
RUSSIA BUILDS UP ARMY NEAR UKRAINE BORDER

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MOSCOW [REDACTED] is bolstering its military presence on its western border, sending tens of thousands of soldiers to newly built installations within easy striking distance of Ukraine.

The moves, which come as Moscow ratchets up confrontation over the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, are a centerpiece of a new military strategy the Kremlin says is meant to counter perceived threats from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Military analysts say the deployments appear to be an effort to build a more permanent and robust military posture around Ukraine, where Russia has carried out covert military interventions [REDACTED] support of pro-Russia separatist fighters [REDACTED] at maintaining influence in its West-leaning neighbor.

Russias plans around the Ukrainian border show a real intent to use force if needed, said Anton Lavrov, a defense analyst at Moscow-based think tank CAST. They would be Russias first line of assistance if the pro-Russian rebels in east Ukraine needed help.

The Russian Defense Ministry didnt respond to emailed questions.

U.S. military officials, having closely monitored Russian movements of troops and equipment in the two years since Moscows seizure of Crimea from Ukraine, said they havent detected signs of an immediate threat. Any shift in Russian military posture reflects broader plans, a senior military official said Thursday.

Its a long-term trend; there is nothing new, the official said.

Some U.S.-based analysts in recent weeks have pointed to Russian plans to reorient forces in various spots to potential areas of conflict, adding the shifts dont necessarily indicate imminent military activity.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have flared in recent days after Russian President Vladimir Putin accused Ukraines military of killing two Russian service members during incursions into Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. Mr. Putin said Russia would respond to the deaths and met with his security council to discuss antiterrorist security scenarios involving Crimeas borders. Ukrainian officials denied the charges, saying Russia was creating a pretext for further intervention.

Outside the region, Russia has begun using Iran as a launchpad for airstrikes in Syria, further underscoring its assertive military strategy.

The buildup on Ukraines frontier represents a significant shift. For years, the Russian-Ukrainian border was viewed by Moscow as little more than an administrative boundary. As late as 2009, Russia didnt have a single large army unit along its 1,200-mile border with Ukraine. That changed with the 2014 revolution in Kiev and subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine.

As that conflict unfolded, Russia stationed tens of thousands of troops on the border in makeshift camps and fomented a pro-Russian rebellion with deliveries of weapons and volunteer foot soldiers.

At key points during fighting, regular Russian military units helped to prevent the Ukrainian army from routing the separatists, according to Ukrainian and Western officials, though Moscow denies sending conventional forces into Ukraine.

Violence in eastern Ukraine continues, despite cease-fire attempts brokered by European leaders. July and August saw some of the worst flare-ups in months, with Ukraine saying on Thursday that three of its soldiers had been killed in the previous 24 hours.

Now Russia is building new army installations along the border, creating some new units and redeploying others from further east, in line with its telegraphed intentions to step up its forces in the west.

In May, Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu said the army would create three new divisions to counter NATO, which in April announced it would send four battalions, or about 4,000 troops, to Poland and ex-Soviet Baltic countries.

The political situation along the western border of the country remains unstable, Mr. Shoigu told officers at a televised meeting in June, noting that the U.S. and other NATO members are boosting their military potential in the region.

Russian military officials said two divisions would be created in the Western Military District and one in the Southern Military District, each with 10,000 troops. The focus has also been on combat readiness: Russia has carried out more than 300 training exercises and war games in the Western Military District since the winter.

Several units are being relocated to the region, including those in the Western Military Districts 20th Army, which had been based until last year in Nizhny Novgorod, east of Moscow, the military officials said.

The 20th Army, which had seen lower levels of readiness in previous years, is also getting a major overhaul with new combat units, including two or three motorized rifle brigades and a tank brigade, they said.

A new regional headquarters is now located in Voronezh, some 100 miles from the border with Ukraine. To make way for its relocation, new bases and at least 10 military barracks are being constructed in nearby towns for the incoming soldiers, according to the officials. Construction of some of the new installations began in 2015.

Some of the moves have been made public. In Boguchar, where the 9th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade will be based, a local priest performed a service to bless the construction grounds, where barracks will house more than 5,000 soldiers and 2,200 units of weaponry, according to Defense Ministry contracts. The town is some 25 miles from the Ukrainian border.

Nearby in Valuyki, in the Belgorod Region, the Defense Ministry has stationed the 23rd Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, previously based in Samara near the border with Kazakhstan. The compound is expected to be completed this year. It is expected to hold some 4,500 servicemen, equipped with tanks and other armor, according to information on the city administrations website.

The new base will have hangars for weaponry, housing complexes and even an ice rink.

In May, the 28th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade began arriving in Klinty, around 200 miles north of Ukraines capital Kiev, from Yekaterinburg 600 miles to the east of Moscow. An orchestra, folk singers and local dignitaries bearing traditional welcome gifts of bread and salt greeted the first arrivals at the train station, according to reports and photographs in local media.

Further south, near Rostov-on-Don, the Defense Ministry is reforming the 150th Motorized Rifle Division, the name of the unit that stormed the Reichstag in Berlin in 1945.

Russia is preparing to hold major annual military exercises, called Kavkaz 2016, near the Ukrainian border in September. The exercises are the first aimed at integrating Crimea and the peninsulas defense into Russian military plans.

A U.S. military official said Russian units are expected to practice conducting amphibious landings and air-defense exercises to reinforce Crimea. U.S. officials also anticipate Russia will continue to rotate troops and equipment, with long convoys of military material moving in and out of the region.

Capt. Danny Hernandez, the chief spokesman for U.S. European Command, said the U.S. was monitoring the region and the planned Russian military exercises closely.

Ukrainian officials have become increasingly nervous about growing violence in the eastern part of Ukraine. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said on Thursday that there had been record levels of artillery shelling against Ukrainian positions the previous night, adding that Ukraine might announce mobilization and martial law if the conflict escalates in Crimea and the countrys east.

U.S. and other allied officials believe Russias strategy is to provoke an overreaction by Kiev, one that could help undermine the case in Europe for sanctions.

Russia wants to show it can turn the heat up and down and put pressure on Kiev to react, a Western official said.

Kaynak/Source: