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Russian Troops, Jets Stage Drills Near Ukraine Amid High Tensions With West

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The Russian military will stage large-scale exercises in its regions near Ukraine and in annexed Crimea amid ongoing tensions at the border, news agencies reported Tuesday.

The Defense Ministry said 6,000 troops and 60 warplanes have been deployed for so-called combat readiness drills stretching across three regions near Ukraine and in Crimea, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

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Squadrons of Su-27SM, Su-30SM2 and Su-34 fighter jets will "refine interaction when performing missile strikes at a maximum distance," TASS quoted the military as saying.

More than 1,500 Southern Military District soldiers will also maneuver to proving grounds "at a considerable distance from their points of permanent deployment," according to Interfax.

Separately, the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet said T-72B3 battle tank crews staged shooting drills at a Crimean firing range.

The announcements come two weeks after 3,000 Russian troops and 300 tanks were deployed across several regions bordering Ukraine. The U.S. State Department criticized those exercises, saying they go "in exactly the opposite direction" of de-escalation.

Russia also completed 10,000-troop drills across southern regions that included Crimea in late December.

Russia and its close ally Belarus are holding snap military drills with advanced S-400 missile system batteries near Belarus' western border with NATO members and its southern border with Ukraine.

Russia's active military maneuvers in recent months come as Western governments warn that it is gearing up to invade its pro-Western neighbor Ukraine with around 100,000 troops gathered on its borders.

The Kremlin denies planning an invasion, defending its right to move troops within Russian borders, and accuses the United States and NATO of increasing tensions with their stepped-up military activities in response to Russia's actions.

While high-level talks between Russia and the U.S., NATO and OSCE have failed to quell tensions, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov agreed to continue talking at their meeting in Geneva last week.

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