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U.S. Believes Russia Could Attack Ukraine 'At Any Point': W. House

By AFP

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A convoy of Russian armored vehicles moves along a highway in Crimea on Jan. 18. **AP Photo / TASS**

The White House said Tuesday that Russia is ready to attack Ukraine at "any point," upping its threat assessment ahead of a meeting between the top U.S. and Russian diplomats.

"We're now at a stage where Russia could at any point launch an attack on Ukraine," Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters. "I would say that's more stark than we have been."

Psaki's characterization of the situation around Ukraine came as Secretary of State Antony Blinken was scheduled to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Friday in Geneva.

A U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Blinken's goal was to see "if there is a diplomatic off-ramp" and "common ground" where Russia can be persuaded to pull back from Ukraine.

Ukraine, the U.S. and European countries have raised deep concerns over Russia's troop build-

up on the border, despite repeated denials from Moscow that an invasion is planned.

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If President Vladimir Putin decides to launch an invasion of Ukraine, where Russia already has annexed Crimea and backs pro-Russian separatists in another region, then "severe economic consequences" will be imposed, Psaki said.

"No option is off the table," she said, warning of an "extremely dangerous situation."

Psaki blamed the Russian leader, saying "President Putin has created this crisis."

"There's the diplomatic path forward. We certainly hope they take that path. There's the other path. It is up to the Russians to determine which path they're going to take and the consequences will be severe if they don't take the diplomatic path," she said.

While the United States and its European allies have no plans to meet a Russian attack against Ukraine with military force, the economic counter-measures would be unlike any used in the past, Washington says.

Psaki stressed that this could include shelving the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany. The pipeline, which has been completed but not commissioned, is seen as an important part of Europe's energy supply network, but also a crown jewel in Moscow's export capabilities.

"Our view continues to be that stopping the Nord Stream 2 pipeline is a credible piece we hold over Russia," Psaki said.

Blinken was flying Tuesday first to Ukraine in a show of support.

He will then head to Berlin for four-way talks with Britain, France and Germany to seek Western unity.

The U.S. official said that Blinken agreed with Lavrov to the talks in a telephone call, but said it was possible that Russia was not interested in a diplomatic solution.

"I think it's still too early to tell if the Russian government is genuinely interested in diplomacy, if it is prepared to negotiate seriously in good faith, or whether it will use discussions as a pretext to claim that diplomacy didn't address Moscow's interests," the official said.

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