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NATO steps up military pressure on Russia

By Stefan Steinberg and Peter Schwarz

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NATO continued its military build-up on the Russian border even as US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Paris Sunday evening to discuss the conflict over Ukraine. The meeting, involving four hours of “frank” talks, ended with no breakthrough and separate news conferences.

The two men met after Russian President Vladimir Putin indicated his readiness to make certain concessions. Last Friday he phoned US President Barack Obama in Saudi Arabia to discuss a “diplomatic resolution to the crisis.” On Sunday, Kerry dismissed Lavrov’s proposal for a Federal Ukraine that was not part of NATO, cynically declaring that was “up to the Ukrainians”—that is, the fascist-led regime in Kiev backed by Washington.

Kerry again rejected Russia’s annexation of the Crimea as “illegal and illegitimate” and accused Russia of massing troops on its border with Ukraine. Western governments are using the alleged Russian troop movements to justify the steady boosting of their military presence in the Baltic states. The former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were admitted into NATO in 2004, but the military alliance did not previously deploy troops there in order not to provoke

Russia. The three states have tiny armies, numbering between 5,000 and 12,000 each, and without any tanks or fighter jets.

This is now being changed. The US has already sent six F-15C combat planes to Lithuania. Britain has promised to send four jets. Other NATO members, including Germany, have also been asked to provide aircraft, including AWACS spy planes that can look deep into Ukraine and Russia.

Simultaneously, NATO has decided to hold Navy exercises in the Baltic Sea, with Norway or Germany providing the command vessel.

Poland, which shares a border with Ukraine, is also the scene of a military build-up. The US has already sent 300 military personnel and 12 warplanes to the country.

NATO foreign ministers meeting on Tuesday in Brussels are expected to decide on further measures. A NATO spokesman announced that they will halt practical collaboration with Russia in the Russia–NATO Council and “extensively” increase military collaboration with Ukraine.

Outgoing NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen told the German press that the alliance was considering options “to revise military plans, hold military maneuvers and increase troops in an appropriate way.” He said the extension of NATO to Eastern Europe over the last 15 years had been a huge success and proposed that new countries be admitted to the alliance, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Georgia and Montenegro. He did not mention Ukraine, but said NATO’s partnership with the country had grown “ever closer.”

These developments confirm that the crisis in Ukraine, which was instigated by the United States, Germany and their European allies, is being used to encircle and intimidate Russia in order to subordinate it to the dictates of Western imperialism.

Within Ukraine, a tug-of-war is developing over the presidential election to be held May 25. Vitali Klitschko, one of the spokesmen of the Maidan protests and leader of the UDAR party, withdrew his candidacy and announced he would support the billionaire businessman Petro Poroshenko. Klitschko will instead run for another influential post, mayor of Kiev, to be elected the same day.

With a fortune of \$1.8 billion, Poroshenko is ranked seventh on the *Forbes* list of Ukrainian oligarchs. He made his fortune in candies and chocolate, shipbuilding and the armaments industry. He also owns the influential television station Channel 5.

Poroshenko began his political career in the late 1990s and repeatedly changed sides. Initially, he was a supporter of President Leonid Kuchma. Then, together with the recently deposed president Viktor Yanukovich, he founded the Party of Regions. Soon after, he joined up with

Yanukovich's rival Viktor Yushchenko and supported the so-called "Orange Revolution." After Yushchenko was elected president, Poroshenko became foreign minister. When Yanukovich returned to power, Poroshenko briefly assumed leadership of the country's Economics Ministry.

Poroshenko apparently decided to support the Maidan protests after Russia, in an attempt to pressure the Yanukovich government, banned the import of his brand of chocolate, costing him millions in profits. His Channel 5 TV was continuously present on Maidan Square, pumping out propaganda in support of the protests.

Poroshenko has the support of Germany and other European governments. Together with Klitschko, who has been heavily backed by Berlin, he was invited to the Munich Security Conference in February. Poroshenko and Klitschko have in recent weeks met with both British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President François Hollande.

According to Ukrainian opinion polls, Poroshenko has the support of 25 percent of voters, far more than any other candidate. He is considered to be a more conciliatory figure than his main rival, Yulia Tymoshenko, whose rabid Ukrainian nationalism threatens to divide the country and plunge it into civil war.

Kyryl Savin of the Green Party-affiliated Heinrich Böll Foundation in Kiev told *Deutsche Welle*: "I don't think he is going to play the radical nationalist card. On the contrary, he'll try to keep the country together somehow."

Evidently, European governments have concluded that Tymoshenko is too much of a loose cannon and they need a safer pair of hands in Kiev to ensure their interests. They also see billionaire businessman Poroshenko as the ideal candidate to implement the draconian austerity measures and mass sackings demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

The fact that one of the richest oligarchs is now promoted by leaders of the Maidan and the Western powers to be Ukraine's next president explodes the claim that the protests in Kiev represented a struggle for democracy and against corruption. The new government was installed as a result of a fascist-led coup whose purpose was to bring to power a pro-Western government, deepen the subordination of the country to the dictates of the Ukrainian oligarchs and international finance capital, and provide a staging ground for Western imperialist efforts to weaken and isolate Russia.