

Ukraine

US, Europeans Work To Rally Western Front

BY LARA JAKES
AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON — The U.S. and major allies strained on Monday to rally a strong Western front to persuade Russia to step back from a military takeover of Ukraine's strategic Crimea region. But several acknowledged there are few options beyond already-threatened economic and diplomatic penalties, and critics said administration efforts were too little, too late after years of pressing for friendlier relations with Moscow.

A stern-faced President Barack Obama labeled the Russian advance in Crimea a violation of international law. He urged Congress to approve an aid package for the Ukrainian government, and repeated earlier threats that the U.S. would take steps to hobble Russia's economy and isolate it diplomatically if President Vladimir Putin does not back down.

Obama met Monday evening with his national security team, including Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, to discuss Ukraine. Hours later, Kerry was to leave for Kiev to reinforce U.S. support for the new Ukrainian government that only weeks ago ousted its pro-Russian president.

But French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said Russia's control of Crimea would not be easy to reverse. And the suggestions he offered — sending in observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation, questioning Russia's membership in the G-8 economic group and holding out for a diplomatic dialogue proposed by Germany — were an indication of how limited the options were for the U.S. and Europe.

Still, alternately threatening and cajoling Putin, Western leaders pointed to the damage that his nation's natural gas, uranium and coal industries could suffer if sanctions cut off exports to the European Union, its largest

Crisis escalates

Secretary of State John Kerry has made plans to visit Kiev as part of the Obama administration strategy to increase the diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin is sending more troops to Ukraine, which has mobilized its armed forces.



Latest events

- Crimea's airports and military bases under Russian control
- Ukrainian PM says Russian actions are "a declaration of war"
- U.S. estimates there are 6,000 Russian ground and naval forces in the region

Impacts

- Russian stock prices have fallen and the ruble has hit a new low against the dollar
- Russia's G8 partners have condemned Moscow's military build-up in Ukraine; leaders have withdrawn from preparations for June summit in Sochi

Source: ESRI, Chicago Tribune, BBC, AP © 2014 MCT

customer.

Britain's prime minister warned of diplomatic, political, economic "and other pressures" that could be brought against Moscow. And the European Union's foreign ministers issued a Thursday deadline for Putin to pull back his troops or face a rejection of visa-liberalization and economic cooperation negotiations that have long been in the works.

"I think the situation is relatively clear, you need to see a return to barracks," EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said in Brussels, where ministers also froze preparations for the Group of Eight summit of major economies that is set for June in Sochi.

In Washington, Obama declared, "The strong condemnation that has proceeded from countries around the world indicates the degree to which Russia is on the wrong side of history."

"So there are really two paths that Russia can take at this point," Obama said. "Over time, this will be a costly proposition for Russia, and now is the time for them to consider whether they can serve their interests in a way that resorts to diplomacy as opposed to force."

The White House said Obama met for more than two hours Monday night with the National Security Council and the other cabinet members, discussing what steps the

United States can take with international partners to further isolate Russia and persuade them to de-escalate the situation.

The Pentagon announced late Monday it was suspending military-to-military engagements with Russia, including exercises, bilateral meetings, port visits and conferences. But the West stopped far short of suggesting that its own military force might be used to push Putin's troops out of Crimea — even as Ukrainian officials reported that four Russian navy ships in Sevastopol's harbor had blocked two vessels controlled by Kiev.

Russia, too, tried to steer the world debate.

At a U.N. session in Geneva, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Ukraine should return to a Feb. 21 agreement that sought to end months of unrest in Kiev by addressing an array of issues at the heart of the dispute between protesters and the government of then-President Viktor Yanukovich. However, that agreement did not address the grievances that caused the protests in the first place, and the pro-Russian Yanukovich fled Kiev for protective sanctuary near Moscow within days of signing it.

"Instead of a promised national unity government," Lavrov complained, "a government of the victors' has been created."

U.S. officials say the Feb. 21 agreement could form the basis for a political resolution to the crisis but would have to be significantly altered.

Both Kerry and Lavrov are to attend meetings in Paris on Wednesday about refugee spillover in Lebanon from the other war on a NATO border — the three-year bloody conflict in Syria. It is likely they will discuss the crisis in Ukraine, too.

Some critics said the Obama administration should have seen Russia's advances coming and blamed the White House for policies emboldening Putin.

Pistorius Trial: Witness Recalls Screams

PRETORIA, South Africa (AP) — "Bang .. bang, bang, bang." The murder trial of Oscar Pistorius opened Monday in South Africa with testimony from a neighbor who described the sound of what she said were four gunshots and recalled the "blood-curdling screams" of a woman who prosecutors say was the girlfriend slain by the onetime star athlete in his home.

"It's the most helpless feeling I've ever had in my life," university lecturer Michelle Burger said of listening to the screams. "I knew something terrible was happening in that house."

The 27-year-old double-amputee runner, whose stature peaked at the 2012 London Olympics and then plummeted when he shot model and television personality Reeva Steenkamp in the pre-dawn hours of Valentine's Day last year, stood in the dock in a dark gray suit and black tie, writing in a pad and sometimes passing notes to defense lawyers. At one point, he smiled at a person sitting behind him. Steenkamp's mother, June, sat near Pistorius but there was no communication between them.

The proceedings were broadcast on television, though Burger was not shown at her own request, and millions of people around the world followed a trial where the heady mix of a celebrity defendant and shocking allegations has drawn comparisons to the O.J. Simpson case two decades ago.

Sunken Oil Pipelines Raise Spill Fears

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — A freshwater channel that separates Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas is a premier Midwestern tourist attraction and a photographer's delight, offering spectacular vistas of two Great Lakes, several islands and one of the world's longest suspension bridges.

But nowadays the Straits of Mackinac is drawing attention for something that is out of sight and usually out of mind, and which some consider a symbol of the dangers lurking in the nation's sprawling web of buried oil and natural gas pipelines. Stretched across the bottom of the waterway at depths reaching 270 feet are two 20-inch pipes that carry nearly 23 million gallons of crude oil daily. They are part of the 1,900-mile Lakehead network, which originates in North Dakota near the Canadian border. A segment known as Line 5 slices through northern Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula before ducking beneath the Straits of Mackinac and winding up in Sarnia, Ontario.

The pipes were laid in 1953. They've never leaked, according to the system's owner, Enbridge Energy Partners LP, which says the lines are in good shape and pose no threat.

But a growing chorus of activists and members of Congress is demanding closer scrutiny as stepped-up production in North Dakota's Bakken region and Canada's Alberta tar sands boosts the amount of oil coursing through pipelines crossing the nation's heartland.

Cold Weather Helping Some Businesses

NEW YORK (AP) — The harsh winter has been rough for some businesses, but for a lucky few, the frigid weather means more cold, hard cash.

Ace Hardware is having its best winter in more than a decade for snow blower and shovel sales. Waterproof boots are on a long backorder at clothing maker L.L. Bean. And more people are staying home and ordering goeey grilled cheese sandwiches and booze from Delivery.com.

"The concept of a polar vortex doesn't feel good, but it's good for business," said Kane Calamari, a vice president at Ace Hardware Corp.

Much of the country has been in a deep freeze. Only 32 winters have been colder in the last 119 years, according to Jake Crouch, a climate scientist at the National Climatic Data Center, a division of the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration.

With more Americans stuck indoors, customers are ordering up more meals and arranging to have their laundry picked up through Delivery.com's website and smartphone app. Sales at the company, which operates in major metro areas such as New York, Chicago and Washington D.C., rose 30 percent in January and February compared with the year before. Orders for soups, wine and vodka have spiked.

Ellen's Oscar Celeb Selfie Makes Waves

NEW YORK (AP) — Ellen DeGeneres' celeb-studded selfie from the most-watched Oscars telecast in a decade was a landmark social media moment at a time online conversation is boosting television viewership and vice versa.

It's also a murky example of what is or isn't product placement in a hyper-marketed world. Would the world's most retweeted photo have been shot by an iPhone if Samsung hadn't been a commercial sponsor of the Academy Awards?

An estimated 43 million people watched "12 Years a Slave" win the Oscar for best picture on Sunday night. It was the most-watched Academy Awards since 2004, when "Lord of the Rings: Return of the King" was the best picture. And it was the most popular entertainment event on TV since the "Friends" finale that year. The Oscars are generally the most-watched TV event of the year after the Super Bowl.

Obama's 2015 Budget Appeals To Dems

BY ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Striving for unity among Democrats rather than compromise with Republicans, President Barack Obama will unveil an election-year budget on Tuesday that drops earlier proposals to cut future Social Security benefits and seeks new money for infrastructure, education and job training.

But Obama's almost \$4 trillion budget plan is likely to have a short shelf life. It comes just three months after Congress and the White House agreed to a two-year, bipartisan budget pact that has already set the parameters for this election year's budget work. Democrats controlling the Senate have already announced they won't advance a budget this year and will instead skip ahead to the annual appropriations bills for 2015, relying on new spending "caps" set by December's budget deal that provide \$56 billion less than what Obama wants in 2015.

Obama would divide the extra money equally between the Pentagon and domestic initiatives like boosting manufacturing hubs, job training and preschool programs and cutting energy waste. Republicans are likely to balk at the idea, which would be paid for by curbing special interest tax breaks and making spending cuts elsewhere in the budget.

Obama has also announced a four-year, \$302 bil-

lion plan to boost spending on highways, rail projects and mass transit. Half of the initiative would be financed through corporate taxes. Funding for highway and mass transit projects expires at the end of September, and there's bipartisan interest in finding a supplemental funding stream to augment stagnant revenues from the \$18.4 cents-per-gallon gasoline tax.

Obama's budget arrives after a tumultuous year that began with Obama muscling through a 10-year \$600 billion-plus tax increase on upper-bracket earners. Feeling stung, Republicans refused to yield on about \$80 billion in automatic spending cuts that began in March. Then, conservatives in the GOP forced a 16-day partial government shutdown over funding to implement the nation's new health insurance program. The small-bore, two-year budget deal struck by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., emerged from the wreckage to alleviate the toughest automatic cuts.

With no design or expectation of luring Republicans into more budget negotiations in this election year, Obama's blueprint presents his vision for boosting job growth and favored initiatives like education. The White House announced earlier Obama was dropping a plan opposed by most Democrats in his budget proposal a year ago to slow Social Security cost of living increases.

The budget also will flesh out a plan Obama announced in his State of the Union address to expand the earned income tax credit for childless workers, helping more than 13 million. It would also boost the tax credit for child care and help people sign up for individual retirement accounts.

"This year the administration is returning to a more traditional budget presentation that is focused on achieving the president's vision for the best path to create growth and opportunity for all Americans, and the investments needed to meet that vision," the White House said in a statement last month.

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