

US, Europe step up pressure as Ukrainian crisis intensifies

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Tensions in Ukraine continued to mount Friday as Russia denounced the threat of US and European Union (EU) sanctions against Russian and pro-Russian Ukrainian officials.

In a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin Thursday, Obama issued what amounted to an ultimatum for a complete capitulation. He insisted that Russia recognise and negotiate with the pro-Western regime installed in Kiev via a fascist-led coup, withdraw all troops from Crimea and open the door to “international monitors.”

Just hours before, the US announced sanctions on unspecified Russian and Ukrainian individuals and entities, using as a pretext the vote by the Crimean regional parliament to hold a referendum to secede from Ukraine and associate with Russia. Russian-backed military forces have taken over the Crimean Peninsula where a majority of the population is Russian-speaking and the Russian navy has a major base at the Black Sea port of Sevastopol.

The Obama administration has also escalated military tensions with the dispatch of six F-16 fighters to Lithuania, 12 F-16s and 300 US troops to Poland next week, and the entry of a US destroyer into the Black Sea. In the midst of the standoff, Turkey, a NATO ally, scrambled eight F-16s to intercept a Russian reconnaissance aircraft over the Black Sea.

The EU has also set in motion its own three-step plan for sanctions. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius warned yesterday that tougher measures were planned if Moscow did not back down. “If there are not very swift results, there will be new measures aimed at those responsible and Russian businesses,” he told France Info radio.

The US and EU sanctions are being accompanied by a deluge of propaganda in the American and

international media denouncing “Russian aggression” and demanding the recognition of “Ukrainian sovereignty.” The level of hypocrisy involved is staggering. Not only have the US and its European allies been aggressively intervening in Ukraine to oust the elected government, but Washington has carried out intrigues, interventions and a string of wars of aggression, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria.

Responding to the latest threats, a Russian foreign ministry statement yesterday condemned the EU’s actions as “an extremely unconstructive approach.” It warned: “Russia does not accept the language of sanctions and threats, but if they are imposed they will not remain unanswered.”

A separate statement on Putin’s phone call with Obama noted that the Russian president had pointed out that the situation in Ukraine was the result of an “anti-constitutional coup.” He defended Russian actions, saying that the regime in Kiev had taken “absolutely illegitimate decisions on the eastern, south eastern and Crimea regions.”

Putin did, however, make a conciliatory gesture, stressing the importance of US-Russian relations that “should not be sacrificed for individual differences, albeit very important ones, over international problems.” Later yesterday, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov expressed the hope that “extremely deep disagreements” between Russia and the West would not lead to a new Cold War.

The extreme right-wing character of the US-backed Ukrainian regime was underscored yesterday by the announcement that the head of the fascist Right Sector organisation, Dmytro Yarosh, would stand in elections scheduled for May. Highlighting the prominent role played by Right Sector and the far-right Svoboda party

in the putsch that ousted Russian-aligned President Viktor Yanukovich, a spokesman, Andriy Tarasenko, declared: “We remain the leaders of this revolution.”

Yarosh has called for the banning of Yanukovich's Party of the Regions and the Communist Party of Ukraine. In the most recent elections, both parties received more votes than Svoboda. Tarasenko boasted that Right Sector, whose armed thugs were prominent in anti-Yanukovich protests in Kiev, was “mobilising” in preparation for war with Russia.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk, interim prime minister in the Kiev regime, yesterday flatly ruled out any compromise with Russia, and denounced any move by Crimea to secede from Ukraine as “unlawful and unconstitutional” and the backers of a referendum as “separatists and traitors.” A court issued an arrest warrant for Sergei Aksyonov, the leader of the secessionist movement.

The Ukrainian administration yesterday failed to pay its latest bill for gas supplied by the Russian energy giant Gazprom, bringing the total outstanding debt to nearly \$2 billion. The refusal to pay could escalate the crisis after Gazprom threatened to halt gas supplies, saying “we can't supply gas for free.” Any cut-off would not only hit Ukraine, but also many European countries supplied by Gazprom via pipelines running through Ukraine.

Russia's response to the aggressive US-led confrontation underlines the weakness of the Putin regime, which represents the interests of corrupt Russian oligarchs. By whipping up Russian nationalism and chauvinism, Putin only heightens the danger of plunging Ukraine into an ethnic civil war that threatens to draw in all the major powers and plunge the world into a disaster.

Russia is seeking to consolidate its position in Crimea. Yesterday, after meeting with Crimean parliamentary delegates in Moscow, Valentina Matvienko, leader of the Russian parliament's upper house, told a large rally of Russian nationalists in Moscow that Crimea would be welcome as part of the Russian Federation if it votes in the referendum to do so.

The Crimean Peninsula is the key strategic base for the Russian navy to the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The Russian navy has scuttled two aging warships at the entrance to Lake Donuzlav,

effectively preventing several Ukrainian naval vessels from leaving their home base. A confrontation at a Ukrainian military base outside Sevastopol, during which Russian-backed forces attempted to takeover the facility, has reportedly ended without incident.

The chief responsibility for this highly flammable situation lies with the Obama administration and its allies, which are determined to inflict a humiliating and debilitating defeat on the Russian government, no matter what the cost and dangers involved.



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