

Despite Geneva talks on Ukraine, Washington escalates standoff with Russia

By Alex Lantier
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Though Moscow distanced itself from protests in eastern Ukraine at talks in Geneva, US and European officials signaled yesterday that they would continue to ratchet up tensions with Russia amid continuing moves by the regime in Kiev to mobilize its armed forces against pro-Russian protesters.

The joint communiqué issued in Geneva by the United States, the European Union (EU), Ukraine and Russia called for an end to protests and building occupations in eastern Ukraine. Buildings currently occupied by protesters were to be returned to the control of the US puppet regime in Kiev installed by a fascist-led putsch in February.

The statement declared: “All sides must refrain from any violence, intimidation, or provocative actions. The participants strongly condemned and rejected all expressions of extremism, racism, and religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism. All illegal armed groups must be disarmed; all illegally seized buildings must be returned to legitimate owners; all illegally occupied streets, squares, and other public places in Ukrainian cities and towns must be vacated.”

The communiqué called for international monitors to oversee “de-escalation measures” and pledged to grant amnesty to protesters for non-capital crimes.

Despite Moscow’s decision to sign a document calling for an end to the pro-Russian protests, Western officials indicated they would maintain and intensify economic and military pressure on Moscow. At a press conference shortly after the Geneva talks ended, US President Barack Obama said the United States and its European allies would continue to prepare new economic sanctions against Russia.

He had discussed sanctions in a telephone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel before giving the press conference. The two leaders agreed to enact further sanctions if Russia did not de-escalate the situation “in

short order,” according to a White House statement.

“My hope is we do actually see follow-through over the next several days, but I don’t think, given past performance, that we can count on that, and we have to be prepared to potentially respond to what continue to be efforts of interference by the Russians in eastern and southern Ukraine,” Obama declared.

He repeated unsubstantiated US charges that the Kremlin has massed thousands of troops along the border with eastern Ukraine, accusing Russia of sowing “disruption and chaos.”

Obama’s denunciations of Russia for “interfering” in Ukraine continue the brazen lies and distortions that have characterized the statements of US and European officials, amplified by the media, since the onset of the crisis in Ukraine. Anyone who has been following the events knows that it is Washington, Berlin and the European Union that provoked the crisis by orchestrating the overthrow of the elected, pro-Russian government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich—interfering in the affairs of Ukraine by carrying out a putsch and utilizing fascist parties and militia as their shock troops.

As the Geneva talks were ongoing, the Obama administration provocatively declared that it would step up aid to the armed forces of the Kiev regime, in line with a continuing NATO escalation in Eastern Europe announced the day before by NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced the increased aid after talks with his Polish counterpart, Tomasz Siemoniak, on boosting the NATO military presence throughout Eastern Europe. He said Washington would ship medical supplies, power generators, helmets and other equipment to the Ukrainian army.

Washington’s military support for Kiev is part of a continuing build-up across the region, aimed at encircling Russia. Hagel announced a new “air defense cooperative”

between the United States, Poland, Romania and the Baltic states. It will see stepped-up deployments of US warplanes and missiles to Eastern Europe and of US warships to the Baltic and eastern Mediterranean Seas.

The Kiev regime also implemented a ban on travel by Russian males aged 16 to 60 into Ukraine. The Ukrainian State Border Guard Service told the Russian news service RIA-Novosti, “These temporary measures apply, primarily, to healthy males who could somehow influence the situation in eastern Ukraine.”

The Russian airline Aeroflot, which received early notification of the policy, warned: “Ukrainian females aged 20-35 years who are registered as residents of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol will be allowed to enter Ukraine only after special verification.”

Yesterday’s events undermine US and European claims that the Ukrainian crisis is due to an offensive by the Kremlin to conquer Ukraine by orchestrating protests in eastern Ukraine. In fact, the Kremlin is pulling back from the protests despite continuing threats and provocations from the West, even as the anti-Kiev protesters in eastern Ukraine succeed in blunting the first wave of military units sent from Kiev to attack them.

Eastern Ukrainian civilians have blocked armed convoys sent from Kiev, and pro-Russian activists have commandeered several Ukrainian armored vehicles whose drivers refused orders to attack civilians. The wider popular opposition to the Western-backed regime in Kiev and the refusal of soldiers to fire on Ukrainian civilians in recent days is acknowledged even in Western media.

“Ukrainian troops found themselves operating in often-hostile territory, while militants proclaiming loyalty to Russia were welcomed by cheering residents as defenders,” the *Wall Street Journal* wrote on Thursday. “The Ukrainian army also appeared in bad shape. Some of the soldiers blocked by civilians were reservists with rusty vehicles, who eagerly accepted the food and water offered to them.”

The Kiev regime has pledged to try soldiers who refused to fire on the population for “cowardice.”

More broadly, these events expose the lies and hypocrisy underlying the entire Western intervention in Ukraine. The unelected regime in Kiev that emerged from pro-EU protests and the February 22 fascist-led putsch is not a new dawn for democracy, but an authoritarian regime trying to mount a bloody crackdown on widespread popular opposition. It is not the victim of

Russian aggression, but the tool of an aggressive policy by the Western imperialist powers aimed at encircling and weakening Russia.

Despite the outcome of the Geneva talks and the initial failure of the Kiev regime to drown the protests in blood, the situation in eastern Ukraine is still teetering on the verge of a civil war that threatens to escalate into a conflagration drawing in Kiev, Moscow, and the NATO powers.

Deadly fighting broke out in the southeastern Ukrainian city of Mariupol yesterday after an attack on a Ukrainian army base by a group of some 300 fighters. Three of the assailants were killed, thirteen wounded, and 63 captured, but some of the Ukrainian soldiers also surrendered.

“The 25th Airborne Brigade, whose soldiers showed cowardice and laid down weapons, will be disbanded,” interim Ukraine President Oleksandr Turchynov said. “Guilty soldiers will stand before the court.”

Armed protesters are still in control of the city of Slavyansk, which forces loyal to the Kiev regime attacked earlier this week. Pro-Russian protesters continue to control state buildings in ten major cities in eastern Ukraine.

Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed the extremely tense situation, responding to a question in a prime-time interview on Russian television yesterday.

“The people in the eastern regions have started arming themselves,” Putin said. “And instead of realizing that something isn’t right in the Ukrainian state and moving toward a dialog, [the Kiev government] began threatening more force and even moved in tanks and planes against the peaceful population. This is yet another very serious crime of Ukraine’s current rulers.”

Noting that the Russian parliament had given him authorization to send troops into eastern Ukraine to protect ethnic Russians from attack, Putin added: “I really hope I won’t be forced to use that right.”

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