

Facing Options under Mounting Pressure: US at Crossroads on Ukraine

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In-depth Report: [UKRAINE REPORT](#)

The US plan to train Ukrainian national guard troops is put “on hold” pending implementation of Minsk accords in Ukraine. U.S. Army Europe Commanding General Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges said Washington was keen to see a ceasefire deal signed in Minsk between Kiev and pro-Russian resistance movement implemented. “We are prepared to conduct training at the request of the Ukrainian government. But my government is obviously anxious to see the Minsk ceasefire agreement fulfilled and has put on hold this training mission,” Hodges told the Anadolu Agency in an exclusive interview on March 3. (1)

The U.S. was planning to train three Ukrainian battalions this month. A paratrooper battalion assigned to the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team in Vicenza, northeast Italy, has already been readied for the deployment. The training mission was first announced in August last year and had been due to start this March. One battalion of U.S. soldiers is due to train three Ukrainian National Guard battalions. Pentagon press secretary Rear Adm. John Kirby said the training would take place inside Ukraine at an international peacekeeping and security center. “It’s an area where we do multilateral exercises. It’s an area that we’re familiar with,” said Kirby. The instructors were to move to the Yavoriv Training Area near the city of L’viv — which is about 40 miles from the Polish border.

On March 6, a spokesman for U.S. forces in Europe confirmed the delay in a statement and said: “The U.S. government would like to see the Minsk agreement fulfilled.”

The training mission has been the subject of plenty of discussion among US policy makers for months, and the United States has already earmarked \$19 million to help build the Ukrainian National Guard. “We’re very open to the idea that this becomes a first step in further training for the Ukrainian military,” Derek Chollet, former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, told Defense News. (2) One of the biggest challenges for US policy makers is trying to discern “where could this lead and how does this make us think anew about European security issues and force posture issues or defense spending issues?” he added.

The move comes as more Democrats and Republicans in Congress have increased the pressure of the administration for US assistance to Ukrainian forces. House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner and other senior Republican and Democratic House members urged Barack Obama to expedite the authorization of lethal weapons for Ukraine, according to a letter released on March 5. “We urge you to quickly approve additional efforts to support Ukraine’s efforts to defend its sovereign territory, including through the transfer of lethal, defensive weapons systems to the Ukrainian military,” they wrote in a letter, dated

March 4 and signed by eight Republicans and three Democrats. (3) The letter followed up on a meeting between Boehner, other members of Congress and Ukrainian lawmakers in late February.

The list of letter signatories includes Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, who said at his February 2015 confirmation hearing that he would consider sending weapons to Ukraine. On March 2, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said he believed the United States should send guns. They were joined by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey, who told the Senate Armed Services Committee Tuesday that the United States “should absolutely consider lethal aid” to Ukraine that would be funneled through NATO.

The House and U.S. Senate voted unanimously late last year for a bill authorizing Obama to provide weapons to Kiev but he has yet to decide whether to send any.

The White House has reserved the right to consider sending lethal assistance to Kiev but has favored the European strategy of economic pressure over direct infusions of lethal military force. “If, in fact, diplomacy fails, what I’ve asked my team to do is to look at all options — what other means can we put in place to change Mr. Putin’s calculus — and the possibility of lethal defensive weapons is one of those options that’s being examined,” Obama said during a Feb. 9, 2015, press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. (4)

The mission comes at a time of increasing concern among Eastern European countries that the fighting in the eastern Ukraine may spark again. On February 12, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany approved the long awaited peace deal in Minsk. The agreement introduced measures such as a ceasefire - which commenced February 15 - a pullout of heavy weapons, and constitutional reform in Ukraine by the end of the year. Obama and European leaders are weighing their next steps in dealing with the conflict in eastern Ukraine, including possibly providing weapons as well as additional sanctions against Moscow over its role in supporting rebels.

The U.S. and the EU announced a new round of sanctions toward Russia this week and have concentrated on providing non-lethal support for the Ukrainian forces. “The focus of our assistance remains on non-lethal. We continue to review requests for military assistance from the government of Ukraine through an interagency process,” Kirby said.

Warning voices about the involvement into Ukraine are raised inside the United States. Michael Kofman is a well-known defense expert. In his piece Start a Proxy War with Russia published in the February issue of National Interest journal, he writes, “Arming the Ukrainian government would be a bad idea, no matter what the next defense secretary says.” Kofman warns that:

“Sending a mix of weapons to Ukraine is unlikely to improve the situation, given the overwhelming force-on-force mismatch the country faces against Russia, but it could add fuel to a fire that is steadily consuming the country’s chances of emerging as a new nation on a European path.” According to him, “by giving Ukraine the ability to kill more Russian soldiers, sending weapons would raise the costs of war for Moscow to an unacceptable level, thus forcing Russia to abandon its existing policy and thus deterring further aggression. The weakness in the armaments proposal is that it offers no vision for what a new

political settlement to the current conflict might look like.” The expert emphasizes that, “If Obama sends weapons, it’ll get the U.S. into a “proxy war” against Russia, and one that we’ll almost certainly lose.”

The warning voices don’t prevent the US from choosing a dangerous path to stride. Step by step the US continues to move on the way to deteriorate its relationship with Russia.

On March 6, some major Russian banks saw about \$640 million of assets frozen in the U.S. in a move “to punish” Russia for its stance on Ukraine. U.S. President Barack Obama issued an order to extend by one year a series of sanctions against Russia over its role in the Ukraine crisis, the White House said on March 3. (5)

The President said he was extending U.S. sanctions imposed on Russia last March and December in light of the continuing “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”

Ukraine is not the only issue to deteriorate the bilateral relationship. Washington and Moscow have long questioned each other’s commitment to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty that eliminated nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with a range of 500-5,500 km (300-3,400 miles) near the end of the Cold War. The US has said Moscow’s testing of a ground-launched cruise missile violated the treaty. Russia argues that Washington’s use of drones and other intermediate-range arms amounts to a violation. Ashton Carter, the President Barack Obama’s nominee to become the next U.S. Defense Secretary said on March 4 that Russia needed to be reminded that a Cold War-era arms control agreement was a “two-way street” and that Washington could respond to any violations. According to Carter, the United States has a range of actions it could take, including defensive and deterrent steps, if Russia violates the treaty. (6)

Hans Kristensen, a member of the Federation of American Scientists, told Russian online newspaper Vzglyad from a technical point of view, even if the Russian side tests a new missile, it is not a breach of the contract as long as it does not go into production and will not be put into service. (7)

The list of US-initiated statements and actions hostile to Russia can be easily continued...

On February 6, the Project on International Order and Strategy hosted U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice for the launch of President Obama’s National Security Strategy (NSS), which outlines the president’s foreign policy vision and priorities. (1)

In a nutshell, it’s the same good old song and dance about US global leadership and exceptional role to make America dominate the world. Launching the strategy at Brookings Institution, US National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice said, “Across a range of issues with an array of partners, the United States is proudly shouldering the responsibilities of global leadership.” According to her,

“The question is not whether America leads in the world, but how. And the answer is we are pursuing an ambitious yet achievable agenda, worthy of a great power. The president’s budget directly supports his strategy. Our national security leadership is united around this shared vision and agenda”.

(2)

On the discussion of whether or not to provide Ukraine with more assistance, including defensive arms, she said that:

“We are already providing military assistance to Ukraine. We have not taken the decision yet to up the nature of that assistance to include lethal defensive equipment. It’s something that’s under consideration, but obviously it is a significant step and we will want to do so in close consultation and in coordination with our partners.” (3)

The document offers no pithy foreign policy guidelines. Nevertheless, the NSS breaks new ground in its emphasis on strategic patience, its broad view of national security, and its preoccupation with world order. The document states that “strong and sustained American leadership remains essential, as ever. Maintaining a national defense that is the best trained, equipped, and led force in the world.” (4)

Consistent with previous NSS documents, the 2015 version starts with separate chapters explaining how the United States will advance its “security” goals, its “economic” objectives, and its “values” (particularly by promoting democracy and human rights). The final chapter explains how the United States will deter and respond to instability resulting from the misbehavior of influential states and the actions of malevolent non-state actors. It calls on the US to “fortify” the institutional foundations of a rules-based order, while “helping it evolve to meet the wide range of challenges described throughout this strategy.” The global order remains resilient. “Despite undeniable strains,” the strategy notes, “the vast majority of states do not want to replace the system we have.” Rather, what other countries are looking for is firm U.S. leadership, including a willingness to “exact an appropriate cost on transgressors” who violate international rules of the road.

In Europe, the United States reaffirms the importance of NATO as “the hub of a global security network,” and pledges to deepen its cooperation with the EU in countering Russian “aggression” in Ukraine, which has violated longstanding “international rules and norms.”

The strategy repeatedly mentions Russia’s alleged “intervention” in Ukraine as a key foreign policy challenge for the administration. As the White House is weighing whether to ship defensive military weapons to Ukraine, the national security strategy hints at potential new assistance for “partners” such as the government in Kiev. “We will deter Russian aggression, remain alert to its strategic capabilities, and help our allies and partners resist Russian coercion over the long term, if necessary,” the strategy document warns. All in all, the document uses the word Russia 16 times. 12 times the country is mentioned in the context of “aggression”, “violence” and “hostility.” Russia is accused of all evil-doing in the world including outright “aggression and interference into other states’ internal affairs”.

The US realizes that Russia is a much harder nut to crack in comparison with Yugoslavia, Lebanon or Iraq. So the NSS points out that “The United States will “continue to impose significant costs” on Russia, but it will avoid a Cold War, keeping the “door open” to greater collaboration “in areas of common interests, should it choose a different path.”

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated in his latest interview that the leaders of France and Germany genuinely want to find a compromise that would help end the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Speaking to Rossiya 1 TV channel on the conflict and the breakthrough of the Minsk agreement, Putin said that “it seemed to me [the leaders of France and Germany], have a genuine desire to find such compromise solutions that would lead to the final settlement [of the conflict]...” “I had the impression that our partners have more trust in us than distrust, and in any case believe in our sincerity,” Putin noted on February 23. (5)

If the US were to supply Ukraine with ammunition and weapons, it would “explode the whole situation” in eastern Ukraine and Russia would be forced to respond “appropriately,” Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said On February 24. (6) “It would be a major blow to the Minsk agreements and would explode the whole situation,” he was quoted saying. Moscow would not be able to remain indifferent “to such provocative actions,” he added. “We’ll have to respond appropriately.”

“Is that necessary for those who are allegedly calling for the normalization of the situation in Ukraine? I have serious doubts. People may be irresponsible in their actions, but there must be an end to this madness [of] indulging Kiev’s warmongering,” explained Ryabkov.

The Russian Foreign Ministry official statement (7) says:

“We have repeatedly informed US representatives about our serious concern regarding Washington’s intention to provide modern lethal weapons to Kiev, directly or through intermediaries, under the Ukraine Freedom Support Act, which permits and even encourages these deliveries.” It adds, “It would also deliver a huge blow to Russian-US relations, especially if US weapons are used to kill people in Donbass. We are also warning the US Administration against moving weapons and military equipment from Afghanistan to Ukraine following the completion of the ISAF mission.”

Relations between Russia and the US are at their lowest ebb since the Cold War but the fact that the Obama administration put on hold the training of Ukraine’s national guards at the last moment, as well as the decision on lethal arms supplies, shows the President realizes the threat. The steps already taken and planned will no doubt put the US on the way to being dragged into another conflict to sap the country’s resources and put it into dangerous confrontation with Russia, a powerful country to reckon with. The far-away Ukraine, is it where the US vital interests are? Does the United States really believe it has an axe to grind in Ukraine? Does it serve the interests of common Americans? No way! But the pressure is really hard. The hawks in Congress will go to any length aggravating things even further. The US has already gone far enough down by the slippery slope. Can it stop in time to prevent the worst? Can the administration resist the pressure? That is the question.

Notes:

1. <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/news/473917-us-suspends-plans-to-train-ukrainian-military>
2. <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/land/army/2015/01/21/ukraine-us-army-russia/22119315/>
3. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/05/us-ukraine-crisis-congress-idUSKBN0M11V120150305>
4. <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/0a197070089a4a769a6c73f2122b90b8/us-official-obama-st>

- [ill-weighing-sending-arms-ukraine](#)
5. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/03/notice-continuation-national-emergency-respect-ukraine>
 6. <http://news.yahoo.com/u-must-warn-russia-arms-treaty-two-way-001434576.html>
 7. <http://vz.ru/news/2015/2/24/731171.html>
 8. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/brookings-now/posts/2015/02/susan-rice-2015-national-security-strategy>
 9. ibid
 10. ibid
 11. http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf
 12. <http://rt.com/news/234911-us-arming-kiev-explosive/>
 13. <http://rt.com/news/234911-us-arming-kiev-explosive/>
 14. http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/0242E25EDF4EE67743257DE40032C022

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