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Russia expels US diplomats in retaliation for sanctions bill

By Alex Lantier

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On Friday, amid a collapse in relations between the world's two leading nuclear-armed powers—triggered by the US Senate's passage, by a lopsided 98-2 vote, of a sanctions bill targeting Russia—Moscow ordered hundreds of US diplomats to leave the country. The Russian government indicated it has concluded that the US political establishment is seeking a confrontation with Russia, which has the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal.

In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry declared: “The passage of the new law on sanctions shows with all obviousness that relations with Russia have become hostage to the domestic political battle within the US. The latest events show that in well known circles in the United States, Russophobia and a course toward open confrontation with our country have taken hold.”

On this basis, it told Washington to make a more than 60 percent cut in its 1,200-strong diplomatic mission to Russia by September 1. The Foreign Ministry stated: “We kindly ask the US to adjust the headcount of its diplomatic and technical staff by September to exact parity with the number of Russian diplomats and employees in the US. This means the overall number of personnel employed in American diplomatic and consular institutions in the Russian Federation will be reduced to 455.”

It added that Moscow would retaliate against any further US cut in Russian diplomatic staff by imposing identical cuts to US personnel in Russia. American diplomats will also lose access to Moscow warehouses and a dacha compound on an island in the Moscow River on August 1.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov confirmed that these measures were taken on orders from President Vladimir Putin. On Thursday, Putin responded to the sanctions bill by declaring: “We are behaving in a very restrained and patient way, but at some moment we will need to respond... It’s impossible to endlessly tolerate this kind of insolence towards our country.”

A spokesperson for the US embassy in Moscow said: “We have received the Russian government notification. [US] Ambassador [to Russia John] Tefft expressed his strong disappointment and protest. We have passed the notification back to Washington for review.”

Hours later, Friday evening US time, the White House announced that President Trump planned to sign the sanctions bill, against which he had previously lobbied. The bill also increases sanctions against Iran and North Korea. It includes, in an unusual provision designed to target Russia, congressional power to veto any move by the White House to reduce or remove sanctions.

Moscow’s assessment that it expects the US government to launch an open confrontation with Russia points to the extraordinary level of international tensions and the immense danger of war. This assessment will not only guide the Russian government’s policy statements. It will also guide the force posture and readiness status of military forces engaged in explosive proxy wars and military stand-offs in countries surrounding Russia—from North Korea on Russia’s eastern border to Ukraine and the Baltics on its western border and Syria to the south.

These forces control sufficient nuclear weapons to destroy the NATO countries of North America and Europe, and, indeed, the entire surface of the planet, several times over.

During the war provoked in Ukraine by the February 2014 NATO-backed coup that toppled a pro-Russian regime in Kiev, when Russian forces occupied Crimea after its largely Russian-speaking residents voted to return to Russia, the Russian army was placed on full alert. In a TV documentary that aired in 2015, Putin said that he feared “the most adverse development of events.” He added that the Russian nuclear arsenal had been “in a state of full combat readiness.”

Now, Washington has again escalated the confrontation—this time imposing sanctions on any company investing in new pipeline infrastructure carrying Russian oil or gas towards European markets. While this threatens Europe with a cut-off of crucial energy supplies, it threatens Russia, whose economy depends completely on its energy exports, with economic strangulation.

If Moscow is again anticipating a confrontation with Washington and expelling US diplomats, a move typically taken when two states are preparing for war, Russian forces are doubtless again being placed on high alert. The danger that a clash, accidental otherwise, between Russia and the United States, starting in the Middle East, the Asia-Pacific or Eastern Europe, could escalate into an all-out conflict, has surged.

The *Moscow Times* cited Franz Klintsevich, who sits on the Defence and Security Committee of the Federation Council, as saying that Russia's response to the Senate vote was "just the first steps" in Moscow's strategy. "No doubt, others will be taken," he declared, adding that Russian responses could be "unexpected."

This escalation of tensions between the world's main nuclear powers testifies to the depth of the economic and geo-political crisis of world capitalism. In this, the main driving force has been the attempt of Washington and its European imperialist allies to dominate the Eurasian land mass. In the course of the quarter-century since the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union and began the restoration of capitalism, removing the main military counterweight to NATO, the Atlantic Alliance has threatened, bombed or invaded countries from Iraq and Yugoslavia to Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and North Korea.

Any notion that workers can leave the task of stopping the war drive of US and European imperialism to the Russian capitalist regime and its armed forces is a dangerous illusion. Instead, what is emerging ever more starkly are the disastrous consequences of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The corrupt Russian business oligarchy, which emerged from the social and economic collapse produced by capitalist restoration, is neither able nor willing to appeal to the international working class for support against imperialist war threats. Instead, it desperately seeks to work out ways to coexist with US and European imperialism, vacillating between pleas for collaboration and military adventurism.

The Kremlin regime is, itself, emerging as a dangerous factor in world politics. Even after Moscow confronted NATO wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the 2011 wars in Libya and Syria, NATO's backing of a coup in neighboring Ukraine, led by far-right anti-Russian forces, came as a shock to the Kremlin.

The Putin regime hoped, however, that a change of personnel at the top in Washington—the election of Trump and the installation of officials it believed would be more pro-Russian, such as National Security Adviser Michael Flynn and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson—would improve its situation and lessen the dangers. After Flynn's resignation and the passage of the anti-Russian sanctions, however, the Kremlin is reaching the conclusion that these hopes were misplaced.

In a piece titled "After Trump," pro-Kremlin commentator Boris Mezhyuev wrote: "In less than two months, it has become clear that for the US political elite, Flynn and Tillerson are less than insignificant people; they will not be allowed to rule America... Now this page of history can be considered turned, and Russian conservatives and Russia as a whole should learn to live in a 'post-Trump' situation."

With tensions growing between Washington and the European Union, which sharply criticized the US sanctions bill, Moscow is hoping its somewhat strengthened geo-strategic situation will allow it to confront Washington. US-backed Islamist militias are losing ground rapidly in Syria to the Russian-backed Syrian regime, and pro-Moscow forces in eastern Ukraine recently set up a "Little Russia" state entity hostile to the NATO-backed regime in Kiev. Russia believes it can also count on support from Beijing, which sent warships to the Baltic Sea this week amid Russia's confrontation with NATO there.

Some pro-Kremlin commentators are now proposing that Moscow play on growing conflicts between Washington and the EU. In *Vzglyad*, Pyotr Akopov wrote that the “new law on anti-Russian sanctions, paradoxically, is already benefiting Russia.” He continued: “It is not only anti-Russian and anti-Trump, but also an anti-European law that is exacerbating contradictions among the Western powers. Europe is increasingly convinced that Americans’ words about ‘Atlantic solidarity’ are nothing more than a cover for their own selfish ends... It chased after Trump, it wanted to harm Putin, and as a result it tore one more thread out of the rope binding the Europeans to ‘Atlantic unity.’ Bravo, Congress!”

The Kremlin’s hopes that a more aggressive policy will force US imperialism to back down will prove to be no less illusory than its previous hopes in Trump. The sanctions bill is further proof that the American ruling elite will respond, as usual, with escalation, setting the stage for an even more dangerous conflict.