

Obama Tells Russia More Sanctions Are 'Teed Up'

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TOKYO — Accusing Russia of failing to live up to its commitments, U.S. President Barack Obama warned Moscow on Thursday that the U.S. has another round of economic sanctions "teed up" — even as he acknowledged that those penalties may do little to influence President Vladimir Putin's handling of the crisis in Ukraine.

Obama's frank pessimism underscored the limits of Washington's ability to prevent Russia from stirring up instability in Ukraine's east and exerting influence over elections scheduled for next month in the former Soviet republic. A diplomatic accord that offered a glimmer of hope for a resolution to the tense dispute is crumbling, and Russia has warned of a firm response if the country's citizens or interests in Ukraine are attacked.

With no appetite in the U.S. for a military response, Obama is largely banking on Putin caving under a cascade of economic sanctions targeting his closest associates. But the success of that strategy also depends on European nations with closer financial ties to Moscow taking similar action despite their concern about a boomerang effect on their own economies.

"I understand that additional sanctions may not change Mr. Putin's calculus," Obama said during a joint news conference in Tokyo with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. "How well they change his calculus in part depends on not only us applying sanctions but also the cooperation of other countries."

The president's comments came one week after Russia signed an agreement with the U.S., Ukraine and Europe that called for pro-Russian forces to leave the government buildings they have occupied throughout eastern Ukraine and allow international monitors into the region. But there has been little indication that Russia is following through on its commitments.

"There was some possibility that Russia could take the wiser course after the meeting in Geneva," Obama said. "So far at least, we have seen them not abide by the spirit or the letter of the agreement."

The president said the U.S. has crafted a new package of sanctions to punish Russia for failing to follow through on the Geneva accord, but he stopped short of saying that he had, in fact, decided to move forward with those penalties.

"There is always the possibility that Russia tomorrow or the next day takes a different course," he said. "Do I think they are going to do that? So far the evidence does not make me hopeful."

Echoing comments from other officials in Washington, Obama said a decision on the sanctions would come in a matter of days, not weeks. That timeline would appear to put the decision in the midst of Obama's eight-day Asia trip, which also includes stops in South Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines.

The pending penalties on Russia are expected to target wealthy individuals in Putin's inner circle, as well as the entities they oversee. Although the U.S. has also threatened to levy potentially crippling sanctions on key Russian industries — including its robust energy sector — officials say they only plan to employ those tougher penalties if Russia moves military forces into Ukraine.

The U.S. and Europe have already issued asset freezes and visa bans targeting Russian and Ukrainian officials in response to the Kremlin's annexation of the Crimean peninsula. But those penalties have appeared to do little to convince Putin to avoid fomenting unrest in eastern Ukraine, where the U.S. is accusing Russia of fomenting unrest.

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