

US, Europe Step Up Threats Against Russia Over Ukraine

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US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel stepped up pressure on the Russian government after a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels on Thursday.

"We expect other nations to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and avoid provocative action," Hagel declared. "That's why I'm closely watching Russia's military exercises along the Ukrainian border, which they just announced yesterday."

Hagel's warning comes a day after US Secretary of State John Kerry issued his own threat against Russia. "Any kind of military intervention that would violate the sovereign territorial integrity of Ukraine would be a huge, a grave mistake," he told reporters in Washington. "The territorial integrity of Ukraine needs to be respected."

Kerry and Hagel's threats were echoed by German Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen before the NATO meeting: "The situation in Ukraine, especially in Crimea, fills us with great concern. The situation is very confusing and difficult, and it is now important that especially a breakup of Ukraine is prevented and the moderate forces will be strengthened in the country."

US and European demands that other countries avoid "provocative action" are utterly hypocritical. It is the US and European powers, led by Germany, that have carried out a reckless and provocative policy, working with fascist groups to push Ukraine to the brink of civil war.

Their policy aims to break Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence and weaken Russia itself. The return to a new "cold war" between east and west, now referred to in numerous media commentaries, is the direct consequence of the reckless support given by US and European leaders in recent months to nationalist and fascist forces in western Ukraine and the country's capital, Kiev.

In response to threats by far-right forces based in the west of Ukraine, which vowed to march into Crimea, pro-Russian militants occupied the regional parliament and government headquarters in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, on Wednesday night. A group of around 50 armed men seized the buildings and ran up the Russian flag.

Crimea has a predominantly Russian-speaking population and is home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. Underscoring the danger of military conflagration, a former colonel of the Russian General Staff, Igor Korotchenko, wrote in the Russian online newspaper slon.ru that "if illegal armed formations attempt to overthrow the local government in Crimea by force, a civil war will start and Russia couldn't ignore it."

As for the “moderate forces” in Ukraine referred to by the German Defence Minister, they are nowhere to be found in the new cabinet voted into office on Thursday by a large majority of the Ukrainian parliament. The new cabinet is reactionary to the core. All the key positions have been taken by either veterans of previous governments, fascists or the representatives of oligarchic interests. In an attempt to cloak the reactionary nature of the new regime, a number of government posts were awarded to figures active in the Independence Square protests.

As expected, the post of prime minister went to former banker Arseniy Yatseniuk, leader of the right-wing Fatherland party, founded by the oligarch and convicted embezzler Yulia Tymoschenko. Yatseniuk is a former head of the National Bank of Ukraine, foreign minister and speaker of the Ukrainian parliament.

Yatseniuk is also the chosen representative of Washington—which refers to him as “Yats”—as the infamous recording of the telephone conversation between the State Department’s top European official, Victoria Nuland and US ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt revealed.

No less than three posts, including that of deputy prime minister, have been given to the fascist Svoboda party, whose militants played a decisive role in attacking security forces last week and ousting President Viktor Yanukovich.

Svoboda Party deputy Oleksandr Sych was appointed deputy prime minister. In his career as a parliamentary deputy, Sych sought to introduce legislation to ban all abortions, including pregnancies caused by rape. His contribution to Svoboda’s glorification of “Ukrainian family values” was to call upon women to avoid rape by not drinking alcohol and “controversial company.”

Two other Svoboda members have taken over the ecology and agriculture ministries. The new agriculture minister, Oleksandr Myrnyi, is, according to Forbes, in the top five of Svoboda’s highest earners, with an estimated income of Hr 17 million (\$1.6 million) in 2012. His main business interests are concentrated in agriculture—a blatant conflict of interests with his new appointment.

Another Svoboda member, Oleh Makhnytsky, heads the strategically important general prosecutor’s office. Appointed a week ago, Makhnytsky issued an international arrest warrant this week for the ousted president Viktor Yanukovich, who is allegedly seeking asylum in Russia.

Another key post is to be occupied by Andriy Parubiy, who was a cofounder of the forerunner of Svoboda, the Social-National Party of Ukraine. Parubiy founded the organization in 1991 together with Oleh Tyahnybok, the current head of Svoboda. Parubiy, who led the right-wing militias that conducted the assaults on Yanukovich’s security forces, has now been appointed head of the National Security Council.

According to the *Libération* newspaper, Dmitri Yarosh, the leader of the pro-Nazi Right Sector group, is to be Parubiy’s deputy. This means that Svoboda and other ultra-rightists head key posts in the security apparatus and will be responsible for organizing the shock troops to repress future social unrest.

The key post of Finance Ministry in the new regime has been taken by Oleksandr Shlapak , a

former deputy head of PrivatBank regarded as a guarantor of the interests of finance capital.

Other nominees share close links to various oligarchs. Volodymyr Groysman, the new deputy minister for regional policy, began his career in agribusiness and real estate. He was a member of the party of former President Viktor Yushchenko, and is now reportedly close to millionaire businessman and member of parliament Petro Poroshenko. The new energy minister, Yuri Prodan, previously worked in Kyivenergo, the capital's energy monopoly supplier, and played a central role in the creation of the National Energy Market. Prodan has been described by the Ukrainian media as close to the Privat Group of billionaire Igor Kolomoisky.

The task of the new government is to implement the "extremely unpopular steps" that Prime Minister Yatsenyuk complained had not been carried out by previous governments. i.e., hikes in energy prices, the closure of large sections of heavy industry and massive social cuts.

The country faces a financial crisis and needs an estimated \$35 billion in bailout loans to be able to pay its bills for the next two years. Nearly half of this sum, \$15 billion, is owed to western banks.

International Monetary Fund managing director Christine Lagarde said Thursday that the IMF would send a team to Ukraine to assess the economic situation and spell out to the newly installed regime "the policy reforms that could form the basis of a Fund-supported program." In previous dealings with the Yanukovych government, the IMF already dictated such "reforms," i.e., extreme austerity measures, including drastic cuts in wages and pensions and an end to gas subsidies, which would send consumer prices soaring.

Since the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008, the European Union with US support has installed unelected governments in Greece and Italy to implement austerity and remunerate western banks. Now, for the first time, the same imperialist alliance mobilized extreme nationalist and fascist forces to topple an elected government and install a new pro-western regime.

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