

## **NATO Conflict in Syria Spotlights Illegal US Blundering**

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The US Trump administration is warning Turkey to “tread carefully” in its military offensive in northern Syria, alarmed that the two NATO member states could end up in open conflict.

Puppet President Trump and his Pentagon chief James 'mad dog' Mattis both issued stern calls this week to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, urging “restraint” as Ankara pushes ahead with its military incursion near the town of Afrin.

Turkey rebuffed the White House’s rebuke, insisting it is not slowing down, aiming to move its troops further west to take the town of Manbij from Syrian Kurdish fighters.

That is where the Americans have a sizable troop presence in support of the Kurdish YPG militia. Turkey claims the YPG are “terrorists”, whereas Washington claims that the Kurds are a useful proxy force against Islamic State terrorists.

Ankara’s foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu asserted: “Terrorists in Manbij [Kurdish YPG] are constantly firing provocative shots. If the US doesn’t stop them, we will.”

The New York Times cautioned that an assault on Manbij “could bring Turkish forces into direct conflict with American troops stationed there, with unpredictable results.”

Hence, Trump and other Washington officials are issuing grave injunctions to Ankara to step back.

The morass of two NATO members on the cusp of war takes on an almost surreal facet when one considers that American and Turkish warplanes are taking off from the same NATO airbase at Incirlik in southern Turkey.

One wonders too, ironically, how NATO’s Article V would work in this bizarre scenario whereby a NATO member calls on the other 27 nations in the military alliance to defend it if it comes under attack – from another NATO member!

The burlesque situation is worthy of the satirical anti-war novel *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller.

However, the chaotic mess is far from amusing. It could ignite a full-scale war embroiling Syria, Russia and Iran.

Almost lost in the myopic daily news coverage is the salient fact that neither the US nor Turkey should have any military forces operating in Syria. Their presence is a flagrant violation of international law and Syria’s national sovereignty.

Washington’s blundering ineptitude is most culpable. It was the Pentagon’s announcement last week that it was setting up a 30,000-strong Border Force using the Kurdish YPG as foot-soldiers that triggered Turkey’s furious reaction.

US secretary of state Rex Tillerson sought this week to back-pedal on the Border Force initiative, claiming that the Pentagon's plan was exaggerated by inaccurate media reports. That's hardly convincing. Not for the first time is Washington's policy in Syria, and elsewhere in the world, seen to be at cross-purposes, or worse, mendacious.

Fearing that a Kurdish enclave armed by the Americans on the Syrian border could expand into Turkey's territory and consolidate with separatist Turkish Kurds of the PKK, Erdogan was prompted to go on the offensive to, as he put it, crush the "terror army" being created by Washington.

The question that has to be urgently addressed with the force of international law is: on what legal authority are American forces present in Syria? By what mandate is Washington setting up militia in Syria? Precisely, none.

For nearly seven years, the US and its NATO allies have claimed they are intervening in Syria purportedly to defeat Al Qaeda-linked terror groups - groups which they have in fact been covertly sponsoring for the criminal objective of regime change against the Syrian government of President Assad.

The seven-year war has been largely brought to a close by the legal intervention of Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, who routed the Western-backed proxies on request from the Syrian authorities in Damascus.

There has never been any legal justification for the US military presence in Syria. There is even less a pretext now. Washington's forces must withdraw from their wholly illegal presence on Syrian soil. The defeat of terror groups has been achieved mainly by the Syrian army supported by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. Those remaining insurgents can be easily taken care of by the Syrian state and its allies. There is absolutely no need for America to persist in stationing troops in Syria - even if we accept the pseudo claim that Washington is combatting terrorists.

The American interloping in Syria increasingly looks like a brazen illegal occupation whose ulterior agenda is to further destabilize the Syrian state. Washington needs to be censured and sanctioned. Its policies are illegal, criminal and prosecutable under international law. It needs to get its military forces out of Syria - now.

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