will be frozen and they will be forbidden from doing business with US citizens and companies, or raising financing in the US. The list of 38 includes two lower-level Russian government officials and several individuals close to Putin.

While Trump downplayed his meeting with Poroshenko and said nothing about Russia's role in Ukraine, the head of the US puppet government was given a hero's welcome at the Pentagon, with Defense Secretary and former Marine General James Mattis pledging full US support and denouncing threats to Ukrainian "sovereignty" and to "international law" and the "international order." A Pentagon spokesman said the US had not ruled out the option of supplying the Kiev government with lethal weapons to fight pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

In response to the new sanctions, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said Wednesday that he was canceling a scheduled Friday meeting with US undersecretary of state for political affairs, Thomas Shannon Jr., in St. Petersburg. Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said that if the US continued to place new sanctions on Russia, Moscow would respond "to make matters mutual" and place sanctions on the US. He said that a "long list of possible sanctions" was being prepared.

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