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Putin to Oversee Russian Ballistic Missile Drills

February 18, 2022



Saturday's missile launches will follow a series of Russian statements that it was withdrawing some of its forces from near the Ukraine border. **Russian Defense Ministry**

Russian President Vladimir Putin will personally oversee military ballistic and cruise missile drills this Saturday, the Defense Ministry announced Friday.

Aerospace Forces and Strategic Rocket Forces will take part in what the military described as strategic deterrence exercises.

The ground forces' Southern Military District will join the Navy's Northern and Black Sea fleets in the missile launches.

The state-run TASS news agency cited the Defense Ministry as saying that the maneuvers had been "planned in advance."

The announcement did not specify the location or types of missiles to be fired.

TASS reported that Northern and Pacific fleet submarines, as well as the Strategic Rocket

Forces, typically launch intercontinental ballistic missiles at firing ranges every year. Aerospace Forces aircraft fire cruise missiles during the annual strategic exercises, it added.

Asked about whether Russian military drills are increasing tensions, the Kremlin said Friday that the exercises are “absolutely transparent.”

Spokesman Dmitry Peskov added that ballistic missile exercises happen regularly and weren't a cause for concern.

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Saturday’s missile launches will follow a series of Russian statements that it was withdrawing some of its troops and tanks from near the Ukraine border, after its massing of troops sparked the biggest crisis with the West since the Cold War.

Western governments disputed Russia’s claims, saying its military was actually increasing its presence near Ukraine instead of reducing it.

The United States said Thursday that Russia is on the verge of unleashing a massive military attack against Ukraine, dismissing Moscow's claim to be pulling forces back.

Russia denies any plans to invade Ukraine but on Thursday warned of "military-technical measures" if its far-reaching demands for a U.S. and NATO pullback from eastern Europe aren't satisfied.

Tensions have been exacerbated by Russia's ongoing joint war games in Belarus, whose strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko was in Moscow on Friday for talks with Putin.

During talks with the Belarusian leader on Friday, Putin announced that Lukashenko would join him at Saturday's missile drills.

"Our Western partners — as you call them — have brought the military-political spectrum to the forefront, and we have to react to it, including by holding military exercises and through diplomacy," Lukashenko told Putin in Moscow.

He also accused Western leaders of "scaring the world by saying that 'tomorrow' we will attack, encircle, destroy Ukraine."

Sporadic fighting remains common in eastern Ukraine, and the Ukrainian army accused the pro-Russian separatists of dozens of ceasefire breaches on Thursday, most of them using heavy weapons.

AFP contributed reporting.

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