

West Vows 'Serious Consequences' for Russia's 'Land Grab'

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Denouncing Russia's actions in Crimea as "nothing more than a land grab," U.S. Vice President Joe Biden warned Russia on Tuesday that the U.S. and Europe would impose further sanctions as Moscow moved to annex part of Ukraine.

With limited options, the U.S. was seeking ways to show it will not stand idly by as President Vladimir Putin signed a treaty for the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea to join Russia. So far, Putin has been undeterred by sanctions and visa bans levied by the U.S. and the European Union, and there is no U.S. appetite for military intervention.

"Russia has offered a variety of arguments to justify what is nothing more than a land grab, including what he said today," Biden said in Poland, which shares a border with both Russia and Ukraine. "But the world has seen through Russia's actions and has rejected the flawed logic behind those actions."

The White House issued a statement Tuesday evening condemning Russia's attempt at annexation and saying the U.S. would not recognize it. That statement echoed the words

of many other Western leaders who denounced Russia's annexation Tuesday, including French President Francois Hollande, who said Europe needed a "strong and coordinated" response.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry, for its part, said it did not recognize the treaty signed at the Kremlin making Crimea a subject of Russia.

Biden arrived early Tuesday in a region on edge over Russia's nascent aggression in Crimea. Amid eerie echoes of the Cold War, U.S. allies including Poland have raised concerns that they could be next should the global community be unable to persuade Putin to back down.

The Group of Seven leading industrial nations — which include the U.S., Germany, Britain, Canada, France, Japan and Italy — are set to meet next week in The Hague to discuss Russia's actions in Crimea. The G7 leaders have already suspended preparations for a Group of Eight summit scheduled for June in Sochi because of the Ukraine crisis.

Former Soviet states are among the most alarmed by the prospect that Moscow could be resuming its traditional imperial ambitions. But Ukraine is at greater risk militarily because it lacks membership in NATO and the promise of collective defensive measures that NATO membership provides.

In a clear warning to Moscow not to test other nations along its border, Biden said the U.S. commitment to defending its NATO allies is "ironclad." He promised more sanctions would be coming, along with new NATO training and exercises that will take place in Poland.

Meanwhile, major Western powers sought fresh ways to show that Russia would incur real costs unless it changes course.

The White House announced that President Barack Obama was inviting the leaders of the G7 to a meeting in Europe next week to discuss further action. The group normally meets under the banner of the G8, which includes Russia, but has suspended preparations for upcoming G8 talks.

And in London, British Foreign Secretary William Hague says Britain was suspending military cooperation with Russia in light of the crisis. British Prime Minister David Cameron also slammed Russia for its actions in Crimea, saying that "it is completely unacceptable for Russia to use force to change borders on the basis of a sham referendum held at the barrel of a Russian gun."

Cameron vowed that Russia would face serious consequences said he would "push European leaders to agree further EU measures" on Thursday.

"It is a simple fact that Russia's political and economic isolation will only increase if it continues down this dark path," Biden said, adding that virtually the entire world rejects the referendum in Crimea on Sunday that cleared the way for Russia to absorb it.

In sessions Tuesday in the Polish capital and later in Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, Biden was to discuss the crisis with the leaders of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia — three Baltic nations that are deeply concerned about what Russia's military intervention in Ukraine's Crimean peninsula might portend for the region.

All four countries share borders with Russia, while Poland also borders Ukraine. Poland broke away from Moscow's domination in 1989 and was a vocal advocate for Ukraine forging closer ties with the E.U. — a dispute at the heart of Ukraine's political crisis.

"This trial, this challenge that we are facing will not be for a month or a year," Tusk said after meeting with Biden. "We are facing a strategic perspective for many years to come."

Biden said the goal is for NATO to emerge from this crisis stronger and more unified than ever. While in Europe, Biden planned to discuss what additional steps the U.S. can take to shore up security for Poland and the Baltics, such as increased training, said a senior administration official, who was not authorized to comment by name and demanded anonymity.

At Warsaw's request, the U.S. last week sent some 300 air troops and a dozen F-16 fighters to Poland for joint training in a show of military support for a key ally.

Material from The Moscow Times is included in this report.

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