

Dangerous Crossroads: US, NATO Deliver Fresh Ultimatums to Russia over Ukraine

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Speaking in Paris Thursday, US Secretary of State John Kerry issued a fresh ultimatum to the government of Russia, warning that it had to demonstrate “within hours” that it is acting to end the revolt in eastern Ukraine against the Western-installed government in Kiev or face the consequences.

“We are in full agreement that it is critical for Russia to show in the next hours, literally, that they are moving to help disarm the separatists,” Kerry said. He added that “the European Community will be meeting on their component of the sanctions. We all agree that they need to be ready.”

Kerry’s warning came in the context of a NATO foreign minister’s meeting that wrapped up in Brussels Thursday and a European Union summit scheduled for today in the Belgian city and World War I battle site of Ypres.

The US Secretary of State delivered his remarks alongside French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, who was clearly acting on a somewhat different agenda, not to mention timetable. Fabius spoke of a “de-escalation” in Ukraine and of commitments that Russian President Vladimir Putin had made the day before in a four-way telephone conference that included German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Francois Hollande and Ukraine’s President Petro Poroshenko. France, he said, hoped that Russia’s promises would be fulfilled “in the coming days.”

While Washington is manifestly seeking to ratchet up the confrontation with Russia, the Western European powers are showing somewhat less enthusiasm for such an escalation. Meanwhile, it is far from clear that there has been any “de-escalation” of the situation on the ground in Ukraine, which is turning into a major humanitarian crisis, largely ignored by Western governments and media.

A so-called ceasefire announced by Poroshenko last week has in practice functioned as an ultimatum to the forces that have declared themselves independent from the Kiev regime in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions to lay down their arms or be “destroyed.”

The separatists in eastern Ukraine have reported continued attacks, including air strikes and artillery barrages against Slavyansk and other civilian population centers throughout the so-called ceasefire. Meanwhile, the Kiev regime has also reported troop losses, including nine soldiers killed in the downing of a military helicopter. Kerry charged Wednesday—with absolutely no evidence—that the weapon used to bring down the copter had been supplied by Russia, an accusation that Moscow denied.

Increasingly desperate conditions in the east and fear that the formal end of the ceasefire on Friday will spell a violent escalation of the US-backed government's military offensive has sent a wave of refugees toward the Russian border.

"There are still lots of people in Slavyansk—moms, kids and elderly people," an aid volunteer in Slavyansk told Russia's RIA Novosti news agency. "They've run out of money as they haven't received any for more than two months. The town has been left without water or electricity. There is no gas in some districts. Famine may break out soon. People should be evacuated."

Residents of Slavyansk reported that families attempting to leave the city had been turned back at checkpoints manned by the National Guard, the ranks of which have filled in large measure with members of the Right Sector and other neo-fascist and extreme nationalist elements who spearheaded the Western-backed coup that ousted Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich last February.

Nonetheless, the Associated Press reported, "Thousands of Ukrainians in cars stuffed with belongings lined up Thursday at the eastern border to cross into Russia, with some saying they felt betrayed by their government and vowing never to return." Russia's migration service reports that 90,000 Ukrainians had crossed the border seeking refuge since the fighting began.

Talks are to be held today between rebel leaders and representatives of the Ukrainian regime, Russia and the EU on a possible extension of the so-called ceasefire.

On Wednesday, the NATO ministers' conference approved a package of additional military support for the Ukrainian regime that was said to include aid areas such as logistics, command and control and cyber defense. Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen voiced unqualified support for Kiev, declaring it had "a clear vision for rebuilding its defense and security sector and a clear strategy for resolving the crisis."

For its part, Russia denounced the NATO move as a further provocation. NATO had set a "provocative course to build up Ukraine's military potential which has been used, as we know, against civilians in the southeast of the country," Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Thursday. "Under the pretext of the events in Ukraine, [they] are pushing for the escalation of military-political tensions near the Russian border," she added.

The Russian government has taken a number of steps to defuse the confrontation, including the rescinding Wednesday of legislation passed in March granting Putin the power to intervene in eastern Ukraine in defense of its ethnic Russian population. The Putin government

has also pulled troops back from the border, recognized Poroshenko as Ukraine's president and conducted talks with him on a so-called peace plan. Moscow's climb-down is directed in large measure at protecting the interests of the country's billionaire oligarchs, whose wealth is tied closely to the West. Nonetheless, Washington has shown no inclination to turn from a policy of confrontation with—and military pressure against—Moscow.

It seems unlikely that the European Union summit will decide on the kind of "sectoral sanctions" favored by Washington, which would target whole areas of the Russian economy

such as energy, defense and finance. The EU does nearly 12 times as much business with Russia as the US and is dependent upon Russia for 30 percent of its gas. Any sweeping measures against the Russian economy could well throw the EU's own economies into deeper crisis.

Citing American officials, the *New York Times* reported that even Washington has rejected "Iran-style sanctions" for fear of "disrupting global markets." The *Financial Times* of London reported Thursday that, based on draft documents it had seen, the EU is preparing only to warn Moscow that it could face unspecified "targeted measures" if events in Ukraine merited them.

There have also been rumblings within the US corporate and financial establishment over the proposed sanctions. The US Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturing took out joint newspaper ads in the US press warning against "a course of sanctions that history shows hurts American interests" and "would harm American manufacturers and cost American jobs."

Particularly concerned are big energy conglomerates that are looking to Russia as a major source of profits. Companies like Exxon and Halliburton stand to lose out on lucrative contracts to European rivals such as Total and Schlumberger if the Obama administration were to impose unilateral sanctions.

Nonetheless, there are indications that the US ruling political establishment is prepared to press ahead with the confrontation with Russia, which Washington views as a significant obstacle to its drive to assert hegemony in Eurasia.

"There are times where our foreign policy interests trump individual mercantile interests, and now is one of those times," Senator Bob Corker, a Tennessee Republican on the banking and foreign relations committees, told Bloomberg News.

On the sidelines of today's EU summit, the Ukrainian regime is to sign the economic portion of an Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, which will effectively create a largely one-sided free trade zone, opening up the Ukrainian market to Western European goods under conditions in which there is virtually no market in Western Europe for Ukrainian products.

It was the backing away from signing such an accord by Yanucovych—who feared the social unrest that such a deal would unleash—that triggered the US and EU-orchestrated and fascist-spearheaded coup that ousted him from power.

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