

Russia Outflanks Obama on Ukraine

Sept. 23—While the Obama Administration continues to press for even more international sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis, Russian leaders are working with European interlocutors and others to hammer out a lasting ceasefire, as the first step toward a settlement.

The Contact Group on Ukraine, which includes representatives of the Ukrainian government, the Russian Federation, and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk republics, meeting with officials of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), signed a memorandum in Minsk, Belarus, on Sept. 20, agreeing on a complete ceasefire, establishment of a buffer zone in eastern Ukraine, withdrawal of heavy weapons from the contact line on both sides, and deployment of an OSCE monitoring mission. The memorandum, which has received scant coverage in the American media, was read out to reporters by former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma; it has nine provisions, as reported by RIA Novosti:

1. The ceasefire is to be considered bilateral.
2. Military elements and military formations shall be stopped at their contact line as of Sept. 19.
3. Usage of all kinds of weapons and offensive actions are prohibited.
4. Within 24 hours of the approval of this memorandum, weapons with a caliber of more than 100 millimeters shall be moved at least 15 kilometers away from the contact line on both sides, including from the residential areas, which would create an opportunity to establish a 30-kilometer buffer zone.
5. Deployment of heavy weapons and heavy equipment in the region confined by residential areas is prohibited.
6. Placing of mine barriers at the border of the buffer zone is prohibited. Mine barriers that were placed there earlier shall be removed.
7. Flights of operational aircraft and foreign aerial vehicles, except for the vehicles of the OSCE, over the buffer zone are prohibited.

8. In the ceasefire zone, the OSCE monitoring mission shall be deployed within 24 hours of the approval of this memorandum. It is desirable that the above-mentioned zone shall be divided into sectors. The number of the sectors' borders shall be negotiated in the course of the preparation of the work of the OSCE monitoring mission's group of observers.

9. All the foreign armed groups, military equipment, as well as fighters and mercenaries, shall withdraw from Ukrainian territory under the supervision of the OSCE.

The OSCE issued a statement, posted on its website, welcoming the agreement. Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter, who is also the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, called the memorandum “a significant step towards making the ceasefire sustainable and an important contribution in the efforts to peacefully settle the crisis in Eastern Ukraine.” He expressed his expectation that the memorandum would “bring relief to the suffering populations in the affected areas, and concluded by calling upon all sides to help consolidate the path of de-escalation.

Business leaders from the U.S., Germany, Russia, and Ukraine took a complementary initiative the week of Sept. 15, in a meeting at the home of Davos Economic Forum organizer Klaus Schwab in Geneva. They called for all parties to hold to the ceasefire, for the scaling back of sanctions, consideration of a policy of military non-alignment for Ukraine, and an economic recovery plan for the country.

Poroshenko Leaves U.S. Empty-Handed

Meanwhile, the Ukraine crisis was given center-stage attention in Washington in the closing days of the pre-election Congressional session, with the visit of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to the U.S. capital. He met with President Barack Obama on Sept. 17 and 18, as well as with other top Administration officials, and delivered a 45-minute speech before a joint session of Congress, where he practically begged for American weapons and for fast-track Ukraine membership in NATO, as well as immediate special status as a strategic ally of the Atlantic Alliance.

But Poroshenko went home to Kiev largely empty-handed. His request for lethal military aid was rejected, and the NATO membership issue remains elusive, because numerous NATO members oppose it, as a provocation against Russia.