

Blinken Presses Russia to Pull Troops on Solidarity Trip to Ukraine

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Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (R) and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. **Efrem Lukatsky / Pool / AFP**

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday demanded that Russia end its "aggressive" actions towards Ukraine, warning on a solidarity visit to Kiev that the giant neighbor has yet to withdraw most forces from a recent buildup.

The top U.S. diplomat met Ukraine's leadership and toured a somber memorial with photographs of some of the more than 13,000 people who have died fighting pro-Russian separatists since 2014, when Moscow seized the Crimean peninsula from Kiev.

"We stand strongly with you," Blinken told a joint news conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

"We look to Russia to cease reckless and aggressive actions," Blinken said.

Russia last month amassed 100,000 troops near the border and in Crimea, its biggest buildup since 2014, but quickly announced a pullback in what many saw as a test for the new U.S. administration of President Joe Biden.

But both Blinken and Zelenskiy said Thursday that the pullout had been limited.

"We're aware that Russia has withdrawn some forces from the border with Ukraine, but we also see that significant forces remain there," Blinken said.

Zelenskiy said that Russia was still flexing its muscle on the Black Sea and that it had only removed 3,000 to 3,500 troops from Crimea.

"The forces that remain along the Ukrainian border permit the Russian side to launch a military operation against Ukraine at any moment," Zelenskiy said.

In Brussels, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that "tens of thousands" of Russian troops remained and that they had left heavy weaponry despite some reductions.

"Overall, there is a significant Russian presence, and there are many more Russian troops now, in and around Ukraine, than before the recent increase in tensions," Stoltenberg said.

With Blinken in Kiev, the Ukrainian military said that one soldier was killed and another injured from shelling in Donetsk, a breakaway area in the eastern Donbass region.

Zelenskiy, however, said there had been a decline in sniper fire, a leading cause of casualties.

He also welcomed U.S. support but said that Ukraine "desperately" needed more.

Russia's withdrawal of troops "is slow — therefore, perhaps, there still may be a threat. Nobody wants these surprises," Zelenskiy said.

He has renewed calls for Ukraine to join NATO but Western European nations have been cool to the idea, fearing the Russian reaction.

Turning page on Trump

The United States has earmarked \$408 million in security aid for Ukraine this fiscal year and Blinken said he spoke in depth with Ukrainian leaders about their needs.

Biden in his first three months in office has sought to toughen U.S. resolve against Russia after his predecessor Donald Trump's flirtation with President Vladimir Putin.

Likely believing that the new U.S. leadership presents greater opportunities, comedian-turned-president Zelenskiy said that he had invited Biden to visit Ukraine.

Blinken replied that he would convey the invitation and that Biden hoped to visit eventually.

Biden also has proposed a summit with Putin in a bid to bring stability to the relationship — making it all the more pressing to show solidarity with Ukraine first.

Blinken arrived late Thursday from London where he joined other foreign ministers from the

Group of Seven wealthy democracies in condemning Russia's "irresponsible and destabilizing behavior" in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Pressure on corruption

Despite vows to support Ukraine, the Biden administration has also pressed Kiev on good governance — long a major concern for Western partners.

Ahead of Blinken's trip, the State Department sharply criticized Ukraine for removing the head of state energy company Naftogaz, Andriy Kobolev, who had reduced Ukraine's dependence on Russian gas deliveries and introduced reforms that improved the company's public image.

Blinken said he had a "very good, open, direct" conversation with Ukrainian leaders about reforms.

Speaking at a roundtable with anti-corruption campaigners, Blinken said that Ukraine is "facing aggression from without and from within" Russia as well as "corruption from oligarchs" and vested interests.

Blinken called for independent oversight of state-owned enterprises, greater transparency in the selection of judges and the strengthening of an anti-corruption board.

"So just as there are incredibly brave soldiers on the frontlines in the Donbas, in many ways, you are on the frontlines in that second fight — against corruption and for a democracy that has strong institutions," Blinken told the activists.

Honoring another Ukrainian institution, Blinken also toured an ornate Kiev monastery with Metropolitan Yepifaniy, the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, who showed the top U.S. diplomat a document marking the separation from Moscow's authority.

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