

US and Europe Push Confrontation with Russia Toward War

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US President Barack Obama and allied leaders in Europe pushed the standoff with Russia over Ukraine further to the brink of war on Friday. As troops of the Western-backed, ultra-nationalist regime in Kiev, supplemented by fascist paramilitary forces, continued to mass against pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine, and Russia launched military exercises on its border with Ukraine, Obama held a conference call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President François Hollande, British Prime Minister David Cameron and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to secure agreement on new sanctions against Russia.

The sanctions threat is joined by a further push of US and NATO military forces up to or near Russia's borders. US and NATO war planes are flying over the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; US troops have arrived in Poland; and more US war ships are entering the Black Sea.

Obama and the other leaders claimed the Kiev regime had taken "positive steps" to uphold the four-party agreement to "deescalate tensions" reached April 17 in Geneva, but Russia had "not reciprocated."

British Prime Minister David Cameron's office said: "The five leaders agreed that in the light of Russia's refusal to support the process, an extension of the current targeted sanctions would need to be implemented, in conjunction with other G-7 leaders and with European partners."

At a press conference following discussions with Polish President Donald Tusk, German Chancellor Merkel said she told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a phone call that Germany was ready to impose further sanctions should tensions increase. Merkel's press spokesman declared, "Nobody should be deceived. We are willing to act."

These statements only underscore the hypocrisy and cynicism that have pervaded the actions of Washington and its imperialist allies since they provoked the confrontation with Russia and the largely pro-Russian population of eastern Ukraine by organizing a coup, led by fascist Right Sector militiamen, to overthrow the Russia-aligned, elected Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, last February 22.

The regime's "positive steps" include throwing thousands of troops, armored vehicles and attack helicopters against protesters in the east occupying buildings to protest the new regime and demand greater autonomy, independence or incorporation into the Russian Federation. On Thursday, five protesters were killed by Ukrainian forces in Slavyansk, a center of resistance to the regime in Kiev. That brings to at least eight the number of

protesters killed, in two separate attacks, since Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan made a secret trip to Kiev to advise the US puppet government.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday denounced Kiev's so-called "anti-terrorist" operation in the east as a "bloody crime." He said pro-Russian militants would lay down their weapons only if the Ukrainian government first disbanded its own ultra-nationalist protesters in Kiev and disarmed the Right Sector.

The Geneva agreement calls for all illegal paramilitary groups to be disarmed and disbanded, but Kiev, with the full support of the US and the European Union, has mobilized fascist thugs of the Right Sector against anti-government protesters in the east. On Thursday, thirty Right Sector operatives armed with baseball bats stormed buildings held by protesters in the city of Mariupol.

Right Sector leader Dmytro Yarosh has announced he is moving to the eastern Ukrainian industrial city of Dnepropetrovsk to direct attacks against anti-regime protesters. He boasts of state support for his forces, telling the German publication *Spiegel Online*, "Our battalions are part of the new territorial defense. We have close contact with the intelligence services and the general staff."

The propaganda pumped out by the Obama administration and its European allies, uncritically promulgated by the media, attributes the current crisis to Russian aggression and expansionism. This reached a new height Friday, when Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk told a cabinet meeting in Kiev that "Russia wants to start World War III."

But the responsibility rests overwhelmingly with the US and Germany. Washington, in particular, seems bent on goading Russia into intervening militarily in Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeking to secure the security interests of the Russian oligarchs whom he represents, has threatened to intervene to defend ethnic Russians in the east against attacks from the Kiev government and its fascist allies.

Alongside the military buildup, the US is waging economic warfare and threatening to collapse the Russian economy. On Friday, the credit rating firm Standard & Poor's downgraded Russian credit from BBB to BBB-, one notch above junk bond status. The credit agency said it would further downgrade Russia if new sanctions were imposed.

The Russian central bank was forced to raise the key interest rate from 7 percent to 7.5 percent in an attempt to stem the fall in the ruble and the flow of capital out of the country. The ruble has already plunged nearly 9 percent against the US dollar so far this year and Russian stock prices have dropped sharply.

US Treasury Secretary Jack Lew said Friday that the next round of sanctions against Moscow would go well beyond the penalties targeting individuals thus far imposed. "We are working with our international partners to make sure that when we do it, we do it in an effective way," he said in a radio interview.

On the ground, anti-regime protesters continue to occupy government buildings in a dozen cities, and they have reestablished checkpoints that were attacked Thursday in Slavyansk. The Kiev regime says it is blockading the city.

A Ukrainian military helicopter exploded Friday on the tarmac of a base near Kramatorsk. Ukrainian officials blamed the blast on pro-Russian militants.

There are signs that the civil violence is spreading beyond southeastern Ukraine. Seven people were injured early Friday at a pro-Ukrainian checkpoint near the Black Sea port of Odessa when an explosive device blew up. Residents have built checkpoints aimed at stopping pro-Russian separatists entering from Moldova's breakaway territory of Transdnistria.

With tensions growing and the chances mounting of a war between Ukraine and Russia, which could rapidly draw in the United States and NATO, Russian officials seem to be looking for a way to defuse the situation and find some accommodation with Washington. The Interfax news agency reported Friday that in a telephone call, Russian Gen. Valery Gerasimov warned US Gen. Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that Ukraine had a "substantial group of forces" near the Russian border, including troops intent on conducting sabotage.

However, there is no indication from the American side of a desire to deescalate the crisis. Comments made by Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk confirmed that the US, the EU and the International Monetary Fund are providing funds to build up Ukrainian security forces.

In an interview with the *Washington Post* published Friday, Yatsenyuk was asked: "Is the US giving you enough military aid to build up the army?" Yatsenyuk replied: "The US supplies us with non-lethal support." When asked where his government will find the money to buy military equipment, the Ukrainian premier answered: "The US issued \$1 billion in loan guarantees. The IMF supports us. We are getting support from the EU."

In the same interview, Yatsenyuk declared that only a small minority in eastern Ukraine supported Russia and implied there was widespread support for his government.

A confidential report by NATO tells a very different story. According to an article published by *Der Spiegel* on Friday, the NATO report warns of a possible "failed-state scenario" in Ukraine and the "possible collapse" of the state. The report, made available to the German Foreign Office, places responsibility for the disintegration of Ukraine on the regime in Kiev, which is "manifestly unwilling or unable to seriously clarify key issues regarding the future state structure of Ukraine."

The *Spiegel* article also refers to a survey by the International Republican Institute from the second half of March, which reports that 48 percent of the population in eastern Ukraine "strongly oppose" the head of state Alexander Turchinov, with just three percent expressing "strong support." A total of 59 percent of eastern Ukrainians in the survey expressed positive feelings for Russia, with 45 percent of respondents rejecting the parliament in Kiev.

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