

Ukraine

CONFLICT UPDATE

Institute for the Study of War, Russia Team
February 20, 2022

Russia will likely attack Ukraine the week of February 21, 2022. The Kremlin has deployed sufficient military forces and set informational conditions to conduct offensive operations including limited incursions into unoccupied Ukraine, a comprehensive air and missile campaign, and large-scale mechanized drives on Kyiv and other major Ukrainian cities.

This daily synthetic product covers key events related to renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine and replaces ISW's previous "[Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus](#)," which we maintained from November 12, 2021, through February 17, 2022. That document is no longer updated.

Key Takeaways February 20

- **Kremlin Spokesperson Peskov claimed Ukraine cannot and will not implement the Minsk II Accords, marking a significant change in Kremlin rhetoric that Russia could use as a pretext for further escalation.**
- **The Belarusian Defense Minister announced Russian troops deployed in Belarus will remain in the country after the conclusion of Russian-Belarusian exercises—enabling an indefinite Russian military presence in Belarus.**
- **Russia began testing its nuclear early warning system as part of ongoing exercises intended to deter any NATO response to Russian actions against Ukraine.**
- **French President Emmanuel Macron proposed a renewed ceasefire (unsuccessfully, as of publication) in Donbas in back-to-back phone calls with Putin and Zelensky.**
- **The Kremlin intensified its disinformation efforts to generate the false appearance of a Ukrainian genocide against Russians in Donbas through evacuation efforts and false claims of Ukrainian targeting of civilians.**
- **A CBS national security correspondent claimed the US has intelligence that Russian commanders already received direct orders to invade Ukraine, but no US official confirmed the claim.**
- **Turkish officials decried the further imposition of sanctions on Russia and refrained from condemning Russia's military buildup to retain its balancing relationship with the Kremlin.**

Key Events February 19, 2pm EST – February 20, 2pm EST

Military Events

Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced Russian forces currently deployed to Belarus will remain there indefinitely during a press briefing about the conclusion of joint Russian-Belarusian “Union Resolve 2022” exercises on February 20.¹ Khrenin stated that Russian

President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko decided to “continue testing” Union State forces due to the “aggravation of the situation of Donbas.” Khrenin accused NATO and the West of “pumping up” states near the Union State—referring to Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic States—with weapons, increasing their military posture against the Union State without advanced warning, and prioritizing “offensive means.” Khrenin accused the West of refusing to accept the Kremlin’s demanded “red lines” for the “security architecture of Europe.” Khrenin additionally parroted Russian Foreign Ministry rhetoric about the West undermining the “principle of the indivisibility of security” for the first time. Khrenin did not specify what Russian forces would remain in Belarus. Russian forces will likely permanently deploy to Belarus, as ISW has previously forecasted.²

Khrenin additionally outlined the outcomes of the exercises and stated that unified combat formations of Russian and Belarusian pilots, mechanized units, tank units, paratroopers, special forces, missilemen, and artillerymen operated with a high level of cooperation. Joint forces also addressed support issues and worked out an effective logical support system that enabled an effective Russian-Belarusian coalition. Khrenin praised the use of modern weapons systems and exchange of military expertise and experience between Russian and Belarusian troops. He thus concluded that “Union Resolve” achieved its intended goals and confirmed the cooperative capabilities of Russian and Belarusian forces in the face of Western pressure.

Russia’s ballistic early warning network, the Russian 15th Aerospace Special Forces Army, began command and staff training in Moscow on February 20 as part of ongoing Russian nuclear exercises likely intended to deter a NATO response to any Russian offensive against Ukraine.³

Over 800 personnel from command, logistics, armaments, and other unspecified elements of the Titov Main Test and Space Systems Control Center, 820th Main Center for Missile Attack Warning, and the 821st Main Center for Reconnaissance of Situation in Space participated in the command and staff training. These elements comprise Russia’s early warning network against ballistic missile attacks. These exercises are likely part of the “GROM-2022” nuclear triad exercises that began on February 19.

Russia’s 49th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District (SMD) continued general readiness exercises on February 20.⁴ Unspecified regiment-sized (over 1,500 personnel) tank, motorized rifle, and artillery elements conducted company-level exercises at the Nikolo-Alexandrovsky Training Ground in Stavropol Krai. The elements conducted live fires with 152mm howitzers, multiple launch rocket systems, and T-72B3 tanks to destroy targets at distances of up to 4,000 meters. Reconnaissance, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), and signal elements of the SMD conducted support tasks.

Approximately 10 Russian Black Sea fleet ships, including the large landing ships “Novocherkassk,” “Saratov,” and “Tsezar Kunikov” passed through the Kerch Strait into the Sea of Azov on February 20.⁵ Russian Black Sea Fleet anti-submarine and patrol ships patrolled the Kerch Strait before moving to the Sea of Azov, according to local sources.⁶ Russian authorities issued a NOTAM (Notice to Air Missions) alert over the Sea of Azov for February 21-26.⁷

Russian social media users observed unspecified S-300 air defense elements in Kursk Oblast and Aleksandrovka, Belgorod Oblast heading towards Ukraine on February 19-20.⁸ The social media users observed at least 12 vehicles in Kursk Oblast on February 19 and 3 in Belgorod Oblast on February 20.

Russian Activity

The Kremlin intensified the tempo of the mass evacuations of women and children from the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) to Russia to generate the appearance of a genocide against Russians in Donbas between February 19 and February 20. Russia’s Emergency Situations Ministry stated that over 53,000 DNR and LNR residents evacuated to Russia as of February 20.⁹ The governors of Russia’s Voronezh, Kursk, and Ryazan oblasts declared states of emergency in response to refugee influxes on February 20.¹⁰ Rostov Oblast authorities stated that Rostov Oblast is prepared to receive approximately 14,000 refugees on February 20.¹¹ At least six trains transported approximately 5,000 DNR and LNR residents to Russia on February 20.¹² The Kremlin likely seeks to intensify its evacuation over the

coming days. A prominent Russian Duma deputy from Rostov stated that 170,000 residents of the DNR and LNR are currently applying for Russian citizenship with Russian migration services on February 20.¹³ The Kremlin will likely use the claim of threats to civilians in Donbas to justify a Russian military deployment to Donbas or other, more serious military operations against Ukraine.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov claimed on February 20 that Western states are abandoning negotiations with Russia after the Kremlin only received two responses to 37 letters Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov sent to OSCE member states on January 28.¹⁴ Lavrov's original letters demanded that individual Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) member states respond to Russian security demands individually and not as a bloc, in a Kremlin attempt to undermine Western unity. Ryabkov claimed that the recipients of the letters are "leaving this conversation in a defiant way" by not responding to Russian demands.¹⁵ The European Union and NATO each submitted a collective response to the Kremlin that did not capitulate to core Russian demands on February 10. The Kremlin previously stated that Moscow would not accept a group response and that Moscow requires detailed responses from individual states.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that Putin believes Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky "cannot, does not want [to], and will not" implement the Minsk II Accords in an interview on the *Russia 1* TV channel on February 20.¹⁶ Peskov stated Ukraine's only option is to directly negotiate with Russia's proxies, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR). Peskov denied Ukrainian statements that Moscow has refused to communicate with Ukrainian leadership. Peskov claimed that the Kremlin has asked Kyiv what Ukraine wished to discuss and did not receive a response. Peskov additionally stated that Western allegations of Russian plans to invade Ukraine have fueled tensions and that daily speculation of the date of an invasion "can have detrimental consequences."¹⁷

Peskov's statement on February 20 is a significant change in tone in Kremlin rhetoric about Ukraine's intent to never implement the Minsk II Accords and is the closest the Kremlin has come to formally nullifying the Minsk II Accords. Kremlin messaging up to this point has emphasized that Ukraine seeks to sabotage the Minsk II Accords and has called on Ukraine to implement the accords, without explicitly stating that Ukraine "will not" implement these accords. The Kremlin could use the claim that Ukraine will never implement the Minsk II accords as a pretext for overtly deploying forces to the occupied Donbas

Proxy Activity

The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) escalated their accusations of ongoing Ukrainian plans to attack Donbas on February 20. DNR claims from February 20 emphasized false threats about Ukrainian terrorist attacks against the DNR. The DNR claimed that it found and destroyed explosives caches belonging to Ukrainian sabotage groups, that it apprehended a "terrorist group" that sought to conduct explosive attacks against critical DNR civilian infrastructure, and that it recorded five sabotage attack attempts against the DNR since mid-February on February 20.¹⁸ The DNR reiterated accusations that the West is pushing Ukraine to attack Donbas, claiming that "Kyiv, with the approvals of the Westerners, began implementing the invasion plan for the [DNR's] territory," on February 20.¹⁹ LNR claims from February 20 emphasized an accusation that heavy Ukrainian shelling killed two LNR civilians.²⁰ The Kremlin supported the LNR's claims about Ukrainian forces killing two LNR civilians; Russia's Investigative Committee announced that it would open a criminal investigation of "the Ukrainian Armed Forces' crimes on the territory of Donbas" on February 20.²¹ The Kremlin may claim that Ukrainian forces "killed Russian citizens in Donbas" as a pretext to justify new Russian military operations against Ukraine as ISW previously forecasted.²²

Belarusian Activity

N/A

Ukrainian Activity

Ukrainian Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Yevhenii Tsymbaliuk on February 20 requested an extraordinary meeting of the OSCE Permanent Committee for February 21.²³ Tsymbaliuk placed the request for the OSCE to discuss Russia's military buildup near Ukraine and explore paths for de-escalation.

US Activity

US officials voiced continued concern Russia will likely invade unoccupied Ukraine but maintained that a diplomatic path is still possible in press engagements on February 20. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Russia and Belarus' continuing joint military exercises follow the Russian "playbook" of creating provocations to justify further escalations in an interview with CNN.²⁴ Blinken noted the joint exercises and numerous false flag operations give "every indication" that Russian invasion plans are already in motion. Blinken and Vice President Kamala Harris underscored united international support for sweeping sanctions against Russia should an invasion occur, although Harris acknowledged some differences between NATO allies on the parameters of sanctions in a press conference.²⁵ Blinken and Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby separately reiterated that the United States has offered Putin several diplomatic options and will continue to peacefully attempt to deter and dissuade Russia until an invasion begins, including Blinken's planned meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on February 24.²⁶ Blinken clarified that US recognition of Crimea or Eastern Ukraine as Russian territories is non-negotiable when asked during an interview on CBS's *Face the Nation*.²⁷

CBS News national security correspondent David Martin reported that the US has intelligence that Russian commanders have received direct orders to proceed with an invasion of Ukraine on CBS's *Face the Nation* on February 20.²⁸ Martin said Russian commanders on the ground are making specific plans for how they would maneuver in their sectors of the battlefield. Martin emphasized that Russian commanders have received direct orders and are "doing everything that American commanders would do once they got the order to proceed." No US official has publicly confirmed that Russian forces have received orders to invade as of February 20.

NATO and EU Activity

N/A

Other International Organization Activity

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Secretary General Stanislav Zas said the CSTO could "hypothetically" deploy peacekeepers to Donbas with Ukrainian consent, member state support, and a United Nations mandate in an interview with Reuters on February 17.²⁹ Reuters published the interview with Zas on February 19.³⁰ Reuters reported that Zas said that the CSTO has 17,000 personnel at "constant readiness," a specialized "peacekeeping" force of approximately 4,000 personnel and that the CSTO can swiftly deploy the "needed" number of personnel to Ukraine immediately. Zas stated that only diplomacy can solve the Ukraine crisis. The Kremlin may frame a future overt Russian deployment to the occupied parts of eastern Ukraine as a "CSTO Peacekeeping mission."

Individual Western Allies' Activity

French President Emmanuel Macron attempted to negotiate a ceasefire in Donbas through bilateral calls with Ukrainian President Zelensky and Russian President Putin on February 20. Macron and Putin discussed convening the trilateral contact group among the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Ukraine, and Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) to oversee a possible ceasefire in Donbas. Russia previously boycotted the two most recent OSCE meetings on February 18 and 19.³¹ The Kremlin readout stated that Putin and Macron also agreed to resume dialogue in the Normandy Format at the foreign ministry- and political advisors- levels. The Kremlin may slow down or later refuse to pursue a ceasefire if it assesses the negotiations as detrimental to its calculus, however. The Kremlin criticized

NATO and Ukraine for pursuing a military solution, refusing to implement the Minsk II Accords, and claimed that Ukraine’s “intensifying shelling” necessitated civilian evacuations from the DNR and LNR to Russia. The French readout of Macron’s call with Zelensky stated Macron praised Ukraine’s restraint and that Zelensky reiterated his determination to respect the ceasefire by not reacting to Russian proxy provocations. Zelensky’s office did not issue a readout of the call with Macron as of February 20 at 3:30 EST.

Turkish officials urged diplomatic talks and de-escalation on Ukraine instead of sanctions against Russia in several statements on February 19-20.³² Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin stated that additional sanctions against Russia would undermine or delay a diplomatic solution in an interview with German newspaper Die Welt on February 19.³³ Kalin criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin for seeking to redraw Russia’s borders but urged states to listen to Russia and pursue mutual diplomacy, even if they do not fulfill Russian demands. Kalin also criticized Western and Russian statements for exacerbating tensions and recommended a flexible diplomatic approach—citing Turkey’s existing relations with Russia despite disagreements about Crimea and Libya. Kalin reiterated Turkey’s commitment to mediate between Russia and Ukraine both through NATO channels and bilaterally. Kalin additionally stated Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will reiterate his offer to host Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Istanbul, Turkey, during a likely upcoming phone call on an unspecified date with Putin.

Separately, Turkish Chief of the General Staff Yasar Guler and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Tod Wolters discussed recent developments in NATO over the phone on February 20. Prior to the call, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar urged caution against the risk of possible escalations due to disinformation campaigns and underlined the need for stability in the Black Sea region in a speech.³⁴ Akar attended the Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany on February 18-19 but his official agenda and Turkish meeting readouts did not focus on Ukraine.³⁵ Ankara has recently played down the Russian military buildup compared to other NATO allies, likely due to its fragile partnership with Russia. It has not urged its citizens to leave Ukraine as of February 20 and limited its official statements on Ukraine after the most recent escalations near the Ukrainian border despite its ongoing defense cooperation with Ukraine.

UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss announced the UK will establish a new anti-disinformation center against Russia during an interview with the Daily Mail on February 19.³⁶ Truss stated the UK’s “Russia-Ukraine Government Information Cell (GIC)” will expose disinformation and rebut false narratives. Truss warned that Russian disinformation campaigns have doubled in the past week and may serve as a false flag excuse for Russia to invade Ukraine. Truss stated the new GIC unit is the first revival of the UK’s original information units that it disbanded after the Cold War. Truss also warned that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may encourage the Kremlin to pursue similar stated ambitions against other eastern European and Baltic states, including NATO allies. Truss also criticized the coordinated Chinese-Russian pressure against the right of new states to freely join NATO.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson highlighted the potential human cost of a Russian attack on Ukraine, stated the US and UK could suspend Russian companies from trading in pounds and dollars and underscored NATO’s resoluteness should Russia invade in an interview with the BBC on February 20.³⁷ Johnson claimed a Russian invasion has “in some senses begun.” Johnson said that western intelligence sources believe Russia intends to encircle the Ukrainian capital Kyiv in what would be “the biggest war in Europe” since World War II. Johnson warned this would be a “bloody and protracted” conflict that would be catastrophic for human life. Johnson maintained that the UK and US are prepared to impose extensive sanctions on Russia, including suspending Russian companies from trading in pounds and dollars. Johnson emphasized that NATO leaders learned from Putin’s annexation of Crimea and that Putin will “get more NATO” if he invades Ukraine.

The Canadian Government delivered a security assistance payload to Kyiv, Ukraine, on February 19.³⁸ Ukraine’s defense minister stated that the shipment included unspecified rifles, machine guns, night vision and surveillance devices, and other military equipment.

Other International Activity

N/A

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⁷ https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1495436428456644614.

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¹⁶ <https://iz dot ru/1294249/2022-02-20/peskov-zaiavil-o-nezhelanii-zelenskogo-vypolniat-minskie-soglasheniia>

¹⁷ <https://tass dot ru/politika/13773907>

¹⁸ <https://tass dot ru/proisshestiya/13773331;> <https://iz dot ru/1294161/2022-02-20/v-donetcke-blokirovali-diversionno-terroristicheskuiu-gruppu;>

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²⁰ <https://t dot me/millnr/7152;> [https://www.pravda dot ru/news/world/1684361-ukraina_lnr_ataka/.](https://www.pravda dot ru/news/world/1684361-ukraina_lnr_ataka/)

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²⁵ [https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/20/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-in-press-gaggle-2/.](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/20/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-in-press-gaggle-2/)

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