



U.S. Nears NATO Troop Commitment as Russia Hovers on Ukraine Border

Elliot Davis Jr.

January 25, 2022

President Joe Biden is stepping up options – including possibly deploying U.S. troops – in response to Russia’s aggression on the Ukraine border, where a tenuous and unpredictable situation is unfolding toward confrontation.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Monday put about 8,500 U.S.-based troops on “heightened alert,” meaning that in some cases units are now on a five-day timeline to prepare to deploy to Europe compared to 10 days.

But the tone from the Pentagon was more cautious on Tuesday, with press secretary John Kirby emphasizing that the possibility of an imminent invasion of Ukraine remains unclear as analysts speculate on Russian President Vladimir Putin’s motivations – and his next steps.

“We still don’t believe that Mr. Putin has made a final decision whether to conduct another incursion/invasion into Ukraine, so we still think there’s time and space here for diplomacy to work,” he said.

Kirby declined on Tuesday to offer any more details about the composition of the U.S. troops on heightened alert or where they could deploy. The “vast majority” of those troops would be intended for the NATO Response Force, Kirby said during Monday’s news conference, which would require agreement from all 30 member countries of the Cold War-era alliance to activate them. He has also noted that U.S. European Command still maintains tens of thousands of American forces on the continent that could be redeployed in coordination with U.S. allies.

But Kirby warned that any deployment of new U.S. forces to Europe – which the Kremlin subsequently blasted as “escalating tensions” in and around Ukraine – would not be “the silver bullet that is going to solve this.”

Biden himself has been guarded on the subject since delivering candid remarks during a lengthy press conference last week. While keeping his options open, he spoke plainly to reporters on Tuesday about the scope and seriousness of Putin’s next move.

“This would be the largest – if he were to move in – the largest invasion since World War II,” Biden said. “It would change the world.”

The president's decision to place troops on heightened alert suggests that his administration is at least preparing for the possibility of a military response if Putin invades Ukraine, following weeks of emphasizing economic punishments against Moscow for an incursion.

Russia is 'a power in decline' but still poses a military threat, says NATO chief

Complicating matters are divisions among Western allies. Germany in recent days has blocked fellow NATO countries from shipping weapons to Ukraine, with some of its most senior officials claiming such moves are needlessly provocative and may violate German law. Berlin has come under criticism in recent weeks for being more deferential to Russia, on which it now heavily relies for energy supplies from the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline that runs from Russia through the Baltic Sea and into Germany.

Biden met with European leaders on Monday to discuss their joint deterrence efforts, such as “preparations to impose massive consequences and severe economic costs on Russia,” according to a White House [readout of the meeting](#). White House press secretary Jen Psaki reiterated during a Monday briefing that the meeting was part of the “ongoing contingency planning process.”

The plans have not sat well with Moscow. Russian state-run news agency [Tass](#) quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissing the West and Ukraine's claims about Russia's actions as being a ploy to escalate tensions.

“I think it's important to remember who the aggressor is here,” Psaki said Monday. “It is not the United States. It is not these eastern flank countries. It is Russia who has tens of thousands of troops on the border of Ukraine. They have the power to de-escalate. We would certainly welcome that.”

Moscow's latest actions are likely part of what analysts have considered [ongoing efforts](#) to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty. There was already [widespread concern](#) in November that Russia was mobilizing to invade Ukraine, with one Ukrainian official [telling the Military Times](#) that the country was preparing for a possible attack at the end of January or the beginning of February.

Russia's buildup of troops on the border shows that hostilities could be nearing. Putin has not made clear his intentions for the former Soviet satellite state, beyond frequent assertions that Ukraine and Russia are inextricably linked. Reports indicate he likely wants to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. The country is one of [just a few](#) in Eastern Europe that aren't members of the organization. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said last week](#) that, while it's “not clear what Russia's central demand is,” closing NATO's doors to new members is among the “clearly absolute non-starters.”

An analysis from [Defense Priorities](#), a think tank that has been linked to billionaire Charles Koch, recommends that the U.S. “should offer Russia a moratorium on Ukraine's admission to NATO without shutting the door forever.” The analysis goes on to describe such a move as a “low-cost and low-risk way to avoid conflict.” Kirby clarified Monday that the Pentagon was “not saying diplomacy is dead” in its move to put troops on heightened alert.

Others warn of the costs of cowing to Russia.

“NATO or the United States cannot commit to never allow a country to join,” Cato Institute senior fellow Justin Logan wrote in [an analysis](#) this week. “But given that Ukraine has next to no hope of joining, engaging seriously with Russia on that point may hold the only hope of forestalling a brutal war that Ukraine would lose. As the days tick by, the cost of trying seems clearly lower than the cost of digging in on the principle that Ukraine has the right to do something it can’t do.”

Whatever happens next, one survey suggests that Americans aren’t confident in Biden’s ability to respond to Russia’s actions. A poll released exclusively to [The Hill](#) on Monday found that a majority of respondents believe the president is not able to “handle difficult international issues like defending Ukraine from the Russians and protecting Taiwan from China.”