

RUSSIA CHALLENGES US-NATO: Russia prepares army for Syrian deployment

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Given the worsening crisis in Syria, the Nezavisimaya Gazeta newspaper reported that the Russian army is apparently being prepared for a mission in Syria. Citing anonymous sources in the military leadership, the newspaper said that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the general staff to work out a plan for military operations outside Russia, including in Syria.

The units being prepared for an intervention are the 76th Division of airborne forces (an especially experienced unit of the Russian army), the 15th Army Division, as well as special forces from a brigade of the Black Sea fleet, which has a base in the Syrian port of Tartus.

The details of the operational plan are being prepared by the working parties of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, to which most of the post-Soviet states belong, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to which China and Russia belong.

According to the newspaper report, deployment depends on the decision of the Russian government and the UN. However, the plans also foresee that the troops might intervene without UN approval. The Russian government has so far not confirmed the report.

On Monday last week, three Russian warships were sighted off the Syrian coast. An anonymous source from the Russian government told the Iranian newspaper *Tehran Times* that Moscow wants to show NATO that it will not allow any military operation against Damascus under the guise of a humanitarian mission.

Earlier, the secretary-general of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, Nikolai Bordjusha, had held out the possibility of using “peacekeepers” in Syria. “The task in Syria is likely to be to impose peace—primarily against the insurgents, who use weapons to solve political problems.”

Russia and China strongly oppose a military intervention by NATO in Syria, and have already blocked two UN resolutions on the issue. The US and its allies, especially Turkey, Saudi Arabia and France, have stoked up a civil war in Syria and are systematically arming the so-called rebels, who consist mainly of Islamists, ex-members of the government, or Al Qaeda terrorists. Turkey is increasingly leadership of the US proxy war in Syria.

In recent weeks calls for a military intervention in Syria have increased. After the massacre in Houla, French President Francois Hollande spoke out in favour of military intervention. The West blamed the government of Bashar al-Assad for this massacre without any clear evidence. The German elite is also openly discussing a possible military intervention; Berlin has tried unsuccessfully to push Russia to make concessions on the issue.

Russia has not excluded a “political solution”, i.e., the slow transition from the Assad regime to another government. At all costs, however, the Kremlin wants to avoid the violent overthrow of Assad by the West for several reasons, whether it is through direct military intervention by NATO or is brought about by the rebels armed by the West. Two weeks ago, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev warned that a military intervention in Syria could quickly escalate and lead to the use of nuclear weapons.

Since Soviet times, Moscow and Syria have maintained close ties, especially in military and economic matters. More importantly, however, a war against Syria means a ramping up of US aggression in the Middle East. The US has already significantly extended its influence in the region through the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. They also have military bases in almost every country in the area: Pakistan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Turkmenistan, as well as some in other smaller states. Meanwhile, Syria and Iran, which are virtually surrounded by US military bases, have become the last bastions of Russia and China in the Middle East against the encroachment of the United States.

A regime change in Damascus would probably bring a Sunni government to power, which would work closely with Saudi Arabia and the United States against Russia and China. Moreover, an escalation of the civil war in Syria—which is already well underway—and a military intervention would set the entire Middle East ablaze. A NATO-led war against Syria would be an immediate prelude to a war against Iran. An attack on Iran would mean another step toward a military escalation of tensions between Washington and Beijing.

While China obtains a significant portion of its raw material imports from Iran, Tehran is Russia’s most important ally in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea to counter the influence of the US and Israel. Both Moscow and Tehran oppose the construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline by the West. They also reject the massive military rearmament of Azerbaijan, which is promoted by the United States, Israel and Turkey. The Caspian region is of key geopolitical importance because it links resource-rich Central Asia with Europe, and because it also has extensive oil and gas reserves.

The growing threat of war in the Middle East—and the fact that the European countries, including Germany and France, are siding with the United States—is increasingly driving Russia into a military alliance with China.

It is significant that Vladimir Putin’s first foreign visit since taking office was to Belarus, and that he then only spent a few hours in Berlin and Paris before going on to Central Asia. The highlight of his visit abroad was in China, where he met with the Chinese president, and then took part at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on June 6 and 7. In addition to Russia and China, the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also belong to this organization; Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India have “observer” status.

As was the case at the previous meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, discussion at the SCO summit centred on military and economic cooperation. The summit adopted a declaration on the “establishment of a region of lasting peace and common prosperity”. Military intervention against Syria or Iran was explicitly rejected.

The declaration also condemns the establishment of the NATO missile defence system in Europe, which is directed primarily against Russia and has led to severe tensions between

Washington and both Europe and Moscow. In future, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is planning to cooperate militarily more closely on issues of “regional security”.

During his two-day visit to Beijing, Putin had previously agreed with Chinese President Hu Jintao to jointly strengthen “security in the Asia-Pacific region”. Both countries intend to hold frequent joint military exercises in the Pacific, after holding joint naval exercises in the Yellow Sea in the spring. The United States is increasingly focussing its military build-up in the Asian Pacific region in preparation for a military confrontation with China.

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