

Russia, Belarus Kick Off Joint Air Force Drills

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A Sukhoi Su-35S fighter jet. **Russian Defence Ministry / TASS**

Russia and Belarus [launched](#) joint air force exercises Monday, using every military airfield in the country that served as a launchpad for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine last February.

The drills come as Russia's invasion, now in its 11th month, grinds on as a bloody war of attrition in eastern Ukraine and a campaign of aerial strikes on Ukraine's critical infrastructure.

The allies plan joint air patrols along the Belarusian border, airborne landings and support operations for ground troops, as well as deliveries of supplies and evacuations of wounded soldiers, the Belarusian defense ministry said.

"The main purpose of the exercise is to improve interoperability in the joint execution of training and combat tasks," it said.

State media [reported](#) that the drills will take place from Jan. 16–Feb. 1.

Pavel Muraveyko, first deputy state secretary of Belarus' Security Council, [told](#) the Belta state news agency that the exercises are "exclusively defensive" but warned that Minsk is "ready for any provocative actions from Ukraine."

"We're keeping our powder dry, we have the needed set of forces and means that will respond to any aggression or terrorist threat on our territory," Muraveyko [said](#) Sunday.

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Writing on the Telegram messaging app, the Belarusian military said it has activated all of its air force and air defense sites for the joint drills with Russia.

Eight Russian fighter aircraft and four cargo planes arrived in Belarus on Sunday, Reuters [reported](#) Monday, citing unofficial military monitoring channels on Telegram.

Moscow's close ally Minsk has supported the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine and allowed Russian troops to launch part of its February 2022 invasion from its territory.

Russia and Belarus carried out joint military drills close to the border with Ukraine in the run-up to the invasion.

The Belarusian army has not participated in the Russian invasion itself.

Ukraine has repeatedly warned of possible attacks from its northern neighbor Belarus in the months since Russia invaded, though some analysts assess the possibility of direct involvement by Minsk as low.

On Sunday, the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) think tank [said](#) it believes Russia will likely expand its military presence in Belarus until September 2023, when the countries are expected to hold major combat exercises.

"There are anomalous activities that intensify the information operation that Russia will attack Ukraine from Belarus," ISW said.

"[But] ISW assesses an offensive is still a low-likelihood scenario at this time."

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