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U.S. Deploys 3,000 Troops in Russia-Ukraine Standoff

By Paul Handley for AFP

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Pentagon spokesman John Kirby. **AP / TASS**

President Joe Biden ordered Wednesday the deployment of several thousand more troops to bolster NATO forces in eastern Europe, ratcheting up the U.S. military response to fears that Russia could invade Ukraine.

With Russia refusing to pull back 100,000 troops poised on Ukraine's borders, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said 1,000 U.S. soldiers now in Germany would deploy to Romania, and another 2,000 in the United States would be sent to Germany and Poland.

"The current situation demands that we reinforce the deterrent and defensive posture on NATO's eastern flank," Kirby said.

"President Biden has been clear, the United States will respond to the growing threat to Europe's security and stability."

In response, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said the move would make it harder for a compromise between the two sides.

The U.S. deployments are "destructive steps, which increase military tension and reduce scope for political decision," he said, according to Interfax.

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Containment

Kirby stressed that the deployment was to demonstrate U.S. commitment to the NATO alliance, and that no American troops would be sent to fight in Ukraine, which is not a NATO member.

But that would hardly assuage Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has accused the United States and NATO of seeking to "contain" Russia by placing troops and strategic arms on its border.

"Ukraine itself is just a tool to achieve this goal," Putin said Tuesday in his first major comments in weeks on the crisis.

Putin has demanded guarantees that Ukraine will not join the alliance, and has implicitly threatened the former Soviet state with the massive military buildup.

Russia also wants NATO and the United States to foreswear the deployment of missile systems near Russia's borders and to pull back NATO forces in eastern Europe.

Putin has left the door open to talks, saying he was studying Western proposals and that he hoped that "in the end we will find a solution."

But in a phone call with British prime minister Boris Johnson Wednesday he also noted "the unwillingness of NATO to adequately respond to the well-founded Russian concerns," the Kremlin said in a statement — though Downing Street added that both leaders agreed on the need for a "peaceful outcome."

The Kremlin also said it had Beijing's support in the standoff, and that would emerge when Putin meets Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing on Friday.

Diplomatic efforts

Poland and Romania both said they appreciated the U.S. move.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte was the latest NATO leader to visit Kyiv in a show of support for Ukraine, where he met President Volodymyr Zelenskiy.

After the talks, Zelenskiy said Ukraine was focused "only on peace," but insisted it has the right to defend itself.

Rutte said it was "essential for dialogue to continue" between Russia and the other players.

Western proposals

Citing leaked documents, the Spanish newspaper El Pais reported that Western proposals to Russia include arms control and trust-building measures to defuse the situation.

While a guarantee against Ukraine joining NATO was not offered, the documents proposed "reciprocal commitments" by the U.S. and Russia "to refrain from deploying offensive ground-launched missile systems and permanent forces with a combat mission in the territory of Ukraine," El Pais reported.

"We did not make this document public," Kirby said.

Nevertheless, he said, it confirms that "NATO and its partners are unified in their resolve and open to constructive and serious diplomacy."

Russia 'adding forces'

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said Biden's order was the result of several weeks of talks with partners, and not the reaction to anything specific in the past two days.

"It's not permanent," she said of the deployment.

"Obviously if Russia decides to deescalate ... then certainly that would impact the force posture," she said.

But Kirby said Moscow has shown "no signs of being interested or willing to de-escalate."

"Mr. Putin continues to add forces, combined arms, offensive capabilities, even over just the last 24 hours. He continues to add in western Russia and Belarus and ... the Mediterranean and the North Atlantic."

NATO welcomed the new U.S. troop deployment, with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg saying "NATO will do whatever is necessary to protect and defend all allies."

Tensions have been further aggravated by plans for joint military exercises between Russia and neighboring Belarus, where Washington claims Moscow is preparing to send 30,000 troops.

Video footage released by the Russian defense ministry on Wednesday showed tanks speeding across snowy fields in Belarus and combat helicopters flying overhead as units from both countries practised ahead of the February 10-20 drills.

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