

Australian government joins US sanctions against Russia

Mike Head
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Marching lockstep with Washington, the Australian government has imposed asset seizures and visa bans on selected Russian figures and ratcheted up threats of reprisal against Moscow after Crimea's population voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine and join Russia.

In her statement to parliament on Wednesday announcing the sanctions, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop specifically warned Russia that “the situation in Ukraine remains serious with the potential for military confrontation.”

Bishop's remark points to preparations by Washington and its allies for military interventions directed against Russia. It echoed comments by Arseny Yatsenyuk, installed as interim Ukrainian prime minister by Western-backed fascistic elements, that the conflict with Russia had moved from a political to a “military phase.”

Bishop said she had spoken to the interim Ukrainian foreign minister and British Foreign Secretary William Hague, “who acknowledged Australia's support in his speech to the House of Commons last night.” She avoided any mention of consultations with Washington, but stressed that Australia's measures were in line with those of the US, as well as Canada and the European Union.

The foreign minister said the Australian government would target 12 as-yet-unnamed Russian and Ukrainian individuals who were “instrumental in the Russian threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.” She accused Russia of trying to “steal” Ukrainian territory.

“International law does not allow one state to steal the territory of another on the basis of a referendum that cannot be considered free or fair,” Bishop told parliament. She said the Crimean referendum was not

authorised by Ukraine—referring to the regime just installed on the back of fascist violence—“and was carried out while Russian forces were effectively in control of the territory.”

Canberra's hypocrisy knows no bounds. Successive Australian governments have been party to US-backed invasions to establish puppet regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and called for a similar use of military force to achieve regime-change in Syria. Canberra has also conducted its own neo-colonial operations, sending troops to assert Australian imperialism's interests in East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

In the Ukraine crisis, the Australian political establishment has made clear its commitment to yet another US geo-strategic offensive, directed at establishing Washington's hegemony over the pivotal and energy-rich expanses of the Eurasian landmass, once part of the Soviet Union. By instigating the coup in Kiev, Washington is seeking to bring Ukraine, like other former Soviet republics, directly into its orbit, with the ultimate aim of subordinating or dismembering the Russian Federation as well.

The response of President Vladimir Putin, who represents the interests of a layer of ultra-rich oligarchs, lacks any progressive content. Utterly incapable of making any appeal to the working class of Russia or Ukraine, Putin has resorted to inciting Russian nationalism, which plays directly into US hands.

Like Yatsenyuk and his Western backers, Bishop seized upon the reported death of a Ukrainian soldier in Crimea to escalate the war propaganda against Russia. “I condemn in the strongest possible terms the use of violence against Ukraine and its citizens... The fatal attack on a Ukrainian serviceman in Crimea is to be deplored and underlines the volatility of the crisis that Russia is fuelling.”

This was while the US and its NATO alliance were boosting military forces along Russia's borders in Poland and the Baltic states. Attempting to present the US and its allies as peace seekers, Bishop said Russia should abide by its international obligations and "return to constructive and diplomatic dialogue."

Within hours of making her statement, Bishop went further, declaring that stronger sanctions could follow, including a ban on Putin travelling to Australia in November to attend this year's G20 summit in Brisbane. Putin had been expected to participate in the gathering because Russia hosted last year's event in St Petersburg.

Australia's official Labor opposition, ever anxious to display its pro-US loyalties, had urged the Abbott government a day earlier to consider imposing sanctions. As soon as Bishop made her parliamentary statement, Labor's foreign affairs spokeswoman, Tanya Plibersek, asked to make a "statement on indulgence" supporting the government's decisions.

"I wish to associate myself with the remarks of the minister for foreign affairs," Plibersek said. "Australia has a special responsibility as a member of the Security Council to join the international community in taking strong action to make clear our condemnation of the moves by Russia to annex Crimea and of the fatal attack on the Ukrainian serviceman in Crimea."

The Greens have also lined up unequivocally behind the propaganda being pumped out by Washington. Greens leader Senator Christine Milne issued a statement this morning, backing the sanctions, but urging more aggressive action. "The Greens support strong sanctions against Russia," Milne said. "We have also called for President Putin to be barred from the upcoming G20 meeting in Brisbane."

As in the US, sections of the ruling elite are demanding stronger action against Russia, which could precipitate open military conflict. An editorial in Murdoch's *Australian* yesterday lambasted as "tame" and "lame" the sanctions imposed by the Western powers. It denounced Obama for pulling back from bombing Syria last year, declaring that this "retreat," on top of the partial pullout of troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, had emboldened Putin. "Plainly, the West is going to have to act if Crimea's annexation is not to be the harbinger of more aggression by Mr Putin," it declared.

The government-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation has also been prominent, making its own contribution to the sabre-rattling atmosphere. This week's "Foreign Correspondent" television program, entitled "Moscow Rules," painted a picture of provocative Russian expansionism and whitewashed the fascistic forces installed in Ukraine by the US and its allies.

In an accompanying contribution on the ABC's "The Drum" web site, two correspondents, Greg Wilesmith and Eric Campbell wrote: "Had you turned on a Russian television channel (and in much of Crimea that's all you could watch because Ukrainian stations were shut down) you would have seen some mighty ugly propaganda..."

"The chief propagandist is a Russian television presenter named Dmitri Kiselov, a man of firm opinions and a striking resemblance to Mussolini, only shorter. He spouts angry denunciations of 'the criminals and fascists' who have taken over the Ukrainian capital Kiev in an unconstitutional coup."

By equating the Russian regime with fascism, while covering up the fact that neo-Nazis led the Ukrainian coup and have taken key posts in the US- and EU-backed regime in Kiev, the ABC is not just complicit in the return of fascists to office in Europe. It is helping to whip up the conditions for a war against Russia.

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