

Ukraine to Get More U.S. Aid, but Not Weapons; Obama Refuses to Budge on Lethal Aid Despite Poroshenko's Passionate Plea in Congress

Shishkin, Philip; Sparshott, Jeffrey . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y.]18 Sep 2014: n/a.

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ABSTRACT

The White House announced a new \$53 million aid package for Ukraine, which includes counter-mortar radar, radios, vehicles, patrol boats, body armor, helmets and night-vision goggles.

FULL TEXT

WASHINGTON—President Barack Obama stuck to his refusal to provide weapons or other lethal military gear to Ukraine, despite a passionate appeal Thursday for help in fighting pro-Russia rebels by Ukraine's president.

Speaking before a joint session of Congress, President Petro Poroshenko described the monthslong conflict in eastern Ukraine as being at the forefront of a global fight for freedom and democracy.

"The outcome of today's war will determine whether we will be forced to accept the reality of a dark, torn and bitter Europe as part of a new world order," he said in a speech that was interrupted by several standing ovations.

The White House announced a new \$53 million aid package for Ukraine, which includes counter-mortar radar, radios, vehicles, patrol boats, body armor, helmets and night-vision goggles. But it stopped short of providing weapons or other lethal aid the Ukrainians have been seeking.

The decision reflects the Obama administration's long-standing concern that arming Ukraine would provoke Moscow into a further escalation that could drag Washington into a proxy war.

Mr. Obama said the U.S. would lead an effort to secure a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Ukraine that allows it to pursue the closer trade and political ties with Europe that have drawn Moscow's ire.

"We are going to continue to seek to mobilize the international community to say to Russia that Ukraine desires to have a good relationship with all its neighbors, both East and West," Mr. Obama said at the end of an Oval Office meeting with Mr. Poroshenko. "Russia cannot dictate to them their ability to work effectively with other partners in order to better the situation for the Ukrainian people."

In his speech to Congress, Mr. Poroshenko specifically asked Washington for lethal aid. "Blankets and night-vision goggles are important," he said. "But one cannot win a war with blankets."

But after meeting with Mr. Obama, he said that he was satisfied with U.S. support.

"I am getting everything possible," he told reporters. Later, he added: "I asked the president to increase the cooperation in security and defense and I received a positive answer."

As a tenuous cease-fire appeared to establish a frozen conflict in the insurgent-held areas of east Ukraine, Mr. Poroshenko used his Washington speech to cast the fight in broad, civilizational terms, and to nudge the reluctant West to confront the Kremlin more forcefully.

Washington and the European capitals have imposed several rounds of economic sanctions, which, although damaging to the Russian economy, have so far forced no apparent change in the Kremlin's role in Ukraine.

Ukraine's armed forces are regrouping now after suffering heavy losses last month at the hands of the insurgents and what Western officials have said were Russian troops and heavy artillery. Russia denies sending troops or materiel into Ukraine.

Early this month, Mr. Poroshenko accepted a cease-fire deal put forward by Moscow that left the separatists in control of large chunks of east Ukraine.

A major rationale for his requests for lethal aid now is that a stronger military could deter Moscow and the rebels from violating the truce or pressing their offensive further, or demanding more at the negotiating table.

In an emotional speech, Mr. Poroshenko called Russia's annexation of Crimea earlier this year as "one of the most cynical acts of treachery in modern history" and cast the subsequent pro-Russia insurgency in east Ukraine as a "threat to global security everywhere" and as a conflict "between civilization and barbarism."

He argued that the conflict isn't Ukraine's alone. "It is Europe's, and it is America's war, too," he said. "It is a war of the free world--and for a free world."

He dipped into American history for language designed to resonate with an American audience. "'Live free or die' was one of the mottos of the American revolutionary war," Mr. Poroshenko said. "'Live free or die' are the words of Ukrainian soldiers."

"These young boys, underequipped, and often unappreciated by the world, are the only thing that now stands between the reality of peaceful coexistence and the nightmare of a full relapse into the previous century and a new Cold War," he said.

Mr. Obama on Thursday praised Mr. Poroshenko's leadership, including the implementation of the cease-fire, ratification of a landmark deal with Europe and a new law granting limited autonomy to separatist-held territories. "Those were not easy laws that President Poroshenko passed," Mr. Obama said.

He said the U.S. would stand with Ukraine and is prepared to help the country in negotiations with Russia. "The sovereignty and territory of Ukraine is nonnegotiable," Mr. Obama said.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Presidents; Truces & cease fires; Speeches
Location:	Europe Russia United States--US Ukraine
People:	Obama, Barack
Company / organization:	Name: Congress; NAICS: 921120
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal (Online); New York, N.Y.
Pages:	n/a
Publication year:	2014
Publication date:	Sep 18, 2014
Section:	Europe
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	1562691092
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/1562691092?accountid=45205
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Last updated:	2019-04-19
Database:	US Major Dailies

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