

Dangerous Crossroads: US Builds up Military Forces, Obama Threatens to “End Diplomacy” over Ukraine

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Global Research, March 10, 2014

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

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Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)

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Washington spent the weekend ramping up pressure on its allies to intensify the provocations and threats against Russia over Ukraine.

On Friday, President Barack Obama spoke to German Chancellor Angela Merkel. On Saturday he held talks with UK Prime Minister David Cameron, French President François Hollande and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. He also held a conference call with the presidents of the ex-Soviet Republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia—Andris Berzins, Dalia Grybauskaitė and Toomas Ilves, respectively.

A White House communication spoke of universal agreement “on the need for Russia to pull its military forces back to their base” and for “the deployment of international observers and human rights monitors to the Crimean peninsula.”

An even more threatening pose was struck by Secretary of State John Kerry. According to a State Department spokesman, Kerry warned Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that “continued military escalation and provocation in Crimea or elsewhere in Ukraine, along with steps to annex Crimea to Russia, would close any available space for diplomacy...”

Last Thursday, Crimea’s regional government announced a referendum for March 16 on whether to become part of Russia. Obama’s spokesman described the referendum as “a violation of Ukraine’s constitution” and a “violation of international law.”

British Foreign Secretary William Hague told the BBC that Europe would face the “great danger of a real shooting conflict” if Russian forces moved beyond the Crimean peninsula to enter eastern Ukraine. Diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions would not remove Russian forces from the Crimea, he told the Andrew Marr Show. Asked whether Britain and the European Union would advise the Ukrainians not to take up arms against the Russians, he replied in the negative saying, “It is not really possible to go through different scenarios with the Ukrainians and say: in these circumstances you shoot and in these you don’t.”

In Kiev, Ukraine’s US-imposed prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, pledged that his government would not give a “single centimetre” of Ukrainian land to Russia. Yatsenyuk flies to Washington on Wednesday for discussions at the White House on the military and financial situation, White House officials told CNN.

Official threats of retaliatory action usually involve economic and political sanctions, but the US has above all been busy isolating Russia through a sustained military build-up in

conjunction with states on Russia's periphery.

Last Friday, the USS Truxtun crossed into the Black Sea from Turkey's Bosphorus in what was said to be a "previously planned" training exercise together with the Bulgarian and Romanian navies. The USS Truxtun is a destroyer with a crew of 300, equipped with anti-ship missiles. It was stationed in Greece as part of a strike group headed by the aircraft carrier USS George W. Bush, the world's largest warship, and replaced the USS Taylor, which ran aground in the Turkish port of Samsun last month—an indication of the permanent US presence in the region that is now being beefed up.

The US will send 12 F-16 fighter jets, a Boeing KC-135 refuelling Stratotanker and 300 service personnel to Poland next week for an expanded training exercise. Four F-15s currently fly air patrols over the Baltic States as part of a ten-year-old NATO mission, and the US already has a training squadron of F-16 fighters and Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport planes in Poland. NATO scrambled jets over 40 times last year in response to Russian jets approaching Baltic borders.

The Eastern European and Baltic States are playing a leading role in whipping up a pro-war atmosphere against Russia, including convening a meeting of NATO last week to discuss their "fears" of Russian expansionism.

Reuters noted that Poland is discussing modernising its military, including plans to spend \$45 billion in the next decade to build a new missile defence system and upgrade its weapons systems, including transport helicopters and tanks.

Lithuanian Defence Minister Juozas Olekas told Reuters: "After the events in Ukraine, the Russian aggression, the need to increase spending will be better understood by Lithuanian people, and there will be more support for it."

Sweden's deputy prime minister, Jan Bjorklund, last week called for a "doctrinal shift" in Swedish defence policy in the context of discussions on whether it should fully join NATO.

Pre-arranged military manoeuvres are only one of a series of "happy coincidences" indicating that the US planned the crisis that supposedly began with "spontaneous" pro-European Union protests after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich backed away from an EU Association Agreement last November.

For example, the United States assumed control of NATO's air policing duties over Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in January, taking over from Belgium. According to Fox News, a statement issued at the time said the mission "not only protects the integrity of NATO airspace, it illustrates the alliance's core function of collective defence."

The US has spent the past two decades seeking to eliminate Ukraine as a strategic buffer between Russia and the West, sponsoring the "Orange Revolution" in 2004 in an ultimately abortive attempt to install a wholly pro-Western government. Washington and its allies have tried to do the same in other former Soviet states by integrating them into the structures of NATO and the European Union, encouraging Georgia, in particular, and former Soviet republics in Central Asia to take the path of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Washington has been funnelling money into the region for years and has now opened the taps all the way. According to an admission in December by Assistant Secretary of State for

European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, the US had invested “over \$5 billion” to “ensure a secure and prosperous and democratic Ukraine.”

Others states involved in US machinations are no less financially beholden to Washington. Last Monday, the European Commission (EC) was involved in procedures demanding that Bulgaria abandon an agreement with the US on the provision of economic, technical and other types of assistance on the grounds that the deal was in breach of EU directives because of violations of competition principles. A report noted that between 1990 and 2007, Bulgaria received \$600 million from the US under the agreement. Of this, fully 99.14 percent went to defence.

There is little wonder that Lavrov responded to Kerry’s phone call by declaring that the crisis in Ukraine was “created artificially for purely geopolitical reasons.”

In Ukraine, the newly-installed regime is relying on various oligarchs to rule the country in alliance with far-right and fascist groups. In recent days, several oligarchs have been appointed to top government jobs, including leadership of regional administrations in the east that have been the scene of pro- and anti-government demonstrations and conflicts.

Ihor Kolomoyskyi was named head of Dnepropetrovsk Regional Administration, while Sergey Taruta, the country’s 16th richest man, was appointed as the new regional governor of Donetsk. Kolomoisky, a metals, banking and media tycoon worth \$2.4 billion, told the Associated Press that his task would be to quell any unrest in his region, which was, he claimed, being fomented by agents from Russia.

Rinat Akhmetov, Ukraine’s richest man, worth an estimated \$15.4 billion and until recently a major backer of Yanukvoych’s Party of Regions, has also been lined up to demand national unity.

The former US ambassador to Ukraine, John Edward Herbst, was unapologetic, telling the AP: “The oligarchs taking on this responsibility is a demonstration of their commitment to an independent, sovereign and territorially integrated Ukraine.”

Yesterday saw rallies by pro-government forces to honour the birth 200 years ago of poet Taras Shevchenko, known as the father of the Ukrainian language. The rallies led to clashes with pro-Russian groups in Sevastopol in Crimea.

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