

Russia-Ukraine Warning Update: New Indicators of Imminent Russian Attack

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Russia may launch an attack on Ukraine on Saturday, February 19, 2022. The attack would likely begin with an air and missile campaign targeting much of Ukraine to decapitate the government and degrade the Ukrainian military as well as the ability of Ukrainian citizens to prepare to resist a subsequent Russian invasion. US and allied governments have been warning of such an attack for some days, pointing to the size of the Russian forces concentrated on Ukraine's borders.¹ Western officials have additionally said that Russian troops have moved to jumping-off positions for an invasion over the past 24 hours. The following additional conditions and indicators point to February 19 as an optimal date for a Russian attack:

- Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will be in Germany at the Munich Security Conference. He is scheduled to speak at 1530 Munich time.²
 - His absence from Ukraine will degrade his ability to coordinate a response to any Russian attack and create more propitious circumstances for a Russian-sponsored attempt at a coup d'etat.
 - Russian forces could close Ukrainian airspace to prevent Zelensky from returning to Kyiv.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin will reportedly oversee Russian nuclear drills on Saturday, February 19, as well.³ Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko will accompany Putin.
 - Those drills are being conducted out of the usual exercise cycle and are clearly intended to deter any Western response to an attack.
 - Putin and Lukashenko will observe the exercises from an unspecified "situational center" in Moscow, likely the Russian Ministry of Defense's National Defense Control Center (NDCC). That would put them in the best position to oversee conventional military operations as well.
 - Launching the attack during those drills would take maximal advantage of their deterrent effect.
- Russian proxy provocations in eastern Ukraine have increased dramatically since February 16, including an artillery barrage that damaged a kindergarten in unoccupied Ukraine and multiple other proxy attacks.⁴
 - Russian proxies have increased the frequency and drama of their claims of Ukrainian attacks on them as well as their false claims that Ukraine is preparing to invade occupied Donbas.
 - Russia's proxies in Donbas began evacuating civilians to Russia ahead of a claimed Ukrainian offensive.⁵

- Russian senior officials, including Putin, have been increasingly repeating and expanding on those claims this week.⁶
- The proxy campaign is likely intended on the one hand to draw Ukrainian forces into a response that Russia would then claim to be an attack and, on the other, to use false flag attacks and outright disinformation to fabricate justifications for a Russian attack to “defend” “Russian citizens” in occupied Donbas. This rhetorical and kinetic activity has crossed thresholds pointing to the likelihood of an actual Russian attack.

This update reflects a change to our assessments and forecasts. We have previously assessed that Putin was setting conditions to move Russian forces overtly into occupied Donbas and possibly conduct a limited invasion in unoccupied southeastern Ukraine and/or an air/missile campaign. We now assess that those Russian activities are extremely likely and imminent and that a much larger-scale Russian invasion is very possible.

¹ <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/594859-blinken-tentatively-accepts-invite-to-meet-with-russian-counterpart> ; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/17/ukraine-russia-putin-nato-munich/>; <https://osce.usmission.gov/u-s-statement-for-the-vienna-document-joint-pc-fsc-chapter-iii-meeting-2/>.

² https://securityconference.org/media-library/images/2022/01_Hauptkonferenz/220218_MSC2022_Agenda_fin.pdf.

³ <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/13753399>.

⁴ <https://www dot ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3406057-situacia-u-zoni-oos-kilkist-vorozih-obstriliv-zrosla-do-34-poraneni-cetvero-osib.html>; <https://twitter.com/Liveuamap/status/1494277413991337984>.

⁵ <https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/13738425>.

⁶ <https://tass dot ru/politika/13738807>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/13738953>; <https://tass dot ru/politika/13740693>; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-pro-russia-separatists-trade-allegations-of-cease-fire-violations-11645091832>.