

The Situation in Syria Just Became More Dangerous

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The military situation in Syria took a significant step for the worse on 19 June 2017 when an American fighter jet shot down a Syrian fighter jet carrying out operations against ISIS. That was the latest in a series of foolhardy moves by the Americans which have included the bombing of Syrian army forces in south eastern Syria causing more than 100 casualties, and the shooting down of an Iranian drone in the same region.

The Russian Defence Ministry immediately announced it was suspending cooperation with US forces, and that henceforth all kinds of airborne vehicles, including aircraft and UAVs of the international coalition detected to the west of the Euphrates River will be tracked by the Russian SAM systems as air targets." The obvious inference is that they will at risk of being shot down. David Wroe, defence correspondent for the Fairfax media wrote (SMH 21 June 2017) that the shoot down "triggered a belligerent response from Russia." His article was entitled "RAAF halts air strikes after Russian threat."

As is almost invariably the case with Australian reporting of the Syrian war, inappropriate language and a failure to report accurately on the issues is more often than not the case. Wroe's article and other western media reports of the American action and the Russian response illustrate the point.

US General Joseph Dunford referred to the incident as justified under the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, (AUMF) a resolution passed in 2001 following the "9/11" events in Washington and New York of that year.

Dunford also used the term "collective self defence of partnered forces." That neither the AUMF nor the term collective self-defence are remotely applicable to the war in Syria is never discussed in the Australian media. Their default position appears to be that if the Americans claim it, then it must be correct. There is similarly no discussion at all as to the right of the Americans or their coalition allies, including Australia, to even establish a base on Syrian soil.

The "collective self defence " justification was also used by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop when she was asked on ABC National Radio in late 2015 to explain the legal basis for Australia's announced intention of intervening in the Syrian war. Her answer then was identical to that of Dunford. Neither of them was correct.

Article 51 of the UN Charter does provide for collective self-defence in tightly defined circumstances. The ICJ has stipulated what those circumstances are. It requires as a minimum that a State is attacked by another State, and that the party being attacked requests assistance. It does not apply in the case of attacks by non-state actors.

Manifestly, neither applies to either the US or Australia in the case of Syria. The legitimate sovereign government of Syria has not sought the help of either country. Both are operating in Syria in contravention of international law. Both the US and Australia are quick to invoke the 'rule of law' or the 'rules based international order' when it suits them but are singularly incapable of applying those same principles to their own conduct.

The absurdity of the US led coalition's position is further seen in the US claim that they were defending a self declared "deconfliction zone" in south eastern Syria at the confluence of the Jordan, Syria and Iraq borders.

Russia, Turkey, Syria and Iran had in fact agreed upon the establishment of deconfliction zones within Syria, which the US has failed to acknowledge or even participate in the negotiations. They are now citing a wholly illegitimate zone of their own as theirs to defend while they train the so-called moderate terrorists. That they neither sought nor obtained the consent of the Syrian government to these activities is simply ignored by the western media. That the Americans should attack Syrian forces that are themselves attacking terrorists is beyond irony. The profound hypocrisy of the US and Australian position was never more obvious than in south-eastern Syria.

The area around al Tanf in south-eastern Syria the Americans are defending extends for 50km from the town. The significance of this area is not that the Americans are combatting terrorism as the media would have us believe, but that is a critical part of the logistics flow between Iran and Syria. At al Tanf and elsewhere the Americans are more than willing to intervene on behalf of the ISIS proxies, as senior US military personnel have acknowledged for some time.

This is also illustrated in the specific case of the military base the Americans and their coalition allies have set up at al Tanf on the Syrian side of the border. The militants being trained there by the Americans and others belong to a group known as Maghawir al Thawra. Video footage shows these militants driving around in new Toyota land cruisers identical to those supplied by Saudi Arabia to ISIS and other terror related groups.

One of their spokesmen, Abu al Atheer has said that the goal of the US forces they are being trained by is to take the Syrian city of Deir Ezzor. As Syrian government forces hold that city, it is difficult to see a benevolent rationale behind the desire of militants to take control of the city.

In truth, Maghawir al Thawra is no more than yet another of the multiple terrorist proxy forces being used by the Americans. Their rebranding of such terror groups as "moderates" is no more than a cynical exercise to conceal the fact that the US and its allies are waging an illegal war in pursuit of their overriding objective of regime change in Syria.

The shooting down of a Syrian fighter in this context clearly marked a red line for the Russians. Quite simply, they have had enough and their announcement of tracking and potentially shooting down Coalition planes was the least that could be expected. If one were to apply Wroe's terminology of a "bellicose reaction" to the Syrian situation then the US and its loyal acolyte Australia are much stronger contenders.

Commentators such as Wroe seem completely unable to understand that the Americans are pursuing much wider objectives. Apart from the aforementioned regime change, a major secondary goal is the blocking of Chinese, Russian and Iranian access to the eastern

Mediterranean. These three countries are cooperating in much more than preventing Syria from joining the lengthy list of failed States that have suffered from decades of US geopolitical ambitions. That cooperation manifests itself in the increasingly important Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the massive Belt and Road Initiative that is transforming the geopolitical structure of Eurasia.

Syria and Iran are key states in the development of these peaceful alternative to the perpetual war model preferred by the Americans and their allies. What Pepe Escobar accurately calls 'blood on the tracks of the New Silk Roads reflects the determination of the US to cling to its unipolar ambitions. What is currently being played out in Yemen, Qatar, Syria, Iraq and Iran are symptoms of that ambition.

One faint glimmer of hope is that President Trump is endeavouring to keep a door open to negotiations with Russia. The blatant violations of international law that characterises American behaviour in Syria suggests that the neocon element in US foreign policy is doing all it can to sabotage any Trump initiatives (as confused and weak as they are) for a peaceful resolution of the Syrian conflict. That may be crediting Trump with more goodwill than is justified.

In the light of the Russian warning, Australia prudently chose to cease its illegal military activities in Syria. One would hope that such prudence is the beginning of a greater wisdom about the true costs of unthinking adherence to failed policies. Again however, judging by Australian political statements on the Syrian conflict, and the quality of journalistic commentary cited above, that also may be a vain hope.

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