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Ukraine alleges Russian “invasion” of Crimea as Obama warns of “costs”

By Chris Marsden

1 March 2014

US President Barack Obama issued a statement Friday evening denouncing “reports of military movements” taken by Russia in Ukraine, warning that “there will be costs for any military intervention.” The comments come as the US/European-stoked regime change operation in Ukraine threatens to develop into a conflict between Western powers and Russia.

Obama’s White House statement came shortly after the “interim government” installed in Ukraine by the Western powers appealed for United States and Britain to come to its aid, accusing Russia of mounting an “invasion.”

Arsen Avakov, the new interior minister and member of Fatherland, the party of oligarch Yulya Tymoshenko, alleged that the international airport in Sebastopol in the Crimea had been blocked by Russian forces. He wrote on Facebook, “I regard what is happening as an armed invasion and occupation in violation of all international treaties and norms. This is a direct provoking of armed bloodshed on the territory of a sovereign state.”

His choice of words aims to provide a *casus belli* justifying Western military intervention in Ukraine. He is invoking terms of a 1994 agreement, the Budapest Memorandum—signed by US President Bill Clinton, UK Prime Minister John Major, Russia’s Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kuchma for Ukraine—promising to uphold the territorial integrity of Ukraine in return for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons.

Article one of the Budapest Memorandum reads: “The United States of America, the Russian Federation, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, reaffirm their commitment to Ukraine ... to respect the Independence and Sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine.”

Sir Tony Brenton, the former British Ambassador to Moscow from 2004 to 2008, warned that if Russia was found to have invaded Ukraine, then war could be an option “if we do conclude the Memorandum is legally binding.”

The newly-appointed head of Ukraine’s National Security Council, Andriy Parubiy, accused Moscow of commanding armed groups at airports in Crimea. “These are separate groups ... commanded by the Kremlin,” Parubiy said.

Parubiy was a co-founder of the Social-National Party of Ukraine, the forerunner of the far-right Svoboda. He led the right-wing militias that spearheaded the coup bringing down the regime President Viktor Yanukovich, which was more closely aligned with pro-Russian oligarchs. The militias were composed of members of Svoboda alongside members of the fascist Right Sector. Dmytro Yarosh, head of Right Sector, is Parubiy’s deputy.

Interim President Oleksandr Turchynov of Fatherland warned Thursday, referring to Crimea, that “any movements of troops, especially with troops outside that territory will be considered military aggression.” Turchynov yesterday dismissed the head of the armed forces, Admiral Yuriy Ilin, while Parubiy said a state of emergency could be declared—making possible the deployment of the army against Crimea.

In Simferopol, Crimea’s administrative centre, groups of armed men arrived overnight at the main airport wearing military fatigues. At Sevastopol airport, a military airport that handles few commercial flights, a reported 300 people of “unknown identity” had arrived.

There are reports that the men are wearing Russian-style uniforms without insignia, that flights from Kiev have been barred and that there has been movement of Russian armoured personnel carriers and helicopters. The Russian Black Sea fleet, centred at Sevastopol, is quoted as having taken “anti-terror” measures to protect the fleet and associated outposts, not connected to a broader mobilisation. Russia’s Foreign Ministry said that the manoeuvres are in line with bilateral agreements.

The most dramatic claim came from the Ukrainian president's special representative in the southern peninsula, Sergiy Kunitsyn, who alleged that Moscow had deployed 2,000 soldiers to a military air base near Simferopol.

On Thursday pro-Russian militias seized the regional parliament and other government buildings. The men outside Simferopol airport said they belonged to the pro-Russia Unity Party and had come there on the orders of the new Crimean administration. The majority of the Crimean population is either native Russian or Russian-speaking. The *Financial Times* reported yesterday, "For almost a week, Kiev's Crimean opponents have organised grassroots actions to rival those in the capital's central Maidan (square), recruiting hundreds of local men into self-organised militias."

Military manoeuvres on Ukraine's border continued yesterday. The exercises began Wednesday, involving more than 80 combat helicopters and do not immediately impact on the Crimea. Russia also reportedly put fighter jets near the border on alert, as it warned of "a tough and uncompromised response to violations of compatriots' rights."

Kiev-appointed regional Premier Anatolii Mohyliov was replaced Thursday by Russian businessman Alexei Chaliy. A referendum on the independence of Crimea has been scheduled May 25, coinciding with planned presidential and local elections throughout Ukraine. Russian lawmakers introduced two bills on Friday meant to simplify the annexing of new territories into the Russian Federation, as well as access to Russian citizenship for Ukrainians.

In his first public appearance since being forced from office, Yanukovich spoke from Russia, insisting that he was the country's legitimate elected leader and would "continue the fight for the future of Ukraine ... Nobody has overturned me. I was compelled to leave Ukraine due to a direct threat to my life and my nearest and dearest."

Yanukovich said he did not support Crimean secession, stating that Ukraine must remain "united and undivided." He added, however, "The citizens of Crimea do not want to be subordinate to nationalists and bandits." He added that he would not ask for Russian military support to return him to power, but was "surprised" that President Vladimir Putin had remained silent to date.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had reaffirmed to him a commitment that Russia would "respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine," echoing a commitment that Putin made to President Barack Obama last week.

Such statements by no means rule out military conflict, however. The entire region has been destabilised, bringing with it the danger not only of civil war in Ukraine but of a broader conflict that could yet be fought between the major powers.

The putsch engineered by Washington in alliance with corrupt oligarchs and fascist gangs has set in motion events that bring Russia into direct opposition to the US and European powers on issues of an existential character. The prospect of Ukraine falling into the orbit of the US and the European Union, with the possible loss of Sevastopol as a naval base, is dangerous enough for Putin. The ambitions of the Obama administration and its allies do not stop there, however.

Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski played a key role in organising the putsch in Kiev, reflecting both Poland's own long-term designs on Ukrainian territory it ruled prior to World War II and, more importantly, his role as a political ally of the US.

After playing a part as a student in the 1981 strike organised by the Solidarity trade union movement, Sikorski was granted asylum in the UK. At Oxford, he was groomed as a Western political/security asset. He eventually became a resident fellow of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., executive director of the New Atlantic Initiative and a member of the Board of Advisors of the American Committees on Foreign Relations.

Reuters reports, "The Polish government has been funding civil society projects in ex-Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, with much of the aid channelled through a fund controlled by Sikorski's ministry. Recipients of Polish government money include opposition television stations operating in exile from Belarus, giving Poland influence in a country that, after Ukraine, could be the scene of the next confrontation between Russia and the West."

Sikorski described the seizure of administrative buildings in Crimea as "a drastic step" that could escalate: "I'm warning those who did this and those who allowed them to do this, because this is how regional conflicts begin."

Georgia is also set on association with the European Union, which Yanukovich acted to block in Ukraine, setting up the moves to depose him. Defence Minister Irakli Alasania said of Ukraine's rejection of Russia, "There's no way back for Ukraine. It's a first strategic failure for Putin. This is a tectonic geopolitical shift in eastern Europe." It would embolden other countries in the region, he said, and have a ripple effect.

Earlier this week, Kerry issued a statement pledging US assistance in bringing Georgia closer to the US and the EU.