REPORT

Making Putin Blink

With Russia's economy in free-fall, will new sanctions finally force Moscow's hand?

By Keith Johnson, Jamila Trindel  December 16, 2014  Keith Johnson @KFJ_FP

The West’s financial weapons against Russia were meant to hit President Vladimir Putin’s foundation of power — the men and companies close to him — with surgical precision. Instead, Western sanctions, falling oil prices, and Moscow’s clumsy attempts to stem the damage have helped push the Russian economy closer to a meltdown.

With the stakes rising, the United States is doubling down on hurting Moscow. Despite earlier administration misgivings, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on Tuesday that President Barack Obama will sign a bill Congress passed Saturday that authorizes additional sanctions on Russian energy and defense firms. Meanwhile, Secretary of State John Kerry reiterated his calls for Russia to reverse course on its occupation of parts of Ukraine.

The slow-motion agony of the Russian economy went into overdrive this week with a currency collapse sparked by Moscow’s own ham-fisted efforts at damage control. The ruble, which has been sinking all year, shed 10 percent on Monday, driving Russians and anyone stuck with rubles to scrounge for dollars.
REPORT

Obama Can Thank Ted Cruz for Helping Him Fill Key Posts

The Texas Republican's grandstanding allowed Harry Reid to push a wave of White House appointees through the Senate.

BY JOHN HUDSON  DECEMBER 16, 2014  JOHN.HUDSON  @JOHN_HUDSON

Republicans are ripping Texas Sen. Ted Cruz for inadvertently helping Barack Obama’s administration push through the controversial nominations of a number of key foreign-policy nominees, including Tony Blinken for deputy secretary of state and Frank Rose for assistant secretary of state for verification and compliance, a key arms control post.

Those nominations have long been opposed by hawkish Republicans and faced a number of procedural hurdles to confirmation. But this weekend, Cruz bucked his own party leadership and kept the Senate in session for a rare Saturday workday in order to protest the president’s executive action on immigration. Cruz, a Tea party firebrand, had no intention of helping the White House, but his parliamentary maneuvering had the unintended effect of allowing Democrats to move forward with a whopping 24 White House nominees on Saturday — dramatically shortening what is normally a