

US threatens Russia as Ukraine crisis escalates

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US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry issued bellicose statements directed against Russia on Tuesday, one week after a right-wing putsch backed by the US and the European powers brought down the Ukrainian government.

Responding to Russian actions in Crimea, Kerry—on a visit to Kiev, Ukraine’s capital—said Moscow was lying. “Russia has been working hard to create a pretext for Russia to invade further,” he said. If Russia does not de-escalate, “then our partners will have absolutely no choice but to join us” in measures to isolate Russia politically and economically.

Kerry added that Russia’s moves were a “brazen act of aggression.”

From Washington, Obama declared that Russia was “seeking to exert force on a neighbouring country.” He added, “There is a strong belief that Russia’s action is violating international law.”

Earlier, the Pentagon announced that it was suspending “all military-to-military engagements between the United States and Russia.”

In Russian President Vladimir Putin’s first public statement on the Ukraine crisis, he said there is no need yet to send troops into Ukraine. He ordered Russian troops holding military exercises near the Ukrainian border back to their bases, commenting: “We aren’t going to fight the Ukrainian people. The use of the military is an extreme case.”

However, Putin said that if Russian-speaking people in eastern Ukraine asked for Russia’s help, or if there were signs of anarchy, “we reserve the right to use all means.” He denied that Russian armed forces were directly engaged in Crimea, saying the uniformed troops without national insignia were “local self-defence forces.”

Kerry’s official remit in Kiev was to meet with

interim President Olexander Turchynov, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk and others figures put in power by an alliance of oligarchs and fascists backed by the US. He brought an offer of \$1 billion to avert a financial implosion of Ukraine and to stabilise European markets, which fell heavily on Monday before recovering yesterday.

This is itself a poisoned chalice, with US Treasury Secretary Jack Lew stating that US money would “supplement IMF support in order to... cushion the impact of needed reforms on vulnerable Ukrainians.” In short, the US and European powers want to begin imposing savage austerity measures (including cuts in subsidies to basic necessities) and privatisations without provoking an immediate social explosion that would cut across efforts to portray Ukraine as “united” against Russia.

Behind the scenes, talks will have been about precisely how to isolate and destabilise Russia.

Kerry and Obama have spent the past days consolidating a strategic alliance of imperialist and regional powers against Moscow—insisting above all that the European powers, led by Germany, take a hard line on Ukraine and on economic sanctions. In addition, Washington has repeatedly met with the leaders of Georgia and Moldova, encouraging both to make a high-profile stand against Russia to encourage others to do the same.

On February 26, Kerry spoke to the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission, announcing additional US assistance “to help support Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic vision,” while denouncing Russia’s continued military presence in the breakaway Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Kerry said the US continues “to object to Russia’s occupation, militarisation and borderisation of

Georgian territory.”

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, after meeting with Obama at the White House, called on NATO to speed up its approval of Georgia’s membership. Georgia has sought NATO membership for years, but this has in the past been opposed by Germany and France for fear of angering Russia. Garibashvili stressed that Georgia attached “critical importance to our strategic partnership with the United States.”

The day before Kerry travelled to Ukraine, he met with Moldovan Prime Minister Iurie Leanca, promising to give \$7.5 million to the country of 3.5 million people to help facilitate closer links with the European Union. Moldova borders Ukraine and is seeking membership in the EU. “I regret to say, Russia, in some of the challenges that we are seeing right now in Ukraine, has put pressure on Moldova,” Kerry declared.

Obama “re-affirmed the United States’ strong support for Moldovan sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders,” the White House said in a statement, prompting Leanca to cite how Moldova had to suffer Russian backing for the separatist Moldovan region of Transnistria.

“The United States also supports the professionalization of Moldova’s military,” the statement continued. “US assistance enhances Moldova’s capabilities to become a force provider for peacekeeping and stability operations and to promote regional security.”

Stung by criticism of Obama’s supposed indecisiveness from Republican sources, Peter Beinart, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, gave a concise summary of a US policy of encircling and encroaching on Russia in the *Atlantic*.

Noting how the push against Russia began with German reunification, he continued, “In 1995, NATO went to war against Serbia, and then sent peacekeepers to Bosnia to enforce the peace agreement that followed. This new, Eastern-European mission paved the way for further expansion. By 1997, it was clear Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic would enter the alliance.

“In 2004, NATO admitted another seven former Soviet bloc countries, three of which—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—had been part of the USSR. In 2009, Croatia and Albania joined the club. Six former Soviet

republics—Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—now link their militaries to NATO’s via the ‘Partnership for Peace’ program. All five former Soviet republics in Central Asia—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan—provide NATO countries with some basing, transit, refueling, or overflight rights for use in the Afghan war.”

“From Putin’s perspective,” he concludes, “the United States hardly looks in retreat. To the contrary, the post-Cold War period has brought one long march by America and its allies closer and closer to the border of Russia itself.”

On Tuesday, Poland secured a meeting of NATO’s North Atlantic Council on the basis that it felt threatened by Moscow’s moves in the region. NATO pledged that it would review “the measures to be taken to safeguard the security interests of the Allies.”

Though it is difficult to predict precisely how events will unfold in the Ukraine over the coming days, the trajectory of developments is clear. The US is making a political, economic and military push against Russia that has brought Ukraine to the brink of civil war and threatens a far broader conflict.



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