

Obama refuses to rule out arming Kiev following talks with Merkel

By Patrick Martin and Barry Grey
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At a joint White House press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Monday, President Barack Obama made clear he was considering authorizing the dispatch of advanced weapons to the US- and NATO-backed regime in Kiev, to be used against pro-Russian separatist forces in eastern Ukraine.

Obama indicated that he would wait to see the results of talks set for Wednesday in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, between Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, French President François Hollande and Merkel before making a decision on sending US arms to Kiev. The talks are aimed at brokering a new cease-fire agreement between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian separatists following the collapse of an agreement reached last September.

At the press conference following talks with Merkel, Obama said: “If, in fact, diplomacy fails, what I’ve asked my team to do is to look at all options. What other means can we put in place to change Mr. Putin’s calculus? And the possibility of lethal defensive weapons is one of those options being examined.”

Obama then added, “I want to emphasize that a decision has not yet been made.”

The US president left open the sending of weapons such as antitank missiles and armored vehicles to the Kiev regime, which has lost territory in the east of the country to rebel forces in recent weeks, despite warnings from prominent officials and some newspapers internationally that doing so could dramatically escalate the conflict and trigger a military conflict between NATO and Russia, with the possibility of a nuclear Third World War.

Merkel and the leaders of Britain and France have made clear in recent days that they oppose a US move

to directly arm Kiev. Instead, they call for tougher economic sanctions combined with increased NATO military forces in the Baltic states and Eastern Europe to compel Moscow to accept the transformation of Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, into a staging ground for US and European imperialist moves to reduce Russia to a semicolonial status.

In her remarks, Merkel indicated her opposition to the dispatch of American weapons to Ukraine, saying, “I don’t see a military solution to this conflict.” But she stressed that Europe and the US were united in backing the Ukrainian regime, which came to power last February in a US- and German-backed coup led by fascist militias, and forcing Russia to end its support for pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk, Luhansk and other Russian-speaking regions.

“On certain issues we may not always agree,” she said, suggesting that Germany would continue to back the US-led offensive against Russia even if Washington decided to arm the Kiev government.

Obama, for his part, seemed to echo Merkel, saying there “may be some areas where there are tactical differences” while the US and Europe remained united in basic strategy and goals.

US military and civilian officials, including some within the Obama administration, are pushing for a decision to begin sending heavy arms to Kiev. At the Munich Security Conference last Saturday, US Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, NATO’s military commander, said sending weapons to help Ukrainian forces crush the separatists should not be ruled out.

At a Senate confirmation hearing last week, Obama’s choice to become the next defense secretary, Ashton Carter, said he would be inclined to back Ukraine with American arms.

Ukrainian President Poroshenko triggered the latest

crisis in eastern Ukraine by ordering an offensive by Ukrainian military forces, including some battalions of neofascist “volunteers.” It is inconceivable that he would have done so without Washington’s approval.

The Russian-backed forces routed the invaders around the Donetsk airport and have pressed a counterattack, taking control of an additional 500 square kilometers of territory and threatening the town of Debaltseve, which sits on the main road between Luhansk and Donetsk. As many as 3,000 Ukrainian troops are trapped in the town and could be forced to surrender.

Washington, NATO, the European Union and the media have portrayed the fighting in eastern Ukraine as a Russian invasion, although the vast majority of combatants are drawn from the Donbass region, where most people are Russian speakers and the government in Kiev is widely hated.

Obama repeated the claims of “Russian aggression” at the onset of his joint press conference with Merkel, saying that “Russian forces continue to operate” in Ukraine, “training separatists and helping to coordinate attacks.”

Last week’s sudden trip by Hollande and Merkel to Kiev and Moscow, setting the stage for Wednesday’s summit in Minsk, appeared to be driven by concern that a US decision to provide billions in weapons to Ukraine was imminent and could escalate the crisis enormously. Hollande himself warned Monday of the danger of “total war” arising out of the Ukraine crisis. “Aren’t we already close to the point of no return?” he asked.

A top official of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe told journalists at the Munich conference that he feared weapons deliveries would turn the crisis into an “existential conflict for Russia against NATO.”

Similar concerns were expressed in the American media, albeit by a small minority in the US national security establishment. The *New York Times* published an op-ed Monday by Professor John Mearsheimer under the headline “Don’t Arm Ukraine,” which asked rhetorically whether the United States would accept Canada or Mexico joining a hostile military alliance.

Even the rabid anti-Russian publicist Anne Applebaum, a *Washington Post* columnist, expressed concern about “a new World War” emerging from the

Ukraine crisis, although she offered the lesser evil of “a new Cold War” in which NATO would “build a Berlin Wall around Donetsk in the form of a demilitarized zone and treat the rest of Ukraine like West Germany.”

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