

Crimea Referendum: US and EU Threaten Russia, NATO Supports Ukraine's Coalition Government

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In the lead-up to the referendum on the status of Crimea scheduled for March 16, Washington and its European allies are stepping up diplomatic and military pressure on Russia.

On Monday, US ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt declared that the United States would not recognize the results of the "so-called referendum" and threatened further steps against Russia. He said Washington was "not prepared to recognize any result of the referendum," as it regards Crimea "as an integral part of Ukraine." He accused Russia of trying to change the status of Crimea "under the barrel of a gun."

Pyatt said President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry had held talks with European leaders over the weekend, and that the US and the European Union were in complete agreement that harsher sanctions could follow the referendum. "There is no daylight between us," he said.

Falling into line behind Washington, European leaders released their own bellicose statements. Steffen Seibert, the press secretary of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said that, "the chancellor asserted the German position forcefully" in a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday, calling "the so-called March 16 referendum on Crimea illegal."

Seibert claimed, "[T]he Russian side has not shown readiness" to establish a so called "contact group" to negotiate a Russian stand-down in Crimea. Seibert warned Moscow "to change this position in the near future," adding that, "The time for a conversation and rapprochement is short."

Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron, who met for dinner Sunday night, threatened Russia with "further consequences" if Moscow seized on the poll to justify an attempt by Crimea to separate itself from Ukraine. Both reiterated that the referendum was "illegal."

The aggressive stance against Russia is supported by both conservative and social democratic politicians in Europe. British Labour Party leader Ed Miliband called on Cameron to exert "maximum pressure" on Russia, while German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) threatened fresh sanctions over the weekend.

Addressing the House of Commons on Monday, Cameron warned that Russia could face targeted sanctions "within days."

US and European officials pressed ahead despite phone calls late Sunday from Chinese President Xi Jinping to Obama and to Merkel, calling on the US and EU to scale back tensions. "The situation in Ukraine is extremely complex, and what is most urgent is for all sides to remain calm and exercise restraint to avoid an escalation in tensions," Xi reportedly told Obama. "Political and diplomatic routes must be used to resolve the crisis," he added. He went on to suggest that China could serve as a diplomatic channel to facilitate diplomacy.

Xi reportedly stressed with Merkel that the situation was "highly sensitive" and that China favored finding a political solution to the crisis.

The Chinese intervention evidently had no effect. On Monday, the EU confirmed that "preparatory work" on fresh sanctions had "started." Officials from the EU and the US are reportedly to meet in London today to discuss another round of sanctions that could be formally adopted at an EU foreign ministers summit on March 17—that is, the day after the Crimean referendum.

The sanctions, including travel bans on Russian officials and the freezing of their assets, would mark the second stage in the EU's three-step plan. In a first step, the EU last week agreed to suspend visa talks and negotiations on a new investment agreement with Russia. The third stage would involve an arms embargo and harsh trade sanctions.

Even without a formal decision on trade sanctions, the EU is taking initial steps to mount a blockade of Russian energy supplies to Europe. The European Commission decided Monday to prevent Russian state-owned energy giant Gazprom from delivering more gas to central Europe by circumventing Ukraine. According to the Financial Times, EU officials "acknowledged privately the move was geopolitical as much as technical."

These decisions are only the latest in a series of war-mongering provocations by the imperialist powers since Russia sought to secure Crimea, which has a Russian majority and is the home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, in the wake of the Western-backed putsch in Ukraine on February 22.

In order to achieve their geopolitical goals and destroy Russian influence not only in the western part of Ukraine but also in the east and throughout the region, Washington, Berlin and Brussels are prepared to drive Ukraine into civil war and risk a military confrontation with Russia.

NATO announced Monday that it is deploying AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) reconnaissance aircraft to Poland and Romania as "part of the alliance's efforts to monitor the crisis in Ukraine."

Germany is playing a growing role in the military build-up. Most of the AWACS planes have their home base in the German town of Geilenkirchen. The deployment comes as US forces boost the number of F-15 fighter jets flying NATO air patrols over the Baltic States.

Today, Steinmeier is set to travel to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for talks on the Crimean crisis.

On Sunday, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen gave an interview to the German Bild newspaper in which he announced plans to improve the efficiency of the

Ukrainian army. On Monday, the Ukrainian army began military drills. According to an announcement of the Ukrainian Defense Ministry, the government is testing the combat readiness of its troops.

The Ukrainian military drills came only one day after Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk gave a nationalist, war-mongering speech in front of pro-government crowds celebrating the 200th anniversary of the birth of poet Taras Shevchenko. "Our fathers and grandfathers have spilled their blood for this land," Yatsenyuk declared. "And we won't budge a single centimeter from Ukrainian land. Let Russia and its president know this."

The reactionary character of the new Ukrainian government and the so-called "Maidan movement" was highlighted by the fact that Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky received a friendly welcome on Sunday when he addressed a few thousand protesters.

Khodorkovsky personifies a layer of former Stalinists who, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, used their positions in the bureaucracy to amass incredible fortunes through fraud and theft of the formerly nationalised property. He spent ten years in prison for his crimes before he was released at the end of last year in a deal struck between the Putin regime and Berlin.

Khodorkovsky's presence on the Maidan underscores that the protest movement had nothing to do with democracy or human rights. The new regime in Kiev relies on Khodorkovsky-type Ukrainian oligarchs, working closely with far-right and fascist groups, to impose massive attacks on the working class and help the imperialist powers to isolate and carve up Russia.

Addressing the Maidan crowd, Khodorkovsky denounced the Putin regime while seeking to whitewash the fascist elements who led the coup against Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich. "Russian propaganda lies, as always," he said. "There are no fascists or Nazis here, no more than on the streets on Moscow or St. Petersburg. I want you to know that there is a very different Russia. There are people there who, during those days, took to the streets to participate in anti-war rallies in Moscow. They did so despite arrests and many years that they will have to spend in prison."

Khodorkovsky's remarks were widely reported in the Western media, as they conform to the official propaganda, which seeks to present the mélange of fascist thugs and multi-billionaire oligarchs as a democratic revolution.

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