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US, Russia Continue to Inch Toward Confrontation in Syria

6/21/2017

In backing the rebels in the early part of the Syrian Civil War, the US was rather cynically engaging in a proxy war against Russia, angling for regime change in Russia's main Mediterranean ally, and the host of their lone Mediterranean base.

Syria's been a source of tension ever since between the two countries, but as America's direct ground involvement in Syria increasingly involves attacking government targets, the risk of direct military conflict between the US and Russia, with Syria as the backdrop, is growing precipitously.

US military involvement in Syria long was limited to attacks against ISIS targets, with the occasional attack against al-Qaeda forces in the Syrian northwest. Despite US assurances that strikes a few months ago against a Shi'ite militia in the country's southeast were a one-time deal, those strikes have grown increasingly common.

It's not just the Shi'ite militias, which are allied with the Syrian government, being targeted anymore. Twice in recent weeks US warplanes have shot down a pair of drones, which are believed to be of Iranian manufacture, and over the weekend, shot down a Syrian Su-22 bomber within Syrian airspace.

The US is presenting the shoot-down of the Syrian plane as “collective self-defense” to protect the Kurds, but the pretext under which the Pentagon justifies such an attack is very much beside the point. Attacking a Syrian military target inside Syria eliminated the disconnect between forces the US is targeting, and forces Russia’s military are directly allied with.

That’s a big problem, and Russia felt obliged, the day after that incident, to warn that US warplanes operating in much of Syria would be treated as hostile military targets by their substantial air defense units inside Syria.

That warning appears to have been ignored by the US, which shot down another drone in the area Russia warned them against entering. The US appears to believe they are calling Russia’s bluff, but every such incident raises the risk of Russia retaliating, and with the US having already directly targeted Syria’s military once, another move against them especially would risk provoking a Russian reaction, which could quickly spiral out of control.