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# Russia Launches Belarus Military Drills as West Fears Ukraine Invasion

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BMP-2 amphibious infantry fighting vehicles during the Allied Resolve 2022 joint military drills by Belarusian and Russian troops. **Russian Defense Ministry / TASS**

Russia and Belarus launched joint military drills Thursday that heightened tensions and added urgency to diplomatic efforts by NATO leaders to avert a feared invasion of Ukraine.

NATO said Russia's deployment of troops and missiles represented a "dangerous moment" for European security, with fears building for weeks that Moscow was positioning more than 100,000 troops around Ukraine in preparation for an all-out assault.

Western leaders have been shuttling to Moscow for days in an effort to deflate tensions, giving Russia a chance to air its grievances about NATO's expansion into eastern Europe and former Soviet states.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss took a tough message to Moscow on Thursday, accusing

Russia of adopting a "threatening posture" and urging Moscow to withdraw its forces to prove it had no intention to invade Ukraine.

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Kyiv denounced the war games — set to run until Feb. 20 — as "psychological pressure" while French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called the exercises "a very violent gesture."

Columns of heavy Russian missile systems rolled across snow-carpeted fields on the eve of the start of the drills in footage released by the Defense Ministry.

Russia has also sent six warship through the Bosphorus for naval drills on the Black Sea and the neighboring Sea of Azov.

Kyiv denounced their presence as an "unprecedented" attempt to cut off Ukraine from both seas.

Moscow and Minsk have not disclosed how many troops are participating, but the United States has said some 30,000 soldiers were being dispatched to Belarus from locations including Russia's Far East.

## 'Psychological pressure'

Russia's Defense Ministry said the exercises would center around "suppressing and repelling external aggression."

Answering Western concerns, the Kremlin has insisted that the troops will go home after the exercises.

But Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said "the accumulation of forces at the border is psychological pressure from our neighbors."

Kyiv has launched its own military drills expected to mirror Russia's games, but officials have said little about them out of apparent fear of escalating tensions.

The crisis has spurred weeks of talks between Russian, Western and Ukrainian officials.

On the agenda at the talks are Russian security demands to the United States and the Washington-led NATO military alliance that aim to reduce their role in eastern Europe and former Soviet states.

Truss was the latest Western diplomat to travel to Moscow, where she said she received promises from Lavrov that Russia had no plans to invade Ukraine.

"We need to see those words followed up by actions," she told reporters after the talks.

"We need to see the troops and the equipment stationed on the Ukrainian border moved elsewhere because at present it is in a very threatening posture," Truss added.

Lavrov meanwhile said he was "disappointed" by the talks and said Western diplomats have either not understood or have ignored Russia's concerns.

He said the drills in Belarus as well as the movement of troops across Russia's own territory had spurred "incomprehensible alarm and quite strong emptions from our British counterparts and other Western representatives."

## 'Warning time going down'

Moscow's chilly relations with London nearly ruptured after the 2018 poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in England, which the UK blamed on the Kremlin.

Truss's trip came just days after Macron conducted a round of shuttle diplomacy between Moscow and Kyiv, and then briefed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz about his progress in Berlin.

The German chancellor will travel to Kyiv and Moscow next week for separate meetings with the Ukrainian and Russian leaders, including his first in person meeting with Putin.

The flurry of talks over Ukraine Thursday included a meeting between British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

"The number of Russian forces is going up. The warning time for a possible attack is going down," Stoltenberg said at press conference with Johnson.

"Renewed Russian aggression will lead to more NATO presence, not less," he added.

Johnson was due later Thursday to meet with Polish President Andrzej Duda in Warsaw.

Throughout the crisis, Ukraine's Western allies have stepped up supplies to Kyiv and the United States on Wednesday evening delivered its tenth ammunition shipment.

In Kyiv, officials have used more cautious language to describe the immediacy of the threat of the Russian build-up.

Deputy Defense Minister Ganna Malyar said Wednesday the forces on the frontier were being used primarily "for political pressure and blackmail."

Fighting between Kyiv's army and Russian-backed separatists who control parts of two breakaway regions has claimed more than 14,000 lives since breaking out in 2014.

It began weeks after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, sparking a wave of economic penalties from the West, which the United States and the European have said they will expand if Russia escalates again.

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