# Amid mounting tensions, US imposes sanctions on Russia

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With an executive order, US president Joe Biden imposed sweeping new sanctions on Russia on Thursday. The US is expelling 10 Russian diplomats, and sanctioning almost three dozen companies. The US announced sanctions not only on energy companies, but also on any US financing of Russian state bonds and the issuing of credits to Russian state financial institutions.

The US notably excluded the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2 from the new sanctions. The pipeline is bitterly opposed by both the Democratic and Republican parties, NATO members such as Poland, the Baltic states, and also Ukraine, which is heavily reliant on revenues from the transit of Russian gas through its territory to Europe. However, German government representatives have repeatedly argued against US sanctions of the project, insisting that Germany was going to continue to pursue it. Earlier this week, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Germany to discuss the stationing of an additional 500 US troops in the country.

Biden's executive order said that unproven allegations of Russian interference in US elections and a hack of the SolarWinds company constituted "harmful foreign activities of the Government of the Russian Federation." It also accused the Russian government of undermining "security in countries and regions important to United States national security." The order called these actions "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States."

On that basis, Biden also declared "a national emergency to deal with that threat." The last time that the US invoked a "national emergency" as the basis for sanctioning Russia was on March 6, 2014, at the height of the Ukraine crisis. The crisis was triggered by the US-and German-backed coup in Kiev on February 18, 2014, which primarily relied on sections of the oligarchy and the Ukrainian far-right. As the WSWS explained at the time, the coup had created "the most dangerous international crisis since the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962."

NATO immediately issued a statement endorsing the US sanctions, and calling "Russia's actions" a "threat to Euro-Atlantic security." The alliance, which has aggressively expanded to Russia's borders over the past three decades, and has backed multiple coups in countries such as Ukraine and Georgia, hypocritically called on Russia "to cease immediately its destabilising behavior."

In response to the sanctions, Russia summoned US ambassador John Sullivan for what the Kremlin called a "difficult conversation." Following Biden's public denunciation of Russian President Vladimir Putin as a "killer" in March, Russia had also called back its ambassador to the US. It is assumed that in retaliation for the sanctions Russia will soon expel US diplomatic personnel.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that in the light of the sanctions a summit between Biden and Putin, which Biden had proposed on Tuesday, would not happen anytime soon, but did not rule it out entirely either.

The declaration of new US sanctions comes amidst a dangerous heightening of military and geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea region. The backdrop for the recent flaring up of military clashes between Russian-backed separatists in East Ukraine, where a civil war has raged since the 2014 coup, and the Ukrainian army was the Ukrainian government's adoption in March of a strategy to "retake Crimea."

The peninsula, which is strategically located in the

Black Sea and home to the naval base of Russia's Black Sea fleet, was annexed by Russia after the coup. The declaration of the "Crimean Platform" and public discussion of an offensive to "retake" the Donbas in East Ukraine made clear that the Ukrainian government was preparing for all-out war against Russia, counting on support from NATO.

Since then, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky has sought to drum up support for his "Crimean platform." In particular, he has urged the US and NATO to accelerate Ukraine's admission to the military alliance. On Thursday, the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany, Andrij Melnyk, threatened that if Ukraine is not soon admitted to NATO, Ukraine would be forced to "rearm on our own." Speaking to *Deutschlandfunk*, he said that the Ukrainian government was "considering" the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

On Friday, Zelensky is set to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron. Russian media have reported that, among other things, Macron and Zelensky could discuss a major deal to deliver French Dassault Rafale fighter jets to the Ukrainian air force because Ukraine is dissatisfied with what it considers the slow pace of delivery of American fighter jets.

Shortly before the US announced its new sanctions, Turkish diplomatic sources revealed to Reuters that the US had called off the deployment of two warships to the Black Sea through Turkish straits, which was set to start April 14. That extraordinarily provocative move had prompted angry responses from Kremlin officials. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabko warned the US to "stay away from Crimea and our Black Sea coast…for their own good." The calling-off of the deployment no doubt reflected the recognition in Washington that going ahead with it could lead to an uncontrollable escalation of the conflict.

However, the situation in the Black Sea region, which is of major geostrategic significance to the US in its efforts to undermine both Russia and China, continues to be on a knife's edge.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov warned on Thursday that tensions had not been "eased" despite the cancelling of the deployment of the US warships. Just hours after the US announced the sanctions, media reports suggested that Russia would close the Kerch Strait, a sea passage between the Azov Sea and the Black Sea, starting April 26 and continuing until October 2021, to conduct military exercises. The Ukrainian Foreign Minister immediately issued a protest, but the closure of the Strait has so far not been confirmed by the Russian government.

Shortly thereafter, Ukraine's General Staff accused Russia on its Facebook page of having violated "the rules of international maritime law" in the Azov Sea. Without providing any details or evidence, it alleged that "boats of the FSB" [Russia's internal secret service] had blocked the passage of Ukrainian navy ships "on combat duty" the day before. In 2018, the Ukrainian government, then headed by billionaire Petro Poroshenko, launched a major provocation against Russia in the Azov Sea over a stand-off at the Kerch Strait.

Ukrainian media have reported that the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) has also launched "large-scale, multi-phased anti-terrorist exercises" in the Kherson and Kharkov oblasts (regions) and, according to the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Ukrainian troops and military equipment are now focused in the Kherson oblast. The Kherson oblast is located in southern Ukraine, directly adjacent to the Azov Sea and the Black Sea, and north of the Crimean peninsula. The Kharkov oblast is in the East of the country, bordering territories that have been controlled by Russian-backed separatists. Both regions are heavily populated by Russian speakers with close family and cultural ties to Russia, among whom the far-right coup in Kiev in 2014 was very unpopular.

Russia's own military exercises on its southern border are set to last another two weeks. Russia has reportedly also reinforced its Black Sea Fleet.