



BGS Senior Vice President Julianne Smith Speaks To McClatchy DC About How the U.S. And Europe Should Respond to Russian Adventurism.

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U.S., Europe split over imposing tough sanctions on Russia
By Hannah Allam

U.S. officials are struggling to get Europe on board for harsh punitive measures against Russia, whose incursion into neighboring Ukraine is putting transatlantic relations to the test as nervous European states seek to avoid the fray.

Under pressure from U.S. lawmakers to issue a tough response to what they see as Russian President Vladimir Putin's challenge to U.S. resolve, Obama administration officials have said without much elaboration that a sanctions package is in the works.

But it took enormous wrangling to get the European Union to agree to the largely symbolic move of suspending preparations for the Group of 8's June meeting in Russia, and analysts who receive briefings on the diplomatic efforts said Tuesday that the American side, despite working around the clock, is having difficulty finding common ground with the Europeans.

So far, they say, Europe sees high risks for the continent and very little to suggest that any such action would sway a defiant Putin. The options, then, are the United States going the sanctions route alone or watering down the measures to mollify Europe - both scenarios that would

please Putin, who has a reputation of exploiting any sign of transatlantic splits.

“This is the biggest challenge the transatlantic partnership has had since before the Cold War,” said Susan Corke, director of Eurasia programs at Freedom House and a former State Department official who focused on Europe.

“There can’t be an overstating of how important the next 90 days are,” Corke added, referring to fears that, without de-escalation, the Ukrainian caretaker government and the country’s fragile economy won’t make it to elections set for May.

The result so far is an unusually public divergence over which course to pursue on Russia, with the United States pushing for what one official described as sanctions that “make it hurt” and European partners such as Germany, the Netherlands and Britain urging a more measured approach that leaves room for diplomacy in a crisis that’s escalated at an alarming pace.

U.S. officials also have tried to nudge Russia toward an “off ramp” to avoid sanctions. “If later today or tomorrow they would like to take steps to withdraw their troops, we would welcome that, and certainly that would impact the steps we’re considering or may take,” State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters.

So far, Putin doesn’t seem swayed. Russia’s Gazprom on Tuesday raised the price of natural gas supplies to Europe in what many analysts interpreted as a reminder from Moscow of its hold over European energy markets. And in his first news conference since the crisis began, Putin told reporters in Moscow that he had a right to protect ethnic Russians in Ukraine’s Crimea region and denied that he’d dispatched regular Russian forces to the area – he called them “local self-defense forces.”

Both President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry gave stern public remarks Tuesday on the crisis. While he noted that Putin appeared

to be “pausing for a moment,” Obama said that his Russian counterpart is out of step with international opinion on the Ukrainian uprising and “seems to have a different set of lawyers, making a different set of interpretations.”

Kerry, on a trip to Kiev to rally support for the nascent interim leaders, announced \$1 billion in loan guarantees for the Ukrainian government and warned Russia about its “falsehoods, intimidation and provocations.” He said Moscow seems to be looking for a “pretext for being able to invade further.”

Analysts who monitor transatlantic relations say Washington might have some luck getting European buy-in for asset freezes or visa bans, but that Europe’s energy and trade reliance on Russia - along with serious doubts about the efficacy of sanctions at this juncture - are factors that suggest that the United States will have to take the lead on any targeted sanctions.

Europe, particularly the south, is still reeling from its own economic woes and has little appetite for a fight with a major supplier of oil - mainly to Germany and the Netherlands - and of natural gas to much of the rest of the continent.

“The south doesn’t care about Ukraine - they care about bailing out their economies and dealing with austerity budgets,” said James Carafano, vice president of foreign and defense policy studies at The Heritage Foundation, a conservative research center in Washington. “The last thing they want to be doing is getting dragged into a head-butting match with Russia.”

The European Union is Russia’s biggest trading partner. It exports more oil, gas, uranium and coal to the EU than any other country. In 2012, Russian exports totaled more than \$290 billion, according to financial news agencies and EU statistics online.

Germany is the No. 1 recipient of Russian natural gas and, perhaps not

surprisingly, has been among the most vocal European states on the skepticism over immediate sanctions. German leader Angela Merkel also has a special rapport with Putin – the two reportedly enjoy good relations and converse in German – that’s survived Germany protests over the years at Russia’s campaign in Georgia, its human rights record and treatment of gay and transgender communities, among other thorny issues.

Germany signing on to sanctions against Russia almost certainly would alter that relationship – and could cost the United States a valuable conduit to Moscow at a crucial time.

“We’ve relied on Germany’s ties to the Russians,” said Julie Smith, who was a senior adviser on European and NATO policy at the Pentagon and White House before joining the Center for a New American Security research center last year. “It’s been complicated because sometimes it’s been too cozy for our tastes. But she still has a line in to him and that’s been important to us in the past few days.”

Michael O’Hanlon, a defense expert at the Brookings Institution, a Washington research center, said the issue of finding the right mix of sanctions is a critical one.

“There’s an issue of timing, and there’s an issue of, ‘At what point has the aggression become so severe that you need this kind of response?’” he said. “You don’t want to go to all the trouble of applying it if it’s going to be lackluster or temporary.”

Smith, the former White House and Pentagon official, said that U.S. officials should focus on two main tracks: reassuring Russia’s edgy neighbors, particularly Baltic states that were once part of the Soviet Union, that the United States “hasn’t gone wobbly on its security commitments,” and reminding Russia that its action in Ukraine doesn’t bode well for its chances of joining the U.N. atomic energy watchdog or other international bodies it has courted.

Persuading the Europeans on sanctions is a much more difficult fight.

“For Europe, this feels like bringing down a hammer,” Smith said. “The question for many European countries is, A, is this the right time to use such a big stick? and, B, what consequences will I face?”

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