

The US-Russia Proxy War in Syria

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The risk of Syria becoming a proxy war between the U.S. and Russia became real last week when Turkey and Syrian jihadists used U.S.-supplied weaponry to shoot down a Russian warplane and rescue helicopter, killing two Russians, a danger that ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern explores.

Belatedly, at a sidebar meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Paris climate summit on Monday, President Barack Obama reportedly expressed regret for last week's killing of a Russian pilot who was shot down by a Turkish air-to-air missile fired by a U.S.-supplied F-16 and the subsequent death of a Russian marine on a search-and-rescue mission, apparently killed by a U.S.-made TOW missile.

But Obama administration officials continued to take the side of Turkey, a NATO "ally" which claims implausibly that it was simply defending its air space and that the Russian pilot of the SU-24 warplane had ignored repeated warnings. According to accounts based on Turkish data, the SU-24 may have strayed over a slice of Turkish territory for 17 seconds. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Facts Back Russia on Turkish Attack](#)."]]



President Barack Obama meets with President Vladimir Putin of Russia on the sidelines of the G20 Summit at Regnum Carya Resort in Antalya, Turkey, Sunday, Nov. 15, 2015. National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice listens at left. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Immediately after the incident on Nov. 24, Obama offered [a knee-jerk justification of Turkey's provocative action](#) which appears to have been a deliberate attack on a Russian warplane to deter continued bombing of Syrian jihadists, including the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an Islamist, has supported various jihadists as his tip of the spear in his goal to overthrow the secular regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In his first public comments about the Turkish attack, Obama gracelessly asserted Turkey's right to defend its territory and air space although there was never any indication that the SU-24 – even if it had strayed momentarily into Turkish air space – had any hostile intentions against Turkey. Indeed, Turkey and the United States were well aware that the Russian planes were targeting the Islamic State, Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and other jihadist rebels.

Putin even complained,

“We told our U.S. partners in advance where, when at what altitudes our pilots were going to operate. The U.S.-led coalition, which includes Turkey, was aware of the time and place where our planes would operate. And this is exactly where and when we were attacked. Why did we share this information with the Americans? Either they don't control their allies, or they just pass this information left and right without realizing what the consequences of such actions might be. We will have to have a serious talk with our U.S. partners.”

Putin also suggested that the Turkish attack was in retaliation for Russia's bombing of a truck convoy carrying Islamic State oil to Turkey. On Monday, on the sidelines of the Paris summit, Putin said Russia has “received additional information confirming that that oil from the deposits controlled by Islamic State militants enters Turkish territory on industrial scale.”

Turkey's Erdogan — also in Paris — denied buying oil from terrorists and vowed to resign “if it is proven that we have, in fact, done so.”

Was Obama Angry?

In private, Obama may have been outraged by Erdogan's reckless actions – as some reports suggest – but, if so, Obama seems publicly more afraid of offending the neocons who dominate Official Washington's opinion circles and who hold key positions in his own administration, than of provoking a possible nuclear confrontation with Russia.

On Nov. 24, even as Russian emotions were running high – reacting to the killing of one Russian pilot and the death of a second Russian marine killed after his helicopter was shot down apparently by a U.S.-supplied TOW missile fired by Syrian jihadists – Obama chose to act “tough” against Putin, both during a White House press conference with French President Francois Holland and later with pro-Turkish remarks from U.S. officials.

During the press conference after the Turkish shoot-down and the deliberate fire from Turkish-backed Syrian jihadists aiming at two Russian airmen as they parachuted to the ground, Obama chose to make disparaging remarks about the Russian president.

Obama boasted about the 65 nations in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State compared to Putin's small coalition of Russia and Iran (although Putin's tiny coalition appears to be much more serious and effective than Obama's bloated one, which includes countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar that have been implicated in supporting jihadist elements, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State).

By delivering these anti-Russian insults at such a delicate time, Obama apparently was trusting that Putin would keep his cool and tamp down public emotions at home, even as

Obama lacked the integrity and courage to stand up to neocon criticism from The Washington Post's editorial page or from some of his hawkish subordinates.

The administration's neocons who keep demanding an escalation of tensions with Russia include Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland. Then, there are the officials most identified with arms procurement, sales and use, such as Defense Secretary Ashton Carter.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford recently volunteered to Congress that U.S. forces "can impose a no-fly zone" for Syria (a dangerous play advocated by presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and Sen. John McCain). Dunford is the same hawk who identified Russia as the "existential threat" to the U.S. and said it would be "reasonable" to send heavy weapons to Ukraine on Russia's border.

Meanwhile, NATO commander Gen. Philip Breedlove keeps up his fly-by-the-pants information warfare campaign citing Russian "aggression," "invasions" and plans to do still more evil things. One is tempted to dismiss him as a buffoon; but he is the NATO commander.

Lack of Control

It does not appear as though Obama has the same degree of control over foreign and defense policy that Putin enjoys in Moscow – or at least one hopes Putin can retain such control since some hard-line Russian nationalists are fuming that Putin has been too accommodating of his Western "partners."

Perhaps the greatest danger from Obama's acquiescence to the neocons' new Cold War with Russia is that the neocon hopes for "regime change in Moscow" will be realized except that Putin will be replaced by some ultra-nationalist who would rather risk nuclear war than accept further humiliation of Mother Russia.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, the U.S. establishment is such that the generals, the arms manufacturers and weapons merchants, the Defense Department, and most of Congress have a very strong say in U.S. foreign policy – and Obama seems powerless to change it.

The model of governing in Washington is a far cry from Russia's guiding principle of *edinonachaliye* – by which one supreme authority is in clear control of decision-making on defense and foreign policy.

Even when Obama promises, he often fails to deliver. Think back to what Obama told then-President Dmitry Medvedev when they met in Seoul in March 2012, about addressing Russian concerns over European missile defense. In remarks picked up by camera crews, Obama asked for some "space" until after the U.S. election. Obama can be heard saying, "This is my last election. After my election, I have more flexibility."

Yet, even after winning reelection, Obama has remained cowed by the influential neocons – even as he has bucked some of their more aggressive demands, such as a massive U.S. bombing campaign against Assad's military in summer 2013 and bomb-bomb-bombing Iran; instead, in 2014-15, Obama pushed for a negotiated agreement to constrain Iran's nuclear program.

Ideally, Obama should be able to show some flexibility on Syria during his last year in office,

but no one should hold their breath. Obama appears to have deep fears about crossing the neocons or Israel regarding what they want for the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Besides the neocons' close ties to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the neocons are intimately connected to the interests of the Military-Industrial Complex, which provides substantial funding for the major think tanks where many neocons hang their hats and churn out new arguments for more world conflict and thus more military spending.

Unlike Obama, Pope Francis addressed this fact-of-life head-on in his Sept. 24 address to members of the U.S. Congress – many if not most of whom also are lavished with proceeds from the arms trade and then appropriate still more funding for arms production and sales.

“Why are deadly weapons being sold to those who plan to inflict untold suffering,” Francis asked them face-to-face. “Sadly, the answer, as we all know, is simply for money: money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood.”

An Old Epithet

From my days as a CIA analyst covering the Soviet Union, I'm reminded of the epithet favored by the Soviet party daily *Pravda* a few decades ago – “*vallstreetskiye krovopitsiy*” – or Wall St. bloodsuckers. Propaganda-ish as that term seemed, it turns out that Soviet media were not far off on that subject.

Indeed, the banks and corporations involved in arms manufacture and sales enjoy immense power – arguably, more than a president; unarguably more than Obama. The moneyed interests – including Congress – are calling the shots.

The old adage “money makes the world go round” is also apparent in Washington's velvet-gloves treatment of the Saudis and is nowhere better illustrated than in the continued suppression of 28 pages of the 2002 Joint Congressional Inquiry on 9/11. Those pages deal with the Saudi role in financing and supporting some of the 9/11 hijackers, but both the Bush and Obama administrations have kept those pages hidden for 13 years.

One reason is that the Saudis are the primary recipients of the U.S. trade in weapons, for which they pay cash. American manufacturers are selling the Saudis arms worth \$100 billion under the current five-year agreement. Oddly, acts of terrorism sweeten the pot. Three days after the attacks in Paris, Washington and Riyadh announced a deal for \$1.3 billion more.

And yet, neither Obama, nor any of the candidates trying to replace him, nor Congress is willing to jeopardize the arms trade by insisting that Riyadh call an abrupt halt to its support for the jihadists fighting in Syria for fear this might incur the wrath of the deep-pocket Saudis.

Not even Germany – already inundated, so far this year, by a flood of 950,000 refugees, mostly from Syria – is willing to risk Saudi displeasure. Berlin prefers to pay off the Turks with billions of euros to stanch the flow of those seeking refuge in Europe.

And so, an unholy alliance of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states continues to fuel the war in Syria while Obama pretends that his giant coalition is really doing the job of taking on many of those same jihadists. But Obama's coalition has been woefully incompetent and indeed compromised, bumbling along and letting the Islamic State seize more territory along with Al Qaeda and its affiliates and allies.

Russia's entry into the war in September changed the equation because – unlike Obama's grand coalition – Putin's puny coalition with Iran actually was serious about beating back the jihadists and stabilizing Assad's regime. Turkey's shoot-down of the Russian warplane on Nov. 24 was a crude message from Erdogan that success in defeating the jihadists would not be tolerated.

As for the United States and Europe, myopia prevails. None seems concerned that the terrorists whom they support today will come back to bite them tomorrow. American officials, despite their rhetoric and despite 9/11, seem to consider the terrorist threat remote from U.S. shores – and, in any case, dwarfed in importance by the lucrative arm sales.

As for the Vienna talks on Syria, the speed with which they were arranged (with Iran taking part) raised expectations now dampened. Last week, for example, Secretary of State John Kerry bragged about how a meeting of "moderate" rebels is to convene "in the next few weeks" to come up with principles for negotiating with Syrian President Assad's government. The convener? Saudi Arabia!

Obama knows what has to happen for this terrorist threat to be truly addressed. The Saudis and Turks have to be told, in no uncertain terms, to stop supporting the jihadists. But that would require extraordinary courage and huge political – perhaps even physical – risk. There is no sign that President Obama dares bite that bullet.

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