

Meeting in Moscow fails to produce agreement as US plots escalation in Ukraine

Niles Williamson
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German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande met for approximately five hours with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Friday in an attempt to hash out what has been described as a last-ditch effort to resolve the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

The talks concluded Friday evening without any agreement, and the two European leaders left Moscow late at night without making a press statement. There were pledges of further discussions this weekend on a ceasefire between Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatists in the country's eastern Donbass region.

Dmitry Peskov, a Kremlin spokesman, told reporters after the meeting that the leaders had agreed to continue working towards an agreement on implementing the lapsed ceasefire plan signed in Minsk last September. "At the moment joint work is under way on preparing the text of a possible joint document on implementation of the Minsk agreements—a document which would include proposals made by the president of Ukraine and proposals formulated today and added by Russian President Putin," Peskov said.

Merkel, Hollande, Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko are expected to discuss the possible framework by phone on Sunday.

Prior to Friday's meeting Merkel told reporters that the European leaders were, "convinced there will be no military solution to the conflict." She also sought to lower expectations for the meeting's possible outcome, saying, "We know, however, that it remains completely open whether we will be able to reach a cease-fire through these talks."

The meeting between the European leaders and Putin took place amidst threats by the US to directly arm the regime in Kiev that was installed in a right-wing coup

one year ago. Ukraine has suffered a series of setbacks in the east and is facing a deepening economic crisis.

US Vice President Joe Biden and European Council President Donald Tusk, the former Prime Minister of Poland, made a joint appearance in Brussels on Friday ahead of the talks in Moscow, calling for unity between the US and EU in maintaining an aggressive stance towards Russia.

"Russia cannot be allowed to redraw the map of Europe," Biden told reporters. In fact, it is the United States and the European powers that have utilized the coup in Ukraine as the basis for a vast militarization of all of Eastern Europe, including the doubling of NATO combat forces announced on Thursday. NATO will station six command and control units in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

Biden later cast aspersions on the trip by Merkel and Hollande to Moscow, "President Putin continues to call for new peace plans as his troops roll through the Ukrainian countryside, and he absolutely ignores every agreement his country has signed in the past."

Tusk told reporters, "The European Union and the United States need to continue standing shoulder to shoulder, coordinating our efforts and uphold the pressure on Russia for as long as necessary." He also warned against an agreement with Russia that would result in the partition of Ukraine, "We cannot compromise on Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Ukrainian President Poroshenko announced on Ukrainian television Friday that his government would only accept an agreement in line with the cease-fire plan negotiated in Minsk in September of last year.

In addition to armored Humvees, drones, and radar equipment, the Obama administration is also

considering delivering small arms and anti-armor missiles to aid in the bloody suppression of pro-Russian separatists. Direct military aid to Ukraine could be seen as an act of war by the US against Russia, provoking a Russian response and a possible direct confrontation between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Underlining the danger of the plan, NATO Commander General Phillip Breedlove issued a warning on Thursday that such a move must take into account a possible military reaction from Russia. It was reported earlier this week that Breedlove and other key figures had recently shifted their position in favor of providing Ukraine with weapons and other military equipment, opening the way for a final decision by US President Barack Obama this coming week.

There are indications of significant differences between Washington and European powers over the arming of Ukraine. German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen said in an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that providing defensive weapons to the Kiev regime would “be a fire accelerant.” She warned that weapons deliveries might “give the Kremlin the excuse to openly intervene in this conflict.”

Rather than military aid, Germany and other European powers have indicated a preference for increasing economic sanctions against Russia as a means of forcing it to back down. The EU is set to consider such action next week.

These maneuvers take place amidst ongoing fighting in eastern Ukraine. The Kiev regime has suffered a series of embarrassing setbacks after launching a renewed offensive in recent weeks, with the separatists making territorial gains and pushing Ukrainian forces out of the strategic Donetsk airport.

The separatists have made significant advances on the city of Debaltseve, an important rail hub between Luhansk and Donetsk, where several thousand Ukrainian government troops are entrenched. The separatists have captured the village of Vuhlehirsk, which is approximately six miles to the west of the city.

Consistent artillery shelling from both sides has destroyed much of the town’s infrastructure, knocking out heat, running water and power. A brief ceasefire was agreed to by both sides on Friday allowing for the evacuation of the approximately 3,000 out of 25,000 residents who had remained amidst the fighting.



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