

US-EU Sanctions Against Russia: A Barely Veiled Threat of War

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In his speech yesterday announcing sanctions against Kremlin officials in retaliation for the Russian-backed referendum in Crimea supporting secession from Ukraine and affiliation with Russia, US President Barack Obama said the United States and its European Union (EU) allies would use all means necessary, including military action, to humiliate and crush Russia.

By initiating trade war with Russia and offering open-ended military support and security guarantees to right-wing regimes on Russia's borders, such as Ukraine, American and European imperialism are setting into motion a confrontation that could easily end in disaster. Such a confrontation poses immense dangers and has no support in the working class in Europe or the United States.

In his remarks, Obama stood reality on its head, trying to present the US-EU intervention in Ukraine as a principled, non-violent defense of international law against Russian aggression. He said, "In recent months, as the citizens of Ukraine have made their voices heard, we have been guided by a fundamental principle: the future of Ukraine must be decided by the people of Ukraine... And so, Russia's decision to send troops into Crimea has rightly drawn global condemnation."

Obama denounced Sunday's referendum in Crimea as "a clear violation of the Ukrainian constitution and international law." He went on to announce: "We are imposing sanctions on specific individuals responsible for undermining the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and government of Ukraine." He pledged to enact further sanctions to "exact a greater toll on the Russian economy" if it did not submit to Washington's demands.

Obama's statement is rubbish. It is Washington and Berlin that engineered a massive political provocation, arming fascist groups to seize power in a putsch and illegally depose Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. The main goal of this operation—carried out in blatant violation of Ukraine's constitution and sovereignty, and in defiance of Ukrainian public opinion—was to transform Ukraine into a far-right outpost of the imperialist powers for military operations and threats against Russia.

Its credit cut off by the major banks, the unelected Kiev regime depends totally on EU, US and IMF bailouts to avoid bankruptcy. Its top security officials are fascists who organized security during Western-backed riots on Kiev's Independence Square—Secretary of National Security Andriy Parubiy, co-founder of the far-right Svoboda party, and Deputy Secretary of National Security Dmytro Yarosh, the leader of the Right Sector militia.

These forces do not speak for the “Ukrainian people,” as Obama claims, but for US imperialism, which has spent over \$5 billion to set up pro-US opposition groups in Ukraine since the dissolution of the USSR, according to US State Department official Victoria Nuland.

These elements make no secret of their violent hostility to Russia or their veneration of the Ukrainian fascists who helped Nazi SS units massacre Ukraine’s Jews during World War II. In a March 12 *Newsweek* interview, Yarosh mentioned his ties to Chechen Islamist terrorists fighting Moscow, and boasted of flying Ukrainian fascism’s red-and-black flag. “We stood under red and black flags throughout the revolution,” he declared. “Red Ukrainian blood spilled on black Ukrainian earth: that flag is the symbol of the national revolution.”

These forces are now being integrated into the new National Guard being set up by the Kiev regime, supported and soon to be armed by NATO. As Obama issued his statement, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andriy Deshchytsia was meeting with top NATO officials in Brussels. He pledged to reinforce “technical military cooperation” with NATO. According to the Belgian daily *Le Soir*, “The authorities in Kiev will soon present NATO, perhaps as early as Monday, with a ‘list’ of equipment that they would like to have at their disposal.”

Denouncing “Russian political tourists in eastern Ukraine,” Deshchytsia said that the current situation in Ukraine “strongly resembles the scenario in Georgia in 2008, in which provocations could lead to a military escalation.”

This extraordinary statement is a threat of military action by the Kiev regime. The 2008 war in Georgia began when Georgian forces attacked Russian peacekeepers in the disputed Georgian region of South Ossetia. If the current standoff resembles the 2008 war, as Deshchystia claims, that is because Kiev is planning attacks on Russian or pro-Russian forces, either in Crimea or eastern Ukraine.

Obama’s denunciations of Russia for having invaded Crimea are hypocritical and politically absurd. First, it is a matter of historical record that when US imperialism has objected to regimes that came to power on its borders, as in the 1911 Mexican revolution and the 1959 Cuban revolution, it has not hesitated to mount military attacks against them. It has even threatened nuclear war, as in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

In their own foreign policy, the United States and its allies do not recognize the sovereignty or territorial integrity of other states as anything they must respect. Even before formulating the Bush doctrine allowing “pre-emptive war,” the US government and media invented a special category of state, the so-called “failed state” (Somalia, Afghanistan), that could be invaded or bombed at will.

Second, Obama’s implicit claim that Crimea is not part of Russia ignores history. An ethnically majority-Russian region, Crimea was a part of Russia and then the USSR from its conquest by Russian Czarina Catherine the Great’s forces in the 18th Century until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Given by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to Ukraine in 1954, in a decision with limited practical significance until the dissolution of the USSR, it has continued to host a major Russian naval base at Sevastopol.

The danger of an invasion of Crimea comes not from Moscow, but from the far-right forces in Kiev. These fascist paramilitaries, who are being given extraordinary latitude by the NATO powers, are being placed in a position where they could start a major war at virtually any time and then enjoy NATO support.

In his address, Obama said: “Vice President Biden departs for Europe, where he will meet with the leaders of our NATO allies: Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. And I’ll be traveling to Europe next week. Our message will be clear. As NATO allies, we have a solemn commitment to our collective defense, and we will uphold this commitment.”

This use of Poland and the ex-Soviet Baltic republics as military outposts directed against Russia underscores the catastrophic consequences of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the USSR. That set the entire former USSR on course for territorial disintegration and reversion to semi-colonial status, in which it will serve as a source of cheap labor for finance capital and be thrown open to imperialist intrigue. In Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—as in Russia itself—the ruling elites that came to power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were gangster capitalist oligarchies.

The imperialist powers are now calculating that constant military threats and escalating economic sanctions will break up the circle of oligarchs supporting Putin and undermine the loyalty of Russia’s upper-middle class to the Kremlin.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote: “The current sanctions are not miracle weapons, let alone fast-acting ones. Asset freezes and travel bans will not make Putin popular in Moscow’s political and moneyed elite, but his standing with the people will presumably rise initially. Economic sanctions, which are the next step in the escalation threatened by the EU, are dangerous for Putin. They would be costly for many in the EU, but they are costlier still for Putin.”

This deeply reckless policy, threatening a collapse of trade and global war, is carried out with contempt for public opinion not only in Russia and Ukraine, but in the United States and Europe. Obama has not asked the US or European working class whether it supports fighting a war with Russia in order to honor the “solemn commitment” he has made to Lithuanian kleptocrats or the fascists in Kiev. What is being prepared is an explosion of opposition in the international working class to the criminal foreign policy of imperialism.

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