

German, French leaders fly to Russia amidst warnings of “total war” over Ukraine

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As fighting between pro-Russian separatists and the NATO-backed Kiev regime escalates in east Ukraine, and as NATO foreign ministers announced a massive troop deployment throughout Eastern Europe, France and Germany have suddenly announced plans to travel to Russia to propose a new “peace plan.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande traveled to Kiev yesterday to meet with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who also met US Secretary of State John Kerry for talks originally scheduled to discuss US plans to directly arm the Kiev regime. Merkel and Hollande are scheduled to travel today for talks in Moscow, which has supported the separatists in the civil war in east Ukraine unleashed by the NATO-backed coup in Kiev a year ago.

The diplomatic maneuvers take place as the efforts of the US and the European powers to force Russia to back down in Ukraine threaten to unleash a war of incalculable consequences. Russian officials have also stated that if Washington arms Kiev for a large-scale offensive in east Ukraine, the Russian army will intervene to prevent Kiev from massacring the separatists, which could lead to a major land war in Europe and possibly a world war involving nuclear-armed powers.

French President François Hollande announced his trip with Merkel to Kiev at a press conference at the Elysée presidential palace yesterday. “We have gone in the space of a few months from having differences, to conflict, to war ... We are in a state of war, and a war that could be total,” he warned.

Echoing statements by Merkel earlier this week, Hollande said he opposed plans for NATO to arm the Kiev regime, apparently referring to reports Monday that the Obama administration is considering providing Kiev with billions of dollars worth of “defensive” weapons. “I am sure I will be told there is a difference between defensive and offensive weapons, but that is a matter of

semantics,” Hollande said. He added that France did not support Ukraine joining NATO.

Claiming that France was a “friend” of Russia, Hollande said: “Time is short, and it will not be said that France and Germany together did not try everything, attempt everything to preserve peace.”

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is holding talks in Poland and Latvia, said Berlin and Paris hope to avoid a “total loss of control” over the escalation of the fighting.

Kremlin advisor Yuri Ushakov replied that Russia was “ready for a constructive conversation” to establish dialog and economic relations between Kiev and the eastern separatists.

Nonetheless, few details emerged on what Berlin and Paris are proposing. Yesterday evening, the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* posted an article on the plan, titled “New Peace Plan in Ukraine: More Territory for Separatists.” Describing the plan as based on last year’s Minsk accords, it declared, “The essence of the proposal is to arrange an immediate ceasefire and grant separatists in east Ukraine broad autonomy in an area larger than previously agreed.”

German government spokesmen denied the report, however. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* changed the article and posted a note explaining: “Territorial questions are not to be negotiated between Merkel, Hollande, and Poroshenko. However, political observers think it unlikely that demarcation lines set last September in the Minsk Agreement can be maintained, in light of the separatists’ recent territorial gains.”

The British *Guardian* newspaper posted an editorial arguing that the Franco-German initiative was instead an opportunity to threaten to totally cut Russia off from the world financial system.

It wrote, “EU sanctions thus far have had a virtually symbolic impact. Cutting Russian banks and companies

from the Belgium-based Swift international transaction system would, by contrast, impose a serious jolt. It could be done quickly, but then also rolled back rapidly. It has worked before, against Iran, which entered nuclear negotiations soon after being banned from Swift in 2012. ... When Mrs. Merkel and Mr. Hollande head for Moscow, they should put Swift on the table.”

Kerry, who was slated to discuss US arms deliveries to Kiev with Poroshenko, said President Obama is reviewing all options, including “providing defensive [weapon] systems to Ukraine.” He proposed, however, that Russia fall in line with US policy and adopt “a diplomatic solution that is staring everybody in the face.”

He demanded that Russia abandon the east Ukraine separatists: “Russia needs to demonstrate its commitment to ending the bloodshed once and for all. And we would ask that it does so by honoring the agreement that it signed, the Minsk agreement ... There must be an immediate commitment now to a real ceasefire which is not just a piece of paper and words, but which is followed up by specific actions.”

Kerry hailed “unity” between the United States, Germany, and France as ensuring that conflict could be overcome.

Amid the flurry of vague and contradictory proposals, however, it is unclear to what extent Washington and the European powers are coordinating their initiatives, or whether they have well-defined policies. French officials told *Le Nouvel Observateur* that Merkel’s and Hollande’s trip had not previously been discussed with Washington; however, it is not yet clear whether the Franco-German initiative is in fact in conflict with whatever policy the US government will ultimately pursue.

There are also conflicts within the United States itself. Republican Senator John McCain gathered a bipartisan group of 12 US senators yesterday on Capitol Hill and announced that if the White House does not arm Kiev, they would draft legislation requiring the US government to do so.

Kerry indicated that the Obama administration would make this decision sometime next week, following a visit from Merkel to Washington. The EU is also set to consider new sanctions against Russia next week.

What is clear is that the civil war in Ukraine has placed the world on the verge of catastrophe. According to the French president and his warnings about “total war,” Europe is closer to world war than it has been at any time since the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

Responsibility for the immense dangers facing the

world population lies primarily with the United States, Germany, and all the NATO powers. The current crisis was provoked by the decision of Washington and Berlin to organize the coup last year, installing a right-wing government lacking any popular support, through a putsch led by pro-Nazi, anti-Russian forces such as the Right Sector militia.

Nothing that Washington or its European allies say can be taken at face value. While Hollande pledged himself as a “friend” of Russia, Kerry declared in Kiev, “We don’t view this as a zero-sum game. We have never viewed it that way. This is not meant to be nor should it be a divide between East and West.”

In fact, as Hollande and Kerry spoke these words, preparations for a far broader military confrontation between the NATO powers and Russia continued apace. A summit of NATO defense ministers in Brussels was setting up the infrastructure for NATO rapid reaction forces to number in the tens of thousands of troops, to be deployed in Eastern European countries all along Russia’s western border. (See: “NATO doubles combat forces in Eastern Europe”)

A major factor behind the calculations of Paris and Berlin, as they suddenly propose a truce, is the rapidly deteriorating situation of the Kiev regime. While they pursue military escalation elsewhere, Paris and Berlin have tactical objections that arming the Kiev regime is not a viable policy. As French diplomatic sources told the daily *Le Monde*, “The Ukrainians will not militarily retake the Donbass [region of east Ukraine], this strategy is doomed to failure.”

Having lost control of its position at the Donetsk airport, pro-Kiev militias in east Ukraine are surrounded and under heavy fire at the strategic transport hub of Debaltseve.

At the same time, Ukraine’s economy is collapsing due to the fighting in the key industrial regions in the east, and the cutting off of key Ukrainian export markets in Russia. Yesterday, as Kiev sought to negotiate the next tranche of Ukraine’s \$17 billion IMF loan, it raised interest rates by fully 5 percent, to 19.5 percent, in an attempt to halt the hryvnia’s 46 percent slide against the US dollar.



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