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Ukraine's Goal to Take Back Crimea Is 'Direct Threat' to Russia – Kremlin

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Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy. **president.gov.ua**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy's intention to restore Kiev's control over Crimea constitutes a "direct threat" to Russia, the Kremlin said Thursday as tensions run high between the two countries.

Speaking in his annual address to the Ukrainian parliament on Wednesday, Zelenskiy said the return of Crimea to Ukraine following Moscow's 2014 annexation of the peninsula should be the country's main goal — but stopped short of saying it should be retaken by force.

"We see this as a direct threat to Russia," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was quoted as saying by Interfax.

"Such wording means that the regime in Kiev intends to use all available possibilities, including force, in order to encroach on a Russian region."

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In addition to the conflict over the annexation of Crimea, Kiev has been locked in a nearly eight-year war with pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine that has claimed over 13,000 lives. Ukraine and its Western allies accuse Russia of sending arms and funding to the rebels, claims Mosow denies.

Tensions have ratcheted up significantly between Ukraine and Russia in recent weeks, with Kiev accusing Moscow of massing forces near their shared border and the United States warning of a possible Russian invasion. Russia, in turn, has accused Ukraine of massing troops near southeastern Ukraine, and NATO of provocations.

Zelenskiy on Wednesday called for direct talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to end the escalation.

“Let’s be honest, the war in Donbass has been going on for eight years. Eight years since Russia annexed Crimea,” Zelenskiy said. “We must talk, knowing that we have a strong and powerful army.”

Kiev's Western allies have warned that Russia could use a perceived threat to its security as pretext for an invasion of Ukraine.

"The likelihood of hostilities in Ukraine is still high," Peskov said Thursday.

"This remains a matter of particular concern and worry for us. We are seeing an increase in the intensity of provocative actions on the contact line."

Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) said Thursday it had detained three alleged Ukrainian spies who it said were gathering secrets and plotting terrorist attacks.

The chief diplomats of the U.S. and Russia are due to meet in Sweden on Thursday, where they are likely to discuss the escalation in tensions with Ukraine.

AFP contributed reporting.

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