

Obama Delivers a Ukrainian Ultimatum

By [Bryce White](#)

Global Research, February 20, 2014

At this stage in the unrest, the label of “peaceful protestors” is at best a dubious one. Those protesting have resorted to hurling chunks of pavement, petrol bombs, and fireworks, and are increasingly resorting to the use of firearms. Ukraine’s health minister has said that at least 600 people have been wounded thus far, with more than half being police officers. [3] Additionally, twenty-six persons are reported dead, ten being police officers. The fact that any police officers should have been killed is alarming, and is an aspect of the unrest that remains conspicuously unaddressed by Western policymakers and media.

While the tear gas and rubber bullets being used on the part of Ukraine’s police officers are regarded as potentially lethal, and thus could explain the deaths of the protestors, the police officers’ deaths seem to indicate that more lethal means are being used by the increasingly radicalized protestors. In footage posted online, masked rioters can be seen firing pistols and rifles, and the Ukrainian Security Service has said that protestors recently seized over 1,500 firearms. [4] This is in addition to a countrywide campaign that has protestors seizing and attacking regional administrative and police buildings. [3]



Despite a truce being declared between the government and the leaders of the main opposition parties, it is extremely tenuous and hasn’t produced any reduction in the violence thus far. At this crossroads in the conflict, it would seem apparent that all outside parties should remain impartial and encourage deescalation. Instead, the U.S. has imposed a preliminary set of sanctions on around twenty members of Ukraine’s government. Secretary of State John Kerry has said that the U.S. is “talking about the possibility of sanctions or other steps with our friends in Europe and elsewhere in order to try to create the environment for compromise.” [2] In contrast, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has stated, “We don’t want to impose ourselves, as some of our overly zealous Western partners are trying to do.” [5] At this point, steps such as sanctions are likely to only have the effect of further antagonizing the Ukrainian government.

These events must be seen in the broader context of the ongoing geopolitical tug-of-war between Russia and the West. In former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski’s book *The Grand Chessboard*, he states,

“Europe is America’s essential geopolitical bridgehead on the Eurasian continent ... any expansion in the scope of Europe becomes automatically an expansion in the scope of direct U.S. influence as well.” [6]

With Ukraine’s decision last year to not go forward with a pending EU association agreement, the country has suddenly drifted out of the orbit of both Europe and the United

States. For Russia to acquiesce in Ukraine becoming subsumed by the EU and NATO “would be to acknowledge that Ukraine’s destiny is no longer organically linked to Russia’s.” Russia would thereby become further alienated from the West and slowly assume a solitary existence. Interestingly, President Obama had to acknowledge, albeit deny, the nature of the current conflict, saying the U.S.’s approach is “not to see this as some Cold War chessboard in which we are in competition with Russia.”

In this dangerous geostrategic contest, Ukraine has been added to the list of proxy battlegrounds between Russia and the West, threatening to evolve into a full-blown civil war. Rather than continuing to tear the country limb from limb, all parties, both internal and external, need to take serious steps toward peace before it becomes too late.

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Notes

- [1] Walsh, Nick Paton, Greg Botelho, and Victoria Butenko. “Truce Declared in Bloodied Ukraine, but Will It Last through Talks?” CNN. Cable News Network, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- [2] Lewis, Paul, Philip Oltermann, and Dan Roberts. “EU and US Consider Sanctions against Ukraine as Death Toll Reaches 26.” The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- [3] “Ukraine President Yanukovych Sacks Army Chief amid Crisis.” BBC News. BBC, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- [4] “Rioters Seize over 1,500 Guns in Ukraine Mayhem – Security Services.” RT. TV-Novosti, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- [5] Myers, Steven Lee. “Violence in Ukraine Creates Deepening Clash Between East and West.” The New York Times. The New York Times Company, 19 Feb. 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- [6] Brzezinski, Zbigniew. The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives. New York, NY: Basic, 1997. .

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