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Russia Readies for 'Naval Blockade' of Ukraine Ahead of Missile Drills – Reports

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A guard ship leaves to join a naval exercise of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. **Russian Defense Ministry / TASS**

Russia has issued warnings that it will close off Ukraine's coastline for upcoming missile drills next week, a Ukrainian think tank said Wednesday as several Russian warships arrived in the Black Sea.

These appear to be the most large-scale closures in the past eight years, according to Andrii Klymenko, member of Ukraine's Institute of Strategic Black Sea Studies.

He said Russia issued Feb. 13-Feb. 19 air and naval navigation warnings in the Black Sea and the adjacent Sea of Azov for missile and gunnery firing exercises.

"If Russia doesn't conduct a military escalation in Ukraine, it appears they will conduct a significant naval exercise south of Ukraine while conducting a large exercise in Belarus to the north of Ukraine," said military expert Rob Lee.

Russia and Belarus launched joint military drills Thursday that had raised concerns in Western countries with fears that Moscow is plotting a major escalation in the conflict in Ukraine.

Russia's Defense Ministry said in a statement that the exercises scheduled to continue until Feb. 20 in Belarus had begun and would center around "suppressing and repelling external aggression."

Russia issued the navigation warnings as six of its large landing ships entered the Black Sea from the Mediterranean this week for naval drills. The warships have a total capacity of up to 63 main battle tanks and 2,000 troops, according to the Paris-based Naval News website, which added that a Russian submarine is also expected to cross into the Black Sea on Friday.

"This is controversial because the Montreux Convention limits the reasons submarines can transit the Bosphorus," Naval News reported.

Russia's Defense Ministry said Thursday that the six warships made a port-of-call stop at the Navy's Black Sea Fleet base in the annexed Crimean city of Sevastopol before "continuing performing their tasks."

The Kremlin maintained Thursday that the missile drills are in line with international legal norms and do not block commercial ships.

Klymenko said Ukraine "has been warning you for two years" about the potential blockade and called for a response "on the highest international level."

"We don't want any panic, but this is very similar to preparations for a 'naval blockade' of Ukrainian ports," Klymenko added in a Facebook post.

"The warning notices present an obstacle to the [NATO] alliance's ability to make its own shows of force in the Black Sea," the tech news website The Drive said.

Russia's Defense Ministry has announced the deployment of more than 140 warships for cross-country naval exercises that would stretch across every body of water bordering Russia in January and February.

The announcement and the latest navigation warning come amid continuing tensions with the West over Russia's massive troop buildup near Ukraine.

AFP contributed reporting.

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