

Driving the Ukrainian Crisis Closer to the Brink of War

US-Russia talks on Ukraine collapse ahead of Crimean independence referendum

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Escalating pressure from the imperialist powers drove the Ukrainian crisis closer to the brink of war on Friday, as talks in London between US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov broke down.

Kerry denounced tomorrow's scheduled referendum in Crimea on secession from Ukraine and reintegration into Russia as a "backdoor annexation" and accused Moscow of refusing to negotiate.

Lavrov said there was no "common vision" between Moscow and Washington over how to resolve the crisis. He added that Crimea "means more for Russia than the Falklands does for the UK or the Comoros for France. We will respect the choice of the peoples of Crimea."

While he pointedly compared Russia's position in Crimea to British imperialism's role in the Falkland Islands, over which London fought a 1982 war with Argentina, Lavrov said Russia would not attack Ukraine. "Russia doesn't and can't have any plans to invade southeastern regions of Ukraine," he said.

The emergence of opposition in Crimea to the US-backed, fascist-led putsch of February 22 in Kiev has outraged Washington and its European allies. A Russian-speaking area that hosts a key Russian naval base at Sevastopol, Crimea reacted sharply to the move by the newly installed regime in Kiev to strip Russian of its status as an official language and to threats of violence by key regime officials.

Dmitry Yarosh, the leader of the violent, neo-Nazi Right Sector militia and now a top security official in Kiev, threatened in a recent *Newsweek* interview to "use all possible means" to block Crimean independence.

Kerry admitted in US Senate testimony last week that if the Crimea referendum proceeds, the population will likely vote to join Russia. In response, the imperialist powers are accusing Russia of invading Crimea while they escalate tensions and place the entire region on a war footing.

US and European Union (EU) officials have threatened Russia with dire consequences if the referendum proceeds. President Barack Obama said yesterday: "We continue to hope there is a diplomatic solution to be found, but the United States and Europe stand united not only in message on Ukrainian sovereignty, but that there will be consequences if that

sovereignty continues to be violated.”

The hypocrisy of Obama’s statement is staggering. Having backed a putsch led by figures such as Yarosh to install an unelected puppet regime in Kiev, Washington and its allies present themselves as selfless defenders of Ukraine’s sovereignty, when, in fact, they are seeking to turn Ukraine into a forward base for diplomatic and military provocations aimed at isolating and ultimately dismembering Russia. Within Ukraine, the new government is taking its orders from the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street and preparing to unleash a program of savage austerity measures against the working class.

The Russian regime of President Vladimir Putin is incapable of responding in a progressive way to the aggressive moves of the Western imperialist powers. Putin rests on criminal oligarchs who enriched themselves by stealing former state property during the dissolution of the Soviet Union, just as the ousted Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, based his regime on a section of Ukrainian oligarchs. They are incapable of making an appeal to the working class or to progressive, democratic public opinion either in Russia or Ukraine.

Instead, their moves, a combination of military maneuvers and appeals to Russian chauvinism, compliment the reactionary policies of the Western-backed coup regime in Kiev. The current crisis underscores the catastrophic consequences of the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Kremlin.

There were unconfirmed reports Friday that Russian forces in Crimea had brought down an American MQ-5B surveillance drone, which they claimed came from the 66th American Reconnaissance Brigade in Bavaria. They said the drone was flying over Crimean airspace in what would be a clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, the defense of which is the main pretext for the US and European refusal to recognize the Crimean referendum and for their moves to impose sanctions against Russia. The Pentagon subsequently denied the report.

The drone report comes amidst a stepped-up deployment of US forces to Eastern Europe, including the dispatch of fighter jets and surveillance equipment to Poland and the Baltic states. Yesterday, US officials announced that the Pentagon was sending rations to the Ukrainian army.

Even more incendiary proposals are circulating in the US media. In a piece titled “How to Put Military Pressure on Russia,” the *Wall Street Journal* called for arming Polish Air Force F-16 fighters with nuclear weapons and stationing powerful detachments of US ground troops in Poland, Romania and the Baltics.

The ratcheting up of the crisis by the US and Europe with threats of sanctions and military deployments is being carried out in defiance of broad popular opposition to war. Recent polls found that fully 66 percent of Americans fear that the Ukraine crisis could trigger US intervention, while only 32 percent of Germans support imposing economic sanctions on Russia.

Kerry said on Thursday that if the Crimean vote takes place tomorrow, “there will be a very serious series of steps on Monday in Europe and here.” He promised that sanctions against Russia would “get ugly fast.”

EU heads of state also turned up the pressure on Moscow. After German Chancellor Angela

Merkel's warning Thursday that planned EU sanctions aimed to cause "massive political and economic harm" to Russia, British Prime Minister David Cameron demanded that the Kremlin open direct talks with the Kiev regime (effectively recognizing the new government). "We want to see Ukrainians and Russians talking to each other," he declared. "And if they don't, then there are going to have to be consequences."

Kiev has threatened to cut off payment to Russia for its massive oil and gas exports to Europe via pipelines in Ukraine, the central component of European trade with Russia.

Russian gas producer Gazprom, which previously offered Ukraine's Naftogaza a \$3 billion loan to help cover Ukraine's arrears, said Thursday that it did not want a "gas crisis." In Berlin on Thursday, Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller said: "Yes, in Ukraine there is a deep political crisis, but they have to pay for gas. We find our actions towards Ukraine are completely loyal."

In one advance sign of the financial turmoil that could emerge, the US Federal Reserve reported an unprecedented \$100 billion dollar drop in the quantity of foreign-owned Treasury bonds it stores. This prompted speculation that a major holder of US dollars, most likely Russia, had shifted its dollar holdings overseas to a non-US bank to prevent US authorities from confiscating the funds.

The Western media are broadcasting a torrent of lies to present the Kremlin regime as the aggressor and soften up public opinion for conflict with Russia, a nuclear-armed power. Citing right-wing historian Timothy Snyder, CNN downplayed any threat to Russian or Russian-speaking people in Ukraine, declaring: "All of the official claims that have been made by Russia have been met. Their bases are secure, Russian speakers are not under any threat."

Snyder added that a "propaganda blitz" by Russian media was responsible for making it difficult for Putin to negotiate a deal with Kiev and its backers in America and Europe.

In fact, ethnic tensions are mounting within Ukraine due to the imperialist powers' backing of fascist groups that form a critical social base of support for the new regime. The government is raising a 60,000-strong National Guard that will incorporate Ukrainian fascist militias and function under the authority of Yarosh and Andriy Parubiy, the co-founder of the far-right Svoboda party.

There was continuing ethnic violence in Russian-majority regions of eastern Ukraine yesterday, with two people killed in Donetsk as pro-Kiev and pro-Moscow demonstrators clashed.

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