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Ukrainian president delivers bellicose speech to the US Congress

By Niles Williamson

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Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko addressed a joint session of the United States Congress on Thursday morning, calling for increased military assistance from the United States to defeat the pro-Russian separatist movement in the east, and for closer trade relations with the West to limit the economic and political influence of Russia in the country.

Poroshenko, a billionaire oligarch dubbed the Chocolate King for his wealth derived from the confectionery business, spoke as the representative of a thin layer of Ukrainian society that has enriched itself in the wake of the restoration of capitalism amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Poroshenko is seeking to build closer economic and military ties with the United States, the European Union, and the other Western imperialist powers to the benefit of this corrupt layer of oligarchs.

His address to the US Congress came just two days after the Ukrainian and European parliaments jointly adopted the controversial Association Agreement, and one day after he secured a \$300 million loan guarantee from the Canadian government.

In his address Poroshenko pressed for increased military assistance from the United States in his government's drive to put down the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine. Despite a precarious ceasefire between the Kiev regime and the pro-Russian separatists, Poroshenko provocatively called for the United States to provide Ukraine with lethal military aid to complement the non-lethal aid that it has already provided. "Blankets, night vision goggles are also important, but one cannot win the war with blankets. Even more, we cannot keep the peace with a blanket," he said.

He called on the United States to develop closer military ties with Ukraine by developing a "special security and defense status" with the former Soviet republic, which would allow for the "highest level of interaction with a non-Nato ally."

Poroshenko insisted that the outcome of the war being fought in Ukraine between the regime and the separatists was of great strategic interest to the United States and the EU. "The only thing that now stands between the reality of peaceful coexistence and the nightmare of the full relapse into the previous century, into a new Cold War, are Ukrainian soldiers," he said. He maintained that the conflict in Ukraine was a "war for the Free World."

The Ukrainian president used the address as well to call on the US to enact further economic sanctions against Russia, which he declared to be the aggressor in the east. Just last week the United States and European Union endorsed an expanded set of economic sanctions against Russia's oil and gas sector.

Finally, Poroshenko called for the development of closer economic ties between the United States and Ukraine. He called on Congress to establish a special fund to "support investment of American companies and Ukraine" and help the country "reform" its economy. He assured the Congress that aid provided by it would be used by "noncorrupt institutions," and "distributed effectively."

The last Ukrainian President to address a joint session of the US Congress was Viktor Yushchenko in April 2005, after being swept to power in the so-called Orange Revolution, which was heavily supported by the US State Department, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy, as well as a host of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Poroshenko denounced what he called Russian "imperialism" on the same day that the US Senate, following in the wake of the House, voted overwhelmingly to support President Barack Obama's plan for escalating intervention by American imperialism in Syria.

The same senators who hailed Poroshenko as a symbol of resistance to supposed aggression by Russia—whose warplanes have not dropped a single bomb on eastern Ukraine—voted

overwhelmingly to support a military effort in which the United States will bomb Iraq, Syria and any other country in the region that it chooses.

Democratic Senator Carl Levin told reporters that the Poroshenko speech was a “real rousing call to us to be supportive of their dreams,” and called for the dispatch of ammunition, surface-to-air missiles and anti-tank weapons to the Ukrainian government. He said that Congress could take up a resolution in an upcoming session encouraging the President to increase military aid to Kiev.

Republican Senator Rob Portman called for Obama to “immediately” respond to Poroshenko’s requests. “I think most members of Congress on both sides of the aisle understand the stakes here and want to be more supportive,” he told reporters.

After his address Poroshenko met with Obama at the White House Thursday afternoon, where the two discussed the details of \$53 million in new aid from the United States. While Obama did not immediately commit the US to providing lethal weaponry, the deal would provide non-lethal military equipment including body armor, binoculars, counter-mortar detection units, small boats and other gear for the Ukrainian armed forces and border guards.

After the meeting at the White House Poroshenko told reporters that he was satisfied with the new guarantees from Obama. He said, “I asked the president to increase the cooperation in the security and defense sector, and I received a positive answer.”

Meanwhile sporadic fighting between Kiev forces and pro-Russian separatists continued to strain the ceasefire which was signed by both sides nearly two weeks ago after peace talks in Minsk. Officials at the city hall in Donetsk reported that two civilians had been killed and another three wounded in fighting around the airport since Wednesday.

Andrei Purgin, the deputy prime minister of the Donetsk People’s Republic, told reporters on Wednesday that shelling by government-backed forces had effectively ended the ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. “In my opinion, there is no ceasefire already. Heavy weaponry is being intensely used,” he said. “Towns are bombed. Four neighborhoods of Donetsk are being bombed constantly. Not long ago a shell fell in a bus with people in it.”

Also on Wednesday Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk ordered Kiev’s military force to go into full battle alert against pro-Russian separatists. “Russia will not give us peace so I am asking the defense minister for full battle readiness,” he stated. According to Yatsenyuk, the peace plan worked out by Poroshenko did not mean “relaxing the work of the defense and interior ministries. Full readiness [is required],” he added. “We can’t believe anyone, especially the Russians.”