

U.S. puts troops on alert and NATO sends ships, fighter jets to Eastern Europe as Russia continues buildup on Ukraine border

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MOSCOW — The tense conflict over Ukraine shifted further into full crisis mode Monday, with NATO saying it was moving more military equipment into Eastern Europe and Russia continuing to build up massed forces along the border with Ukraine, amid fears that it will invade its neighbor.

The Biden administration also put 8,500 troops on heightened alert for a potential deployment to Europe.

“NATO will continue to take all necessary measures to protect and defend all Allies, including by reinforcing the eastern part of the Alliance,” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said of new [NATO deployments](#), including moving additional ships and fighter jets.

The American forces put on standby include U.S.-based intelligence and transportation units, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said, cautioning that no final decisions have been made.

“This is really about reassuring the eastern flank of Europe,” Kirby told reporters. “It’s proving how seriously the United States takes our Article 5 commitment,” he added, referring to NATO’s mutual defense clause.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia was watching NATO’s moves and President Vladimir Putin was “taking measures to ensure that our security and our interests are properly protected.”

The Belarusian Defense Ministry said Monday that Russian troops continued to arrive in the country, which borders Ukraine, ahead of a major training exercise next month. Further video surfaced on social media Monday showing Russian military convoys and trains with military equipment moving across southern Russia and Belarus.

Preparations for a possible reinforcement of NATO allies bordering Russia came as President Biden held a secure video call with European leaders to discuss the increasing tensions over Ukraine. Biden described the nearly 90-minute call on Monday afternoon as a “very, very good” discussion. “Total unanimity with all the European leaders,” he told reporters.

“The leaders underscored their shared desire for a diplomatic resolution to the current tensions and reviewed recent engagements with Russia in multiple formats,” the White House said in a summary of the meeting. “The leaders also discussed their joint efforts to deter further Russian aggression against Ukraine, including preparations to impose massive consequences and severe economic costs on Russia for such actions as well as to reinforce security on NATO’s eastern flank.”

Even as the Biden administration seeks a diplomatic resolution, it, along with a handful of Western allies, has begun to take the kind of dramatic steps typically reserved for the eve of anticipated armed action.

Britain ordered some diplomats and their families to leave Ukraine, a day after the United States ordered families of diplomats to leave Kyiv and authorized nonessential diplomatic staff to leave. The State Department also cautioned American citizens to consider leaving Ukraine, with U.S. officials warning that an attack could happen “at any time.”

The Pentagon also recently deployed a small unit of Marines to reinforce those assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, said a senior Marine Corps official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian leaders have at once made appeals for foreign aid and sought to downplay the sense of impending crisis.

On Monday, President Volodymyr Zelensky, underscoring differing assessments of the threat facing Ukraine, said that “all is under control, there is no reason to panic.”

“We know about everything, are ready for everything and believe in [things becoming] better,” he said in a video address following a meeting of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council. “And we are doing absolutely everything for this, everything that’s needed.”

Zelensky dismissed reports that the country faced an energy crisis this winter due to fuel shortages. “There’s only one thing we don’t have enough of — a reason to panic,” he said.

Monday’s developments came as Russia scales up its military presence around Ukraine and demands answers to sweeping security demands it has made of the United States and NATO. The proposals, which the Kremlin made last month, would bar Ukraine from joining the alliance and limit Western military activity in the former Soviet sphere.

While the Biden administration has dismissed many of those demands, officials are now working to compile written responses in keeping with a Russian request. State Department spokesman Ned Price said what officials have described as a “non-paper” would also include American proposals for compromise steps on arms control and military exercises.

Last week’s whirlwind tour of Europe by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, including a meeting in Geneva with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, failed to yield any immediate breakthrough on those proposals or reducing tensions.

Russian officials have repeatedly denied any plan to invade Ukraine and asserted that Russia has a right to move troops and hold military exercises on its own territory and with allies. Russian and Belarusian officials have announced joint military exercises in Belarus next month, raising Western fears of a possible ground attack on northern Ukraine from Belarus, and Russian military officials announced a naval exercise involving 20 vessels from the Baltic Fleet.

The Russian Defense Ministry last week announced it would send 12 Su-35 fighters, two S-400 battalions and a Pantsir-S air defense system to Belarus.

Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, blamed the United States and NATO for the escalation of tensions over Ukraine, accusing them of stoking “informational hysteria” against Russia. He complained of “lies and fakes” coming from Western officials.

“I want to draw your attention to the fact that all of this is not happening because of what we, Russia, are doing. It is all happening because of what the United States [and] NATO are doing and because of the information they are spreading,” Peskov told journalists.

The United States and Britain in the past week have aired allegations of separate Russian plans to destabilize the Ukrainian government and install a pro-Moscow regime. Russia has denied the allegations.

Peskov also accused Ukraine of boosting its forces along the line of contact that divides Kyiv-controlled Ukraine from two unrecognized separatist republics, the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. The regions, backed by Russia, split from Ukraine in 2014 after Moscow annexed Crimea. The resulting conflict in eastern Ukraine, which has killed more than 13,000 people, continues.

The threat of a Ukrainian attack against the regions was "now very high," Peskov claimed.

Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko said that Kyiv had repeated many times that "Ukraine is committed to peace and diplomacy, and does not plan any military attacks."

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko accused Ukraine of moving forces to its northern border with Belarus and threatened to further bolster the Belarusian side of the border.

"We just want to protect our southern border," he said, speaking at a meeting with the head of the Belarusian border guards, the BelTA state news agency reported.

European Union President Ursula von der Leyen on Monday announced 1.2 billion euros (\$1.35 billion) in emergency aid to help Kyiv meet financing needs "due to the conflict."

Despite the escalation, the bloc's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said Monday that most E.U. countries would not immediately scale back staffing at embassies or send diplomatic families home.

"We are not going to do the same thing because we don't know any specific reasons," Borrell told journalists before a meeting of E.U. foreign ministers that Blinken was due to join online, Reuters reported. "Negotiations are going on," Borrell added.

The German Foreign Ministry said Monday that families of German diplomats were given the option of leaving Ukraine, but diplomats would stay. "This is the appropriate measure in the current situation," said spokesman Christofer Burger.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said only a handful of the 129 foreign missions in Ukraine had made a decision to pull out diplomats or their families. "The rest ... have not expressed their intention to follow such premature steps," Nikolenko said on Twitter.

Even as NATO leaders stress a united front in support of Ukraine, European nations have been split on what sanctions should be on the table and whether to send defensive weapons to Ukraine.

German officials Monday ruled out any change to Berlin's decision not to supply Kyiv with such weapons, but Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said Berlin was working with Washington and E.U. members on potential joint sanctions should Russia invade.

Andy Hunder, president of the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine, said the decisions by the United States and Britain to scale back embassy staff were "worrying" but added that American business executives in Ukraine were doing "business as usual," while making contingency plans.

"But I think, you know, it still is hoping for the best but preparing for what may come," Hunder said.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Monday said that Russia's embassy in Kyiv is operating normally, disputing Western media reports that staffing had been reduced.

Stern reported from Kyiv, and Ryan and Demirjian reported from Washington. Loveday Morris in Berlin and Ashley Parker, Dan Lamothe and John Hudson in Washington contributed to this report.

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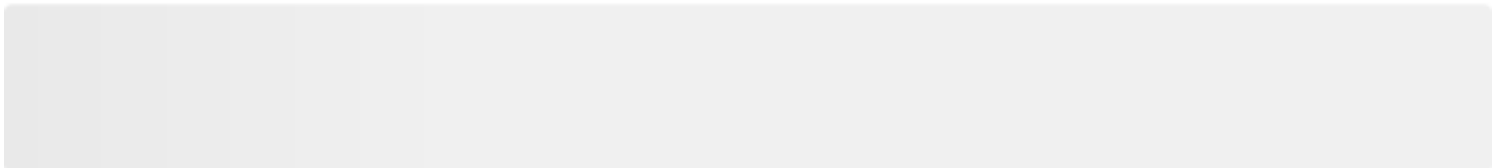
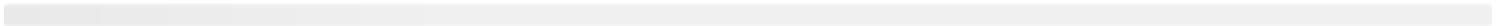
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