US vice president arrives in Ukraine amid violent provocations

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Vice President Joseph Biden began his two-day trip to Ukraine Monday as the country continued to teeter on the edge of civil war. Tensions are mounting over killings in the eastern part of the country, where demonstrators calling either for union with Russia or a federalized system of government have seized control in at least ten towns and cities.

Biden's visit is intended to signal support for the US-backed regime that was installed last February in a fascist-led coup orchestrated by Washington. He is to meet today with the leaders of the unelected government in Kiev, including its president, Oleksandr Turchynov, and its prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

Beyond that, the visit is aimed at ratcheting up Washington's threats against Russia, including not only economic sanctions, but also the steady escalation of US and NATO military deployments right up to Russia's borders.

The steady drumbeat of threats from the West evoked an angry response Monday from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who accused Washington and its puppet regime in Kiev of sabotaging an agreement reached last week in Geneva between the US, Russia, the European Union and the Kiev regime. A joint communique issued at the conclusion of the four-sided talks calls for an end to violence in Ukraine and a de-escalation of tensions through the disarming of illegal armed groups, the ending of occupations of public places, the opening up of dialogue between Ukraine's fractured regions, and the preparation of changes to the country's constitution.

Moscow's response Monday was driven both by violence over the weekend by fascistic elements that spearheaded last February's coup and by Washington's continuing attempts to intimidate Russia.

The first killings took place at a checkpoint manned by opponents of the Kiev regime on the outskirts of the eastern Ukrainian city of Slovyansk. According to reports, four cars approached the checkpoint and their occupants opened fire, leaving three civilians dead. Material found in one of the vehicles established that the gunmen were members of Right Sector, the neo-fascist organization that played a leading role in the violence that toppled the Ukrainian government of President Viktor Yanukovych and brought the US puppet regime to power.

On Monday, there was fresh evidence of fascist violence, with the bodies of two members of a pro-Russian self-defense group pulled from the Donetsk River in Slovyansk. "Today I went to the morgue to identify the two corpses," Vyachislav Ponomaryov, the town's de facto mayor, told the Russian daily *Moskovsky Komsomolets*. He said the two victims had been stabbed to death before being thrown into the water. The town, he said, was increasingly under attack by Right Sector provocateurs and under threat of a military siege by the Ukrainian army.

An attempt last week to send a paratrooper unit against the town ended in a fiasco when soldiers fraternized with anti-Kiev demonstrators and then turned over their armored vehicles and weapons to them. The guns of their tanks are now positioned at barricades built to defend Slovyansk against a Ukrainian army incursion.

Right Sector members have taken prominent positions within the US-backed regime, including the organization's leader Dmitro Yarosh, who has been named deputy secretary of national security. He oversees the country's security forces alongside the new secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council, Andriy Parubiy, who was the founder of the Social National Party of Ukraine, a party directly modeled on Hitler's Nazis. This organization went on to become the anti-Semitic and fascistic Svoboda party, with which US officials have collaborated closely. Given such personnel, expectations that the Kiev regime will disarm the forces that brought it to power are illusory to say the least.

Speaking to reporters in Moscow Monday, Foreign Minister Lavrov condemned the killings in eastern Ukraine and charged that Washington bore responsibility for the violence.

"The fact that extremists started to shoot at unarmed civilians is unacceptable," he said.

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"The authorities are doing nothing, not even lifting a finger, to address the causes behind this deep internal crisis in Ukraine," Lavrov added. The communique signed by Moscow, Washington, the EU and the Ukrainian regime, he charged "is not only not being fulfilled, but steps are being taken, primarily by those who seized power in Kiev, that are grossly breaching the agreement reached in Geneva."

He further warned: "Those who are deliberately pursuing a civil war, in a possible attempt to start a big, serious bloody conflict, are pursuing a criminal policy. And we will not only condemn this policy, but will also stop it."

Lavrov made it clear that the Russian government's ire had also been provoked by the threats from Washington, which have only escalated in the wake of the deal reached in Geneva. These threats continued even as Biden flew to Kiev, with an unnamed senior US official telling reporters on the vice president's airplane that the de-escalation agreement reached in Geneva would not be "an open-ended process," and that Washington would quickly move toward more punishing sanctions if Moscow did not bow to its demands.

"Before giving us ultimatums, demanding that we fulfill demands within two or three days with the threat of sanctions, we would urgently call on our American partners to fully accept responsibility for those whom they brought to power," Lavrov said at his press conference. He said all attempts to isolate Russia would fail, because Russia is "a big, independent power that knows what it wants."

This bravado notwithstanding, the truth is that the government of President Vladimir Putin, which represents the interests of the corrupt and grasping oligarchy that seized control of former state property in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution, is desperately seeking some means of accommodation with US and German imperialism that would still allow it to preserve Russia's most elemental security interests.

Putin's problem is that Washington has no interest in such an accommodation. Rather, it is determined to escalate economic and military pressure with the ultimate aim of eliminating Russia as an impediment to US global hegemony and reducing its territories to a group of dismembered semi-colonies.

To that end, both the Obama administration and the corporate media willfully distort Russia's position, casting it as the principal aggressor. This was evident Monday in the *New York Times'* coverage of Lavrov's press conference, which cast the Russian foreign minister's protests as a calculated exercise aimed at "further preparing the groundwork for a military intervention."

There will no doubt be similar bluster from Biden, who, as a senator, voted for both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and has been a vocal cheerleader for US militarism throughout his career. His trip comes little more than a week after the secret visit to the country by CIA Director John Brennan, which preceded the Kiev regime's crackdown on opposition in eastern Ukraine.

There is no indication that the US vice president will be forthcoming with significant substantive support for the Kiev regime, which needs at least $30 billion to stave off default. The country's economy is expected to shrink by 3 percent this year; its currency, the hryvnia, has fallen 35 percent against the dollar, and the country's fiscal deficit has risen to over 9 percent of gross domestic product.

The US has pledged only $1 billion in aid, and Biden is reportedly expected to discuss sending US advisors to Ukraine to direct how this paltry sum will be spent, while offering nothing more. He is also apparently offering technical advice on how Kiev can wean itself from dependence on Russian energy supplies, including through increased hydraulic fracturing—also known as fracking.

Deutsche Welle, the German international public radio broadcaster, took a somewhat jaundiced view of Biden's trip. "On his visit to Ukraine, US Vice President Joe Biden will offer clear words, but no additional funds to Kiev," it commented.

Deutsche Welle added: "According to insiders, the US has complained that it foots 75 percent of NATO's defense budget; in recognition of that, the US expects that its European partners—in particular, Germany—will help finance Ukraine as its rebuilds its economy."

Frictions over who will bear the cost of the intervention in Ukraine notwithstanding, Germany, like the US, is determined to exploit the crisis that they both provoked in Ukraine to extend its imperialist interests to Russia's borders and beyond. In doing so, both US and German imperialism are pushing Ukraine to the brink of a civil war while confronting the world with the greatest threat of a catastrophic conflict between nuclear-armed powers in over a half a century.

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