

Trump approves new sanctions against Russia

By Bill Van Auken
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On Wednesday, US President Donald Trump signed into law sweeping sanctions legislation that targets Russia, as well as Iran and North Korea, with punishing economic measures that will serve to ratchet up war tensions in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The legislation threatens to escalate dangerous US conflicts not only with the three targeted countries, but also with Washington's erstwhile imperialist allies in Western Europe.

Trump signed the legislation, which was passed by overwhelming votes of 98-to-two in the Senate and 419-to-three in the House, behind closed doors with no public ceremony or press coverage. He accompanied his action with not just one, but two, so-called "signing statements." The first, while couched in fairly sober legal language, contained an expansive interpretation of presidential powers and condemned the legislation as "significantly flawed" and for containing "unconstitutional provisions."

Indicating that the White House intends to interpret the law as it sees fit, the statement added that Trump, "will give careful and respectful consideration to the preferences expressed by the Congress in these various provisions and will implement them in a manner consistent with the President's constitutional authority to conduct foreign relations."

The second statement was essentially an amended version of the first, ginned up by Trump himself to express his belligerent narcissism and including some crude barbs against the US Congress and its Republican majority. Criticizing the legislation's imposition of limits on the administration's negotiating any alteration of the sanctions imposed against Russia by the Obama administration last December over unsubstantiated allegations of Moscow's interference in the US 2016 election, Trump wrote: "Congress could not even negotiate a healthcare bill after seven years of talking. By limiting the Executive's flexibility, this bill makes it harder for the United States to strike good deals for the American people."

Similarly, the president added at the end of his second signing statement: "I built a truly great company worth many billions of dollars. That is a big part of the reason I

was elected. As President, I can make far better deals with foreign countries than Congress."

Whatever Trump's objections, the legislation is the most significant to pass the US Congress since he was inaugurated last January. The enactment of the bill was a foregone conclusion given the overwhelming margins by which it passed in both houses of Congress, well over the two-thirds majorities needed to override a presidential veto.

While Trump indicated that he agreed with the imposition of sanctions against what he described in his signing statements as the "rogue regimes" in both North Korea and Iran—both of which Washington has openly targeted for regime change—his opposition was based largely on the legislation's limiting of his power to waive existing sanctions imposed by the Obama administration against Russia.

The inclusion of this restraint was bound up with the unrelenting campaign waged by the Democratic Party and the corporate media, backed by powerful layers within the US military-intelligence apparatus, attacking Trump as the beneficiary of alleged Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. Underlying this campaign is opposition within the American ruling establishment to any letup in aggression against Russia, which is viewed as a principal obstacle to the US drive to defend its global dominance by militarily asserting its control over the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the entire Eurasian landmass.

Given the inevitability of the enactment of the sanctions bill, Moscow retaliated over the legislation before Trump signed it into law. It ordered Washington to cut its diplomatic staff in Russia by 60 percent—to the same number of diplomats that Russia now has in the US—and seized control of a dacha that had been leased to the US embassy, a tit-for-tat retaliation for similar seizures of Russian facilities in the US carried out at the end of the Obama administration.

Under conditions in which relations between Washington and Moscow are worse than at any time since the height of the Cold War, predominant layers within the US ruling establishment are pressing for a further escalation of tensions between the world's two largest nuclear powers.

The *New York Times* Wednesday published an editorial celebrating a provocative tour being conducted by US Vice President Mike Pence of former Soviet republics on Russia's border, appearing before massed troops in Georgia and vowing that the territory would be brought into the NATO alliance, and pledging in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, that the US would go to war with Russia over the Soviet Union's former Baltic republics.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," he said, indicting Russia for acting to "redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another."

The *Times* editorial noted that Pence told his audiences that he was speaking for Trump, but added that "Trump continues to undermine such assurances by word and deed, the result being an incoherent policy that is bound to be read as weakness or uncertainty by Mr. Putin..."

The day before, the *Washington Post* editorialized that the escalating conflict between the US and Russia was all the consequence of "bad choices" made by Russian President Vladimir Putin. First and foremost, it cited the decision to "seize Crimea from Ukraine, annex it and then instigate an armed insurrection in southeastern Ukraine in 2014. Washington, it added, had retaliated against "Putin's ill-considered impulse to use violence as a tool of intimidation and coercion."

Conveniently forgotten in this narrative is the US-orchestrated and fascist-spearheaded coup carried out in Ukraine to install a regime subservient to the US and further the protracted drive to bring NATO's military might to Russia's borders. Also omitted are the facts that the population of Crimea voted overwhelmingly to join Russia after the coup, and that the the fighting in the predominantly Russian Donbas region was provoked by the rise to power of extreme right-wing anti-Russian nationalists in Kiev.

That the military pressures against Russia are to further increase following the passage of the sanctions legislation has been made clear by the report that both the US State Department and the Pentagon have recommended that the Trump administration supply Ukraine with so-called "defensive" weapons. These would include anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft arms and other weaponry that would fuel a bloodbath in eastern Ukraine.

This type of military escalation on the part of Washington will no doubt strengthen the hand in Moscow of those elements within Russia's own military apparatus pressing Putin to adopt a more aggressive posture toward the US. The likely result would be the placing of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals on a hair trigger.

The new sanctions have not only exacerbated tensions between Washington and Moscow, but also brought the deepening conflict between Europe and America out into the open. Provisions within the legislation passed by Congress targeted Russian energy companies with potentially punishing implications for European firms doing business with them. Among the biggest concerns is the Nord Stream 2 gas project, being co-financed by a group of German, French, British, Dutch and Austrian firms, to funnel Russian natural gas under the Baltic Sea to Germany. Many in Europe view the legislation as a means of strong-arming the European powers into turning to the US instead of Russia to supply their energy needs.

While acknowledging that some steps had been taken to assuage European concerns over the economic impact of the sanctions, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker told German broadcaster ARD on Wednesday that the EU was ready to take countermeasures "within days" if the US sanctions encroached upon the interests of European companies.

"We must defend our economic interests vis-à-vis the United States. And we will do that," Juncker said.

Iran, meanwhile, denounced the sanctions imposed against it in the legislation signed by Trump as a violation of the 2015 nuclear agreement and part of an attempt by the US administration to blow up the deal and set the stage for direct military confrontation.

"The US is after withdrawal from the nuclear deal at Iran's expense and certainly we will not give this opportunity to the country," Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani said on Wednesday. "Of course, this doesn't mean maintaining the nuclear deal at any cost."

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