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Russia to Stage Massive Tank Drills as Ukraine Tensions Soar

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A serviceman of a motorized rifle unit of the Russian Southern Military District on a BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicle of the tank force of the Russian Southern Military District as he takes part in a cross country driving exercise at Kadamovsky Range. **Erik Romanenko / TASS**

The Russian military plans to stage large-scale tank drills in several southern regions "in the next three weeks" amid Western warnings that it could invade Ukraine, the Defense Ministry announced Tuesday.

The maneuvers will involve T-72B3 main battle tanks, BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, BTR-82A armored personnel carriers, as well as anti-tank missile systems and artillery.

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The more than 30 so-called "bilateral company tactical exercises" will take place at 15 firing ranges across nearly every Southern Military District region.

These include the Volgograd region, the Stavropol region and Russia's republics in the North Caucasus, Chechnya and Dagestan. They do not include annexed Crimea or other Russian regions that border Ukraine.

Around 400 troops will handle 80 pieces of military hardware, the state-run TASS news agency cited the Defense Ministry's Southern Military District as saying.

Russia has stepped up military exercises across the country in recent months as the United States began sounding the alarm last fall over the buildup of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine.

U.S. intelligence estimates that Russia has 110,000 troops on the border, which is nearly 70% of the amount needed for a full-scale invasion.

The Kremlin denies planning military actions in Ukraine and defends its troop deployment as movements within its sovereign territory. In turn, Moscow has sought to extract key security concessions from the United States and NATO.

Ukraine has sought to downplay the "apocalyptic" alarm over Russia's buildup.

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