

“This is a Very Dangerous Game”: Moscow Warns that U.S. Strikes against Syria may Lead to War Between US and Russia

By [Alex Lantier](#)

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In a sign that the Syrian conflict risks escalating into war between the world's major nuclear-armed powers, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned yesterday against NATO air and missile strikes on its forces and allies in Syria, stating that Russia would respond militarily.

Lavrov referred to media reports that the United States plans to bomb Syrian or Russian forces inside Syria. “This is a very dangerous game,” he said, “given that Russia, being in Syria at the invitation of the legitimate government of this country and having two bases there, has air defense systems there to protect its assets.”



Moscow also sent nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles to the Russian Baltic city of Kaliningrad late Friday. From Kaliningrad, the missiles can strike targets, including NATO bases, across Poland and the Baltic republics. Russian Defense Ministry officials said the missiles were loaded onto a freighter in the Baltic Sea “right under a US reconnaissance satellite” to monitor its response and make clear to the US military that the missiles were en route to Kaliningrad.

Leaks to US papers including the *Washington Post* last week revealed that US officials are discussing launching an attack on Syrian government forces behind the backs of the American people. While a handful of press reports have emerged on the leaks themselves, a deafening silence prevails in American and European media on the danger and the consequences of such an escalation.

On Wednesday, the *Post*’s Josh Rogin wrote,

“[O]fficials from the State Department, the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff discussed limited military strikes against the [Syrian] regime ... Options under

consideration, which remain classified, include bombing Syrian air force runways using cruise missiles and other long-range weapons fired from coalition planes and ships, an administration official who is part of the discussions told me. One proposed way to get around the White House's long-standing objection to striking the Assad regime without a UN Security Council resolution would be to carry out the strikes covertly and without public acknowledgment, the official said."

In a 2013 speech to Wall Street bankers leaked by WikiLeaks, Hillary Clinton said imposing such a "no-fly zone" would entail mass civilian casualties: "To have a no-fly zone you have to take out all of the air defenses, many of which are located in populated areas. So our missiles, even if they are standoff missiles so we're not putting our pilots at risk—you're going to kill a lot of Syrians."

After last month's US bombing in Deir ez-Zor killed at least 62 Syrian soldiers and wounded 100, it must be assumed that US raids would aim to cause massive Syrian military casualties as well.

Even before Lavrov made his remarks, Russian military officials responded to leaks like the *Post* report by warning US officials that they risked provoking a major war. Russian Defense Ministry spokesman General Igor Konashenkov said his forces would presume US strikes were hostile, and locate and destroy US fighters, including stealth aircraft, over Syria.

"Any missile or air strikes on the territory controlled by the Syrian government will create a clear threat to Russian servicemen," Konashenkov said. "Russian air defense system crews are unlikely to have time to determine in a 'straight line' the exact flight paths of missiles and then who the warheads belong to. And all the illusions of amateurs about the existence of 'invisible' jets will face a disappointing reality."

Addressing "leaks" such as the *Post* report, he added, "Of particular concern is information that the initiators of such provocations are representatives of the CIA and the Pentagon, who ... today are lobbying for 'kinetic' scenarios in Syria."

Konashenkov warned Washington that it should make a "thorough calculation of the possible consequences of such plans."

This remark is chilling. While Konashenkov did not say it, the significance of Moscow's remarks is clear: implementing US plans signifies a military clash with Russia, and the possible consequences of such a clash include escalation into a full-blown nuclear war that would kill billions of people. The diplomatic arrangements that for a time stabilized relations between NATO and Russia in the period after the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the USSR in 1991 have collapsed.

As Moscow apparently concludes that it has no other option but to prepare for war if Washington and its NATO allies decide to launch it, working people around the world are emerging as the sole social constituency for opposition to a catastrophic war.

The driving force in the war crisis is the aggressive policy of the NATO imperialist powers, led by the US. Russia's emergence as an obstacle to unrestrained US-NATO wars in the Middle East, opposing a planned NATO war in Syria in 2013, is totally unacceptable to Washington.

Now, as NATO's Al Qaeda-linked Islamist proxies in Syria face defeat around Aleppo, factions of the American state are openly calling for launching a war to save them. Last month, US General Joseph Dunford indicated his support for imposing a "no-fly zone" over Syria to the US Senate, adding that this "would require us to go to war with Syria and Russia."

Last week, US Army Chief of Staff General Mark Milley mentioned Russia and China as enemies, and directly addressed them, declaring, "I want to be clear to those who wish to do us harm ... the United States military—despite all of our challenges, despite our [operational] tempo, despite everything we have been doing—we will stop you and we will beat you harder than you have ever been beaten before. Make no mistake about that."

While the NATO powers bear central responsibility for the crisis in Syria, the response of Russia's post-Soviet capitalist oligarchy is also reckless and reactionary. Incapable of and hostile to appealing to international opposition to war in the working class, it aimed to use its military strength to deter US-NATO escalation in Syria and to negotiate a deal with the imperialist powers.

This policy has utterly failed. Instead, the Kremlin's oscillations between begging Washington for a deal and escalating military action inside Syria have drawn it into a deepening confrontation with NATO that now threatens to unleash a major military conflict.

Russia's missile deployment to Kaliningrad is a signal to Washington and its European allies that Moscow not only believes that war is a very real possibility, but anticipates that such a war would rapidly spread from Syria to Europe. NATO has deployed tens of thousands of troops near Russia's borders in Eastern Europe since backing a fascist-led putsch that toppled a pro-Russian regime in Ukraine in 2014.

Lavrov said this posed an intolerable threat to Russian national security. "We have witnessed a fundamental change of circumstances [in] the aggressive Russophobia that now lies at the heart of US policy toward Russia," he said. "It's not rhetorical Russophobia, but aggressive steps which really concern our national interests and endanger our security. NATO enlargement, [deployments of] NATO military infrastructure next to our borders ... and the deployment of a missile defense system—these are all a display of unfriendly, hostile actions."

Moscow was outraged in particular by US State Department spokesman John Kirby's threat that if Russia did not obey US orders to retreat from Syria, Islamist groups could "expand their operations, which could include attacks against Russian interests, perhaps even Russian cities. Russia will continue to send troops home in body bags and will continue to lose resources, perhaps even aircraft." In this context, Kirby's subsequent observation that Washington can influence "some" opposition militias in Syria had the character of a threat.

As CIA weapons reach armories of the Al Qaeda-linked Al Nusra front in Aleppo, it is clear that if Moscow simply let the Syrian regime fall to the Islamist opposition, Russia could soon find itself targeted for the type of Islamist operations NATO is currently aiming at Syria. This has apparently persuaded Moscow, at least for now, to risk an all-out confrontation with the US in a desperate attempt to deter NATO military action against Syria and Russia.

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