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Ukraine, the United States and international law

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Plans for a secession referendum in Ukraine’s Crimea region on Sunday are the focus of ramped-up attacks on Russia from the Obama administration and its European allies. Additional military forces are being shifted to the region and new threats of sanctions are being issued.

The US, Germany and Britain have denounced the referendum in the majority Russian-speaking autonomous republic as a violation of Ukraine national sovereignty and territorial integrity and a breach of international law. The US ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, said Monday that the US would not recognize the “so-called referendum.” He charged that “gangs of pro-Russian thugs” were patrolling the area and there was “an active campaign to stir division in Ukraine.”

Pyatt’s comments echoed those of Obama, who has declared that any referendum would “violate the Ukrainian constitution and violate international law,” and top officials in Britain and Germany. Following a meeting Sunday night between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister David Cameron, a statement from Downing Street declared that the proposed referendum “would be illegal and that any attempt by Russia to legitimize the result would result in further consequences.” Cameron earlier declared Russian actions to be “in flagrant breach of international law.”

Such comments bring the level of lying and hypocrisy by the Western powers to new heights. Governments that feel in some way dependent on mobilizing a broader base of public support beyond the military-intelligence apparatus and narrow financial interests concern themselves with matters such as internal consistency and coherence. This is not the case with the supposed proponents of international law in London, Berlin and Washington.

The United States has systematically violated the national sovereignty of Ukraine to unconstitutionally overthrow an elected government and install a far-right regime that includes neo-Nazis whose thugs served as the shock troops for the February 22 putsch.

It was Mr. Pyatt, after all, who participated late last year in the leaked phone conversation with Victoria Nuland, the US assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, in which the two officials discussed the need to “midwife” the opposition movement in Ukraine into a new government. They agreed that the individual who has since been installed as prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, referred to as “Yats,” had the “economic experience” and “governing experience” to run the country as a stooge of the United States.

The entire regime-change operation was carried out illegally, with the US and European powers intervening in Ukraine with billions of dollars in funding for oppositional forces allied with fascist organizations such as the Svoboda party and the Right Sector. It is these rabid Ukrainian nationalists who have waged “an active campaign to stir division,” spewing anti-Jewish filth and threatening and beating up Russian-speaking Ukrainians and other minorities. In one of its first acts, the new parliament eliminated language rights for Russian speakers.

Pyatt speaks for a government that has a long and sordid history, going back more than a century, of “stirring divisions,” fomenting civil strife and intervening to overturn governments it deemed inimical to the global interests of the US corporate-financial elite.

Just over 110 years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt helped orchestrate the “Panamanian Revolution” in order to seize territory from Colombia. The Roosevelt administration, working with French engineer Phillipe-Jean Baunau-Varilla, drew up the new country’s constitution and financed the new government. The new state was threatened with a withdrawal of US military support (and the return of Colombian forces) if it hesitated in rubber-stamping the construction of the Panama Canal and ceding it to American control.

The carving out of Panama from Colombia came only a few years after the US took over the Philippines as part of the spoils of the Spanish-American War, an acquisition that was followed by a brutal war against the native population that left one million civilians dead. Panama was followed one year later by Roosevelt’s “corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, expanding Washington’s claim to control of the Western Hemisphere (“America’s backyard”) and creating the basis for dozens of military interventions over the next quarter century.

More recently, the United States has asserted the right to intervene in any country in the world to defend its interests. It has officially adopted the policy of preemptive war, in direct violation of the United Nations charter and other international prohibitions against aggressive war. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the US has effectively declared national sovereignty, the bedrock of international relations, to have been superseded.

In Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the US and Germany cast aside national sovereignty and territorial integrity and stoked up ethnic and religious divisions to break up the country, beginning with German recognition of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991. In the winter and spring of 1999, the US and NATO carried out a 78-day air assault on Serbia to slice off Kosovo, which in 2008 officially declared independence, in defiance of the elected government in Belgrade, and was quickly recognized as an independent state by Washington and the European powers.

In 2011, the US and its European allies stoked up a civil war and then bombed Libya in order to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi and install a client regime. This neocolonial operation was justified on the grounds that the newly proclaimed “responsibility to protect” doctrine overrode considerations of national sovereignty. Obama acknowledged at the time that there was no self-defense issue involved—the only legal basis under international law for a military attack—but justified the war on the basis that US “interests and values” were at stake. He thereby asserted an arbitrary and unlimited right to militarily attack any country or population.

That same year, the US encouraged the secession of oil-rich South Sudan in order to undermine Chinese influence in North Africa. Hailing the referendum on independence, Obama declared it to be proof that “after the darkness of war, the light of a new dawn is possible.” Independence has been followed not only with the opening up of the oil industry, but also border wars over energy-rich regions.

Countless other examples can be cited. The US invaded Iraq in 2003 (without even the legal fig leaf of a United Nations Security Council resolution) based on lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. It then applied the “divide and rule” strategy, whipping up sectarian divisions and creating civil war conditions in the occupied country. Then-senator and current Vice President Joseph Biden promoted a plan to divide the country into separate ethnic enclaves—a scheme that has in large measure been carried out.

Washington fomented a civil war in Syria that continues to rage. It carries out drone attacks in brazen disregard for national sovereignty (a policy the UN special rapporteur has declared to be in violation of international law).

Ukraine is a continuation of this lawless policy. In its drive to dominate the world, American imperialism—along with its European counterparts—is dragging mankind down the road to catastrophe. For the population of Ukraine, and not just Crimea, it has meant the rise of far-right

and fascist movements, the fanning of toxic ethnic conflicts, and the preparation of savage austerity measures dictated by the banks and the International Monetary Fund.

The reckless actions of imperialism in Ukraine and Eastern Europe threaten to spark a conflict between the Western powers and nuclear-armed Russia, with incalculable consequences.

The secession of Crimea, and the Russian intervention in Ukraine, offer no solution to this crisis. The Putin regime, representing corrupt oligarchs, relies on the promotion of Russian chauvinism and military maneuvers even as it seeks an accommodation with its more powerful adversaries. It is incapable of making an appeal to the working class either of Russia or Ukraine.

In opposition to a new imperialist carve-up of Eastern Europe and the slide toward World War III, the working class must advance its own alternative—a united struggle based on a socialist and internationalist program of opposition to imperialism, war and the capitalist system.