

Hagel Firing Escalates War Danger with Russia

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Nov. 30—The firing of Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel Nov. 24 has seriously increased the danger of general war. His ouster, following the “political impeachment” of President Barack Obama in the Nov. 4 midterm elections, signaled that President Obama—as expected—has chosen to dig in his heels and stick with the White House inner circle of advisors and the disastrous policy course leading now to the heightened danger of world war.

Hagel was fired because he had the audacity to side with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other top military professionals, who viewed the behavior of the White House inner circle—President Obama, Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, National Security Advisor Susan Rice, and Presidential Counselor Valerie Jarrett—as disastrous, and the major obstacle to several urgent policies, including the war against the Islamic State jihadists in Iraq and Syria.

In late October, Hagel sent a two-page memo to Rice, warning that the White House failure to adopt a coherent policy on Syria was jeopardizing the entire anti-IS effort. Contrary to some media accounts, following the original leaking of the memo to the *New York Times* in early November, the Pentagon brass were *not* calling for accelerated regime-change against the Assad government in Damascus. The Pentagon insisted that the United States should not be drawn into what the Joint Chiefs described as a “three-front war”—against IS in Iraq, IS in Syria, and the Syrian Army.

In an interview with *Defense One* on Nov. 17, Gen. Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

Staff, made clear that the mission of the U.S. armed forces was not regime change against Assad; it was the defeat of the Islamic State. Dempsey also insisted that the training of a new Free Syrian Army had to be carried out by the Pentagon, and not by the CIA. In recent months, Dempsey has restructured the U.S. Army to establish a unified Special Forces command, to fulfill precisely such training missions of foreign military forces.

The Hagel memo pressed for the White House to develop a diplomatic strategy for solving the Syrian civil war, now going into its fourth year. Without a political resolution, the U.S. forces could not coordinate against IS with the Syrian Army—the only ground force capable of defeating the jihadists with U.S. intelligence and air support.

In addition to the Syria situation and the war against IS, Hagel and the military commanders were even more alarmed at the growing conflict between President Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin. While the war on IS is an important component of the ongoing U.S. war on terrorism, the military commanders are worried far more about the widening conflict with Russia—knowing such a conflict could quickly escalate to a thermonuclear war.

While the Joint Chiefs maintain clear channels of communication with their Russian counterparts, Pentagon sources confirm that the Ukraine crisis has eroded the longstanding trust, built up over the past 20 years of post-Soviet, military-to-military engagement, and that Obama’s animus toward Putin is making matters worse.

Putin Responds

Both President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have made frequent statements in recent weeks about the Obama Administration's policy of regime change in Moscow, through "color revolution"-style asymmetric warfare operations. Last week, Putin spent two days with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and other top military officials, reviewing Russia's long-term strategic force modernization. In recent months, Russia has significantly expanded its strategic bomber reconnaissance missions; and early in November, the Russians held joint naval maneuvers with China in the Mediterranean Sea—a first.

Beyond the Obama Administration's provocations against Russia, NATO is continuing to push further east, and the Poroshenko government in Kiev is now openly promoting the end to its "non-bloc" status and pushing for eventual NATO membership. The fact of Ukraine even pushing for membership and closer collaboration with NATO is such an immediate strategic provocation against Russia, that German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who has been one of the leading European provocateurs against Putin, made a public declaration that Ukraine can never be allowed into NATO. The German government has been badly split over its policy toward Russia, with Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier promoting closer cooperation, and an end to the self-destructive European sanctions against Moscow, while Merkel has been pushing for abandonment of Germany's traditional "Ostpolitik" of economic and political cooperation with Russia and Eastern Europe.

Other NATO countries, including Poland and Lithuania, are deepening their military ties to Kiev which is further adding to the crisis climate on Russia's western front. Russian officials have asserted that the eastward movements of NATO are in violation of an unwritten agreement that was reached with the U.S. and NATO at the time of German reunification—that there would be no eastward expansion of the Alliance into the former Warsaw Pact countries. That agreement has been shattered, and even former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov has recently backed President Putin in warning that the West has moved towards confrontation with Moscow.

In a recent interview with the Russian News Agency



DoD/Glenn Fawcett

Defense Secretary Hagel (left) was fired because he had sided with General Dempsey (right) and the Joint Chiefs against Obama's inner circle.

TASS, and on other occasions, Putin has made clear that Russia has no intention of capitulating to the West's provocations and asymmetric warfare gambles. Putin's stand is bolstered by Russia's history, from the Napoleonic Wars to World War II, when Russians suffered extraordinary losses, but preserved their sovereignty as a nation.

Revolt in Democratic Ranks?

The firing of Defense Secretary Hagel is likely to backfire against Obama and his inner circle, as more and more Democratic Party leaders publicly break with the Administration and its disastrous policies. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), the third-ranking Senate Democrat, made waves last week by delivering a blistering attack against Obama in a speech at the National Press Club. Schumer charged that Obama squandered his 2008 electoral victory and a Democratic majority in both Houses of Congress by fixating on his Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") at the expense of urgent job creation and other economic policies.

With Congress returning from Thanksgiving recess, the pressure on Obama, from Democratic Party leaders, to purge his White House team and bring in competent, experienced advisors, for his final two years in office, is likely to escalate. But if the Hagel firing is any indication, it will take much more pressure—including the threat of impeachment—to force a stubborn, narcissistic Obama to change. That test of courage for the Democratic Party leadership may be the last best hope for preventing a further plunge into strategic showdown with Putin's Russia.