



Russian Deployments Near Ukraine Likely Intended to Pressure Zelensky, not Biden

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Ongoing reports of increased Russian troop movements on Ukraine's borders and violations of the July 2020 ceasefire have drawn widespread attention and alarm but do not likely presage imminent Russian military action against Ukraine.

What we know so far:

- The *New York Times* reported on March 31 that the US military's European Command (EUCOM) raised its watch level to the highest level in the last week of March 2021.¹ A Pentagon spokesperson stated EUCOM is "monitoring the situation."²
- Russia's proxies in eastern Ukraine escalated attacks on Ukrainian positions throughout March 2021. Neither Russia nor Ukraine has formally revoked the standing July 2020 ceasefire in Donbas, and ceasefire monitors remain in place, but Russia declined a Ukrainian offer to issue a joint reaffirmation of the ceasefire on March 31.³
- US and Ukrainian statements about the scale of Russian force deployments vary considerably. A US official told the *New York Times* that Russia recently deployed 4,000 additional troops to the Ukrainian border.⁴ Ukrainian Commander in Chief Ruslan Komchak claimed on March 30 that Russia is deploying 25 additional Battalion Tactical Groups (BTGs), which would consist of considerably more than 4,000 troops, to Ukraine's borders beyond the 28 currently deployed BTGs, but did not specify a timeframe for these projected deployments.⁵
- Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley called his Ukrainian and Russian counterparts on March 31 to discuss the Russian deployments.⁶
- Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart on April 1.⁷
- Ukraine invited NATO to organize joint military exercises and air patrols to "stabilize the situation" on April 1. NATO has not yet responded.⁸

Several independent sources reported video of Russian units deploying toward Ukraine from March 30 to April 1, including:

- The 56th Air Assault Brigade deployed to Crimea on March 30 following an announcement by Russian Defense Minister Shoigu on March 25 that the brigade would permanently redeploy to Crimea by the end of 2021.⁹
- An unidentified Russian engineering unit was observed 25 kilometers east of Luhansk, Ukraine, on March 30.¹⁰
- An unidentified artillery unit, which could be part of the 56th Air Assault Brigade, deployed to Crimea by rail on March 31.¹¹
- A Russian logistical convoy moved from Rostov to eastern Ukraine on March 31.¹²

- Russian trucks were seen driving through occupied Luhansk, Ukraine, on April 1.¹³

The Kremlin claims all ongoing military deployments are part of a preplanned readiness check. Russia's Southern Military District (SMD) is conducting an annual readiness check from March 29 to the end of April, including over 50 component exercises across southern Russia and occupied Crimea.¹⁴ The Russian Ministry of Defense is not individually announcing the component exercises, which are predominantly at the company and battalion level.¹⁵ The SMD borders eastern Ukraine and is responsible for the command and control of Russia's proxy forces in Donbas. Putin's spokesperson, Dmitri Peskov, and SMD spokesperson Vadim Astafiev claimed all current Russian movements are components of the ongoing readiness check on April 1.¹⁶ The SMD holds annual readiness checks every April. However, it is unclear from available information what Russian deployments are and are not part of prescheduled exercises. The deployment of the 56th Air Assault Brigade is not likely part of a normal readiness check given the MoD's announcement that it is permanently moving to Crimea.

The purpose of these attention-grabbing Russian deployments is unclear. Most Western reporting and analysis of the Russian deployments do not identify a likely Russian course of action they would support. Many frame the Russian activities as a test of the Biden administration.¹⁷ The Kremlin's movements may be intended to support one of several possible courses of action.

The most likely objective of these activities is to coerce Ukrainian President Zelensky to make concessions in the ongoing peace process. The Kremlin routinely escalates its aggression in eastern Ukraine to pressure Ukraine during negotiations.¹⁸ Russian deployments may be intended to complement Putin's discussion with French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel on March 30, which the Kremlin exploited to suggest Russia may continue the Ukrainian peace process without Ukrainian participation.¹⁹ President Zelensky's government continues to focus on negotiations despite ongoing Russian aggression. Zelensky issued a statement on April 1 decrying Russian threats, calling for further negotiations on a ceasefire, and reaffirming his commitment to "negotiate a truce as the fastest tactical step."²⁰ The Kremlin likely seeks to intimidate Zelensky into unfavorable negotiations that exploit his stated desire to reach a settlement and extract concessions such as direct recognition of Russian proxies or the resumption of water supplies to occupied Crimea.

The Kremlin may intend to create a pretext to deploy "peacekeepers" in Donbas by creating the impression of a Ukrainian provocation. The Kremlin falsely frames itself as a neutral party in the Donbas conflict and has previously proposed creating a supposedly neutral peacekeeping force, potentially including Belarusian forces.²¹ ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin has conducted a disinformation campaign claiming Ukraine will launch an offensive against Russia's proxies in eastern Ukraine since early March.²² Russian deployments may be intended to provoke Ukrainian forces into an attack on Russian proxies in violation of ceasefire agreements or to set conditions in which a false-flag attack by proxies on themselves could be more readily blamed on Kyiv. The Kremlin could then exploit Ukrainian "aggression" to call for the deployment of a peacekeeping force involving Russian or Belarusian troops. A Kremlin-backed peacekeeping force in Donbas would legitimize the Kremlin's desired framing of Russia as a neutral arbiter in a Ukrainian civil conflict and grant Russia a permanent lever of influence against Ukraine.

Russian force movements may be intended to distract from another Kremlin line of effort, such as ongoing military pressure in Belarus. The Kremlin's force deployments in Crimea and on Ukraine's eastern borders—and Western reactions to them—have drawn widespread attention in the US government, mainstream media, and analytical community. Russian exercises around Ukraine may be intended to draw US attention, or political capital for a response, away from other Kremlin lines of effort. The Kremlin is rapidly advancing its ongoing campaign to integrate the Belarusian military into Kremlin-dominated structures, including establishing new joint training center and deploying additional Russian forces to the Kaliningrad exclave to threaten NATO's eastern flank.²³ The Kremlin could additionally seek to distract from escalating repressive measures inside Russia or another international effort. Analysts should keep a watchful eye on other aspects of the Kremlin's malign global campaigns during these attention-grabbing actions near Ukraine.

Russia is unlikely to be preparing for either a major or localized offensive against Ukraine at this time. Large scale Russian force deployments, a logistical buildup, and a likely NATO response would be indicators of looming large-scale offensive operations against Ukraine. Russia's frontline conventional units have not deployed at the brigade level or above during ongoing readiness checks in the SMD. Russia's Western Military District (WMD) has likewise not mobilized key regiments and divisions that would likely be necessary to support an offensive against Ukraine. ISW has not observed or captured reports of the buildup of logistical supplies—including fuel, ammunition, and medical supplies—which would be

necessary to support a major offensive. The United States, Ukraine, and NATO would almost certainly observe the preparations for a major offensive and issue far more strident statements than they have so far made.

Russian deployments do not indicate preparations for an imminent, more-localized conventional escalation either. If Putin intended to conduct a sudden operation—such as a surprise air assault to secure the Crimean canal, or a mechanized offensive using forces permanently stationed on the Ukrainian border—the Russian military would not have openly telegraphed ongoing deployments. The Kremlin has additionally not set conditions in the information space for major operations. Russia’s campaign to regain dominant influence over Ukraine is concentrated on the information space, and the Kremlin has not taken rhetorical steps to justify a major offensive. The Kremlin’s ongoing disinformation campaign claiming Ukraine will attack occupied Donbas would not likely support an overt Russian conventional attack into Ukraine on any scale without further conditions-setting. The Kremlin is therefore unlikely to be preparing for offensive action at this time.

The Kremlin is unlikely to be redeploying forces and making provocative statements solely to test the Biden administration. Many current reports argue the Kremlin is deploying troops near Ukraine to test the Biden administration. It is unclear what Putin could intend such a “test” to demonstrate.

The United States could respond to Russian posturing with statements, sanctions, additional aid to Ukraine, or troop deployments of its own to either Ukraine or Ukraine’s NATO neighbors. Putin has shown little interest historically in US rhetoric and is unlikely to have ordered this movement of military assets simply to prompt a response from the White House. The United States is unlikely to impose further sanctions in response to Russian military deployments occurring exclusively within Russia’s borders and illegally occupied Crimea. The United States could conceivably increase its military aid to Ukraine. Finally, the United States is highly unlikely to deploy conventional forces to Ukraine in response to Russian deployments of this variety.

Both an increase in military aid to Ukraine and the deployment of American or NATO troops further east would be major setbacks for Putin’s campaign to regain dominance over Ukraine. He is therefore highly unlikely to have taken actions that he thought might provoke such responses. Furthermore, the US response to these recent Russian military movements is unlikely to provide Putin with any useful indication of how the United States might respond to a more dramatic Russian escalation in the future. The Kremlin thus is far more likely to be posturing in support of a Ukraine-focused outcome than orienting on Washington’s response to its actions.

Russian deployments around Ukraine must be assessed in the context of Putin’s broader objectives against Ukraine.

The Kremlin’s primary objective against Ukraine is to regain dominant influence over the government in Kyiv and prevent Ukraine from joining NATO or the EU. Putin’s campaign against Ukraine is centered on an information campaign to normalize truncated Ukrainian sovereignty. Russia’s proxy forces in eastern Ukraine are a means to the end of securing leverage over Ukraine, not an end themselves. Putin has successfully ensured Ukraine is unlikely to join NATO or the EU by occupying Ukrainian territory. The Kremlin continues to prioritize shaping peace talks with Zelensky to achieve a Kremlin-favorable outcome. Putin is highly unlikely to resort to major offensive operations—which would almost certainly result in further painful sanctions if not a US or NATO military response—unless he assesses direct conquest is the only way to regain dominance over Ukraine. Ukraine, the United States, and its allies must therefore assess Russian actions in the context of Russian objectives and potential courses of action; these actions currently point to an escalation of the ongoing Russian pressure campaign against Ukrainian President Zelensky, not an imminent offensive.

¹ Andrew E. Kramer, “Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/europe/ukraine-russia-fighting.html>.

² Max Seddon and Roman Olearchyk, “Tensions Flare Between Russia and Ukraine,” *Financial Times*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/6a3d49e4-ffc8-4fd2-90c8-8516c2c89c8f>.

³ “TCG Talks: Russia Turns Down Offer to Secure Truce in Donbas from April 1,” UNIAN, March 31, 2021, <https://www.unian dot info/war/donbas-russia-turns-down-ukraine-s-offer-to-secure-truce-in-donbas-from-april-1-11373031.html>; Ukrainian Delegation to the Trilateral Contact Group, Facebook March 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/UkrdelegationTCG/posts/239600531283698>.

⁴ Andrew E. Kramer, “Fighting Escalates in Eastern Ukraine, Signaling the End to Another Cease-Fire,” *New York Times*, March 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/30/world/europe/ukraine-russia-fighting.html>.

⁵ Battalion Tactical Groups are motorized rifle or tank battalions with attached ATGM, artillery, reconnaissance, engineer, and rear support units, intended to be self-sufficient ground combat units. BTGs range in size from 700-900 personnel, and each Russian brigade or regiment fields two BTGs. [“The Quantity of Battalion Groups Consisting of Contract Soldiers in the Russian Army Will Reach 125 in Two Years - Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation,”] Interfax, September 14, 2016, <https://www.militarynews dot ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=425709&lang=RU>; “Contractees in BTGs,” *Russian Defense Policy*, September

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- ⁶ ["Head of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation Valery Gerasimov Had a Telephone Conversation With the Chairman of the Committee of Chiefs of Staff of the US Armed Forces Mark Milley,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 31, 2021, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12351887@egNews; "Readout of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Milley's Phone Call with Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Gerasimov," Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Public Affairs, March 31, 2021, <https://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/2557092/readout-of-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-milleys-phone-call-with-ru/>; "Russian and U.S. military Chiefs of Staff Hold Phone Call," Reuters, March 31, 2021, <https://news.trust.org/item/20210331170618-yrxzk/>.
- ⁷ US Secretary of Defense, Twitter, April 1, 2021, <https://twitter.com/SecDef/status/1377693917689344001?s=20>.
- ⁸ "Deputy Head of the Office of the President Roman Mashovets and Head of the NATO Representation to Ukraine Alexander Vinnikov Discussed the Security Situation in Donbas and Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration," Office of the President of Ukraine, April 1, 2021, <https://www.president.gov dot ua/en/news/zastupnik-kerivnika-ofisu-prezidenta-roman-mashovec-obgovori-67749>.
- ⁹ ["Shoigu Announced the Formation of a New Airborne Regiment in Crimea,"] Izvestia, March 25, 2021, <https://iz dot ru/1142141/2021-03-25/shoigu-soobshchil-o-sozdani-novogo-polka-vdv-v-krymu>; Igor Girkin, Twitter, March 30, <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1376953240915476489?s=20>; Igor Girkin, Twitter, March 31, <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1377266153207250944?s=20>.
- ¹⁰ Petri Makela, Twitter, March 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/pmakela1/status/1377332457209393152?s=20>.
- ¹¹ Herooftheday10, Twitter, March 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/herooftheday10/status/1377164096987000832?s=20>.
- ¹² Herooftheday10, Twitter, March 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/herooftheday10/status/1377280560406597634?s=20>.
- ¹³ Marqs, Twitter, April 1, 2021, https://twitter.com/MarQs_/status/1377620873457373185?s=20.
- ¹⁴ ["Formations and Units of the Southern Military District Began to Pass the Control Check for the Winter Training Period,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 29, 2021, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12351446@egNews; ["The Control Check of the Southern Military District Troops will Take Place in the Format of Bilateral Tactical Exercises,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 31, 2021, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12351798@egNews.
- ¹⁵ The Russian Ministry of Defense issued announcements of broad components of the readiness check, including the participation of engineering troops in all exercises and tank exercises in Chechnya, but has not issued readouts of the participating units and locations of individual exercises. ["Engineering Units Will Provide Ferries for Motorized Riflemen of the Southern Military District During Exercises During a Control Check,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, March 31, 2021, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12351801@egNews; ["In Chechnya, the Tankers of the Southern Military District Began to Pass the Control Check During the Winter Training Period,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, April 1, 2021, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12351994@egNews; ["Servicemen of the Southern Military District in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia Began to Pass the Check During the Winter Training Period,"] Russian Ministry of Defense, April 1, 2021, https://function.mil dot ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12352006@egNews.
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- ²³ ISW will publish an assessment of March 2021 joint Russian/Belarusian military exercises in early April.