

US, European Union impose sanctions against Russia

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Western powers ratcheted up sanctions against Russia Thursday, while the US mounted a major military buildup in Eastern Europe.

The immediate pretext for sanctions from both the US and Europe was the vote in the regional parliament of the Crimean Peninsula to prepare secession from Ukraine and association with Russia, subject to a popular referendum later this month. Russian-backed forces have taken over the strategic peninsula, which hosts a major Russian naval base at Sevastopol and where most of the population is Russian-speaking.

Installed by a Western-backed, fascist-led putsch on February 22, the Kiev regime faces broad hostility in more pro-Russian parts of the country. Its first act was to eliminate Russian as an official language in Ukraine.

Thursday morning, as European Union (EU) officials prepared to meet to discuss actions against Russia, US President Barack Obama unilaterally issued an executive order authorizing sanctions and visa bans against Russian officials. Later yesterday, EU officials announced a similar, three-step plan for sanctions on Russia, echoing Obama's arguments.

Obama's order described Russian actions in Crimea as "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States." Obama's message to Congress announcing the executive order said it would target "persons—including persons who have asserted governmental authority in the Crimean region without the authorization of the government of Ukraine—who undermine democratic processes and institutions in Ukraine."

In a press statement later in the day, Obama added, "The proposed referendum on the future of Crimea would violate the Ukrainian constitution and violate international law. Any discussion about the future of Ukraine must include the legitimate government of

Ukraine." He added, "In 2014, we're well past the days when borders can be drawn over the heads of democratic leaders."

Like every statement coming from top US officials, and parroted in the media, these statements reek of hypocrisy and are full of contradictions. In fact, it is Washington and its allies who are trampling on the Ukrainian constitution, backing a right-wing regime they helped install via an extra-legal putsch. If anyone should be detained and their fortunes seized because they are "destabilizing Ukraine" and violating its constitution, it is top officials in Washington and the European capitals.

And in criticizing "borders...drawn over the heads of democratic leaders," Obama spoke as the chief executive of a state that has been engaged in endless war and has elevated the violation of national sovereignty to a principal of foreign policy. Western powers themselves unilaterally redrew the borders of a European country, Yugoslavia—separating Kosovo from Serbia and declaring it independent in a move aimed at undermining Serbian and Russian influence in the Balkans.

More broadly, Washington and the EU reserve the right to occupy other countries and carry out drone murder in violation of the sovereignty of countries across the Middle East and Africa.

Obama's reference to "legitimate" and "democratic" government is used in relation to a government that is based on right-wing and anti-Semitic forces like the Right Sector militia and the Svoboda party, which have praised Ukrainian SS units that carried out the Holocaust during World War II.

The reliance of the US and European operation on fascistic forces was revealed in the EU negotiations over sanctions. During the discussions, Eastern

European regimes such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic states pressed for harsher terms against Russia. A proposal emerged to call for “quick steps towards the dissolution of any paramilitary structures”— a demand aimed at pro-Russian self-defense groups in Crimea.

However, this demand was dropped, Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* noted, “because it would also apply to Kiev groups, particularly the far-right nationalist groups that are the backbone of the new government here.”

Washington is also deepening its military buildup against Russia in Eastern Europe. US officials announced Thursday that they would send 12 F-16 fighters to Poland and the guided missile destroyer USS *Truxtun* to the Black Sea, which borders Ukraine and Russia. According to US Navy web sites, the *Truxtun* is part of the battle group of the aircraft carrier USS *George H. W. Bush*, which recently arrived in the region.

Moscow responded with massive air defense drills in Western Russia. Military spokesman Colonel Oleg Kochkov called it the “largest-ever exercise” by air defense units in the region.

Western powers are also dispatching military observers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to Ukraine, trying to send them into Crimea.

Washington and the EU are embarking on an unprecedented confrontation with Russia, aimed at forcing a humiliating Russian climb-down in Ukraine, discrediting President Vladimir Putin’s regime, and undermining Russian influence in the region.

Media portrayals of this policy as motivated by the Western powers’ alleged love of democracy are lies. It is bound up with the concerns of imperialism. These include Russia’s role as an obstacle to US war plans, such as its plans to attack Syria last September, and its decision to grant asylum to NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden after he exposed unconstitutional mass spying on the people by US and European spy agencies.

A media silence prevails on the significance of the Sevastopol base, which Kiev is now trying to seize from the local Crimean authorities and place under Western control. It played a key role in Russian naval deployments to the Mediterranean during last year’s Syrian war scare.

As they stir up military tensions in the heart of Europe and threaten to cut off Russia’s \$2 trillion economy from world markets, the imperialist powers are apparently calculating that the Russian ruling elite will ultimately back down. Later on Thursday, Obama had a telephone call with Putin in which he outlined a deal that would involve the pullback of Russian troops and the installation of international monitors in Crimea.

Having seen one unpopular post-Soviet regime collapse in Ukraine, they anticipate that personal concerns of Russian oligarchs desperate to save their bank accounts in London and Zurich will again trump everything and everyone else.

The reaction of Russia in Crimea was anticipated by US officials and has been used to immensely intensify tensions against the nuclear power. There is at least a section of the ruling class that is clearly prepared for war.

By moving towards an all-out clash with Russia, moreover, the US and European powers are risking vast unintended consequences and economic, military and political shocks.

Economic commentators underlined that a policy of sanctions against Russia threatens to shut down large portions of the European economy, which relies on Russia as a key source of oil and gas. An anonymous US official remarked, “Russia is now a two-trillion-dollar economy. If you’re going to sanction them across the board, you have to be very careful not to kill yourself while doing it.”



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