Are We Deliberately Trying To Provoke A Military Crisis With Russia?

Tensions are becoming dangerous in Syria and on Russia's back doorstep.

By Ted Galen Carpenter
Global Research, September 01, 2020
The American Conservative 28 August 2020

Region: Russia and FSU, USA
Theme: History, US NATO War Agenda

A dangerous vehicle collision between U.S and Russian soldiers in Northeastern Syria on Aug. 24 highlights the fragility of the relationship and the broader test of wills between the two major powers.

According to White House reports and a Russian video that went viral this week, it appeared that as the two sides were racing down a highway in armored vehicles, the Russians sideswiped the Americans, leaving four U.S. soldiers injured. It is but the latest clash as both sides continue their patrols in the volatile area. But it speaks of bigger problems with U.S. provocations on Russia's backdoor in Eastern Europe.

A sober examination of U.S. policy toward Russia since the disintegration of the Soviet Union leads to two possible conclusions. One is that U.S. leaders, in both Republican and Democratic administrations, have been utterly tone-deaf to how Washington's actions are perceived in Moscow. The other possibility is that those leaders adopted a policy of maximum jingoistic swagger intended to intimidate Russia, even if it meant obliterating a constructive bilateral relationship and eventually risking a dangerous showdown. Washington's latest military moves, especially in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, are stoking alarming tensions.

There has been a long string of U.S. provocations toward Russia. The first one came in the late 1990s and the initial years of the twenty-first century when Washington violated tacit promises given to Mikhail Gorbachev and other Soviet leaders that if Moscow accepted a united Germany within NATO, the Alliance would not seek to move farther east. Instead of abiding by that bargain, the Clinton and Bush administrations successfully pushed NATO to admit multiple new members from Central and Eastern Europe, bringing that powerful military association directly to Russia's western border. In addition, the United States initiated "rotational" deployments of its forces to the new members so that the U.S. military presence in those countries became permanent in all but name. Even Robert M. Gates, who served as secretary of defense under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, was uneasy about those deployments and conceded that he should have warned Bush in 2007 that they might be unnecessarily provocative.

As if such steps were not antagonistic enough, both Bush and Obama sought to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO. The latter country is not only within what Russia regards as its legitimate sphere of influence, but within its core security zone. Even key European members of NATO, especially France and Germany, believed that such a move was unwise

and blocked Washington's ambitions. That resistance, however, did not inhibit a Western [effort to meddle](#) in Ukraine's internal affairs to [help demonstrators](#) unseat Ukraine's elected, pro-Russia president and install a new, pro-NATO government in 2014.

Such provocative political steps, though, are now overshadowed by worrisome U.S. and NATO military moves. Weeks before the formal announcement on July 29, the Trump administration touted its plan to relocate some U.S. forces stationed in Germany. When Secretary of Defense Mike Esper finally made the announcement, the media's focus was largely on the point that 11,900 troops would leave that country.

However, Esper [made it clear](#) that only 6,400 would return to the United States; the other nearly 5,600 would be redeployed to other NATO members in Europe. Indeed, of the 6,400 coming back to the United States, "many of these or similar units will begin conducting rotational deployments back to Europe." Worse, of the 5,600 staying in Europe, it turns out that [at least 1,000](#) are going to Poland's eastern border with Russia.

Another result of the redeployment will be to boost U.S. military power in the Black Sea. Esper confirmed that various units would "begin continuous rotations farther east in the Black Sea region, giving us a more enduring presence to enhance deterrence and reassure allies along NATO's southeastern flank." Moscow is certain to regard that measure as another on a growing list of Black Sea provocations by the United States.

Among other developments, there already has been a surge of alarming incidents between U.S. and Russian military aircraft in that region. Most of the cases involve U.S. spy planes flying near the Russian coast—supposedly in international airspace. On July 30, a Russian Su-27 jet fighter [intercepted](#) two American surveillance aircraft; according to Russian officials, it was the fourth time in the final week of July that they caught U.S. planes in that sector approaching the Russian coast. Yet [another interception](#) occurred on August 5, again involving two U.S. spy planes. Still [others](#) have [taken place](#) throughout mid-August. It is a [reckless practice](#) that easily could escalate into a broader, very dangerous confrontation.

The growing number of such incidents is a manifestation of the surging U.S. military presence along Russia's border, [especially in the Black Sea](#). They are taking place on Russia's doorstep, thousands of miles away from the American homeland. Americans should consider how the United States would react if Russia decided to establish a major naval and air presence in the Gulf of Mexico, operating out of bases in such allied countries as Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.

The undeniable reality is that the United States and its NATO allies are crowding Russia; Russia is not crowding the United States. Washington's bumptious policies already have wrecked a once-promising bilateral relationship and created a needless new cold war with Moscow. If [more prudent U.S. policies](#) are not adopted soon, that cold war might well turn hot.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at The American Conservative, is the author of 12 books and more than

850 articles on international affairs. His latest book is NATO: The Dangerous Dinosaur (2019).

Featured image is from Zero Hedge

The original source of this article is [The American Conservative](#)
Copyright © [Ted Galen Carpenter](#), [The American Conservative](#), 2020

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)