

US threatens to “re-examine force posture” over Ukraine

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The United States secretary of state, John Kerry, yesterday accused Russia of being behind separatist protests in east Ukraine and said Moscow must “publicly disavow the activities of separatists, saboteurs and provocateurs” if it is not to “incur further costs.”

Testifying before members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry said, “Quite simply, what we see from Russia is an illegal and illegitimate effort to destabilise a sovereign state and create a contrived crisis with paid operatives across an international boundary.”

The aim, he said, was to create a pretext for further Russian incursions into Ukrainian territory.

If Kerry’s hypocritical diatribe was not in furtherance of such a dangerous objective, it would be laughable—given that Ukraine is now led by a regime installed by Washington at the admitted cost of at least US\$5 billion. But Kerry is seeking to create a pretext for US aggression against Russia.

Kerry has phoned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to moot talks involving senior representatives from Russia, the US, Ukraine and the European Union (EU) supposedly aimed at defusing tensions. But in reality, Washington is continuing its military moves both in and around Ukraine.

Derek Chollet, assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, told the House Armed Services Committee yesterday that the stay of the destroyer USS Truxtun in the Black Sea is being extended, and it will be joined by another ship in a week’s time.

“While we do not seek military confrontation with Russia,” he said the “unlawful” takeover of Crimea last month and continued “military threats” against Ukraine and other neighbouring states may cause the US “to reexamine its force posture in Europe,” the *Washington Post* reported.

Yesterday, Moscow accused the United States of

supplying mercenaries to suppress by force the protesters demanding a referendum on becoming part of Russia in the eastern Ukrainian cities of Kharkiv, Donetsk and Lugansk.

A statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Ukraine intended to suppress the unrest with “tightened internal forces and National Guard units with participation of fighters from the illegal armed group Right Sector”, in cooperation with “150 American experts from the private military organisation ‘Greystone’” disguised as regular soldiers.

“We call for an immediate end to any military preparations, which threaten to trigger civil war,” the statement declared.

On Monday, Ukraine’s acting president, Oleksander Turchynov, and Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk both accused Russia of staging the protests as a precursor to an armed seizure of Ukrainian territory. Turchynov blamed “separatist groups coordinated by Russian special services” for actions he said proved that “enemies of Ukraine are trying to play out the Crimean scenario,” while Yatsenyuk said that Russia was trying to split Ukraine and turn part of it into “a territory of slavery under a Russian dictatorship.”

NATO’s secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, speaking from Paris, warned Russia that if it were to “intervene further in Ukraine it would be a historic mistake.”

The pro-Western regime in Ukraine has mounted a brutal response to the pro-Russian protests. Described as an “anti-terrorist” operation, police on Tuesday arrested 70 demonstrators in Kharkiv on Tuesday, who had seized the regional state administration building. Interior Minister Arsen Avakov wrote on Facebook, “An anti-terrorist operation has been launched. The city centre is blocked along with metro stations. Do not worry. Once we finish, we will open them again.”

The Interior Ministry said that those detained faced charges of “illegal activity related to separatism, the organisation of mass disorder, damage to human health” and breaking other laws. Turchynov threatened that those who seized the buildings—precisely the tactic employed by the “protesters” in Kiev in the coup that brought the current regime to power—would be treated as “terrorists and criminals” and prosecuted with the full force of the law.

The previous evening, police used fire hoses, stun grenades and tear gas to push protesters back from the building, who responded by throwing Molotov cocktails, which set the first floor of the building alight.

Victoria Siumar, Ukraine’s deputy national security chief, said earlier Monday that special forces had retaken control of the SBU state security services building in Donetsk. Those arrested in the clampdown had been taken to police detention centres in the cities of Poltava and Zaporijya and face charges relating to separatism, violence and taking part in mass protests, she said.

Donetsk is the hometown of former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, who was ousted by the US-backed coup in February. The protesters who occupied Donetsk’s regional government building called for a referendum on secession from Ukraine to be held by May 11—a demand also raised in Lugansk.

Talks were reported between the Donetsk protesters and local oligarch Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine’s richest man, who controls nearly half of Ukraine’s steel, mining and thermoelectricity assets. He too threatened protesters with a clampdown, but called for devolution to grant more powers to regions in Ukraine.

The government has said that “radicals” were keeping 60 people hostage inside the security service branch headquarters in Lugansk.

Meanwhile, in parliament, the governing parties were passing legislation that will criminalise anyone supporting separation from Ukraine. Legislation outlawing groups and individuals who call for separatism was passed by 230 votes in the 450-member body. All members of the Communist Party, which was a backer of Yanukovich’s Party of the Regions, abstained from voting.

In the run-up to the vote, Vitali Klitschko, leader of the Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform party, said that Ukraine was now facing a “real war” as a result of the events in Kharkiv and Donetsk.

Communist Party (CP) leader Petro Symonenko was physically attacked by members of the far-right Svoboda when he spoke in response to Klitschko. Referring to the

pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine, he suggested that it was the nationalists who had set a precedent for seizing buildings during their protest against Yanukovich. “You are today doing everything to intimidate people. You arrest people, start fighting people who have a different point of view,” he said.

Proving his point, two deputies from Svoboda grabbed hold of him and tried to drag him from the rostrum. Fighting then broke out between CP parliamentarians and those from several other parties.

Yesterday, Russian foreign Minister Lavrov said, “We are ready to consider a multilateral format, in which the Europeans, the US, Russia and the Ukrainian sides would be represented.” But he added that a draft of the new Ukrainian constitution needed to be presented before the meeting allowing for representation of Ukraine’s regions. He told reporters, “I do not think that the oligarchs who have been named governors of the regions will sufficiently represent the south and east of Ukraine.”

Writing in the *Guardian* Monday, Lavrov urged dialogue over Ukraine and denounced the US and the EU for rejecting cooperation in favour of confrontation. Russia had “supported Kiev’s wish for urgent consultations between Ukraine, Russia and the EU to discuss harmonising the integration process,” he stated, but this had been rejected due to “the unproductive and dangerous line the EU and US have been taking for a long time.”

He added that “massive support was provided to political movements promoting Western influence” so that “power in Kiev was seized...with the direct participation of ministers and other officials from the US and EU countries.”

Lavrov insisted that Russia is in favour of “a system of equal and indivisible security in the Euro-Atlantic area,” but Western states have instead “carried out successive waves of NATO enlargement, moved the alliance’s military infrastructure eastward and begun to implement antimissile defence plans.”



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