

Russian Buildup Stokes Worries

Pentagon Alarmed As Troops Mass Near Ukraine Border

BY ADAM ENTOUS
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WASHINGTON—Russian troops massing near Ukraine are actively concealing their positions and establishing supply lines that could be used in a prolonged deployment, ratcheting up concerns that Moscow is preparing for another major incursion and not conducting exercises as it claims, U.S. officials said.

Such an incursion could take place without warning because Russia has already deployed the array of military forces needed for such an operation, say officials briefed on the latest U.S. intelligence.

The rapid speed of the Russian military buildup and efforts to camouflage the forces and equipment have stoked U.S. fears, in part because American intelligence agencies have struggled to assess Russian President Vladimir Putin's specific intentions.

The troop movements and the concealment—involving covering up equipment along the border—suggest Mr. Putin is positioning forces in the event he decides to quickly expand his takeover of the Crimea peninsula by seizing more Ukrainian territory, despite

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Western threats of tighter sanctions.

Still unknown, however, is Mr. Putin's plan, or whether he has one.

The Kremlin has defended the deployments as a legitimate military exercise on Russian soil.

"It's really a question of leadership intentions. Who does Putin tell, if anyone, what his plans are?" a senior Obama administration official said. "He's obviously putting things in place in case he wants to go in. The question is whether a political decision has been made to do so."

A spokesman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said U.S. officials are working at understanding the Russian force movements.

"We're actively monitoring the situation in eastern Ukraine, including the massing of Russian troops and materiel at the border," said the spokesman, Shawn Turner.

"Our immediate focus is on providing policy makers with regular intelligence updates and forward-looking analysis of the situation in order to help inform

decisions," he added.

The U.S. believes Russia now has nearly 50,000 troops in position for possible operations, including those participating in the declared exercises along the Ukrainian border and those already inside Russian-controlled Crimea, officials said.

U.S. and Western officials previously have said there were 20,000 Russian forces along Ukraine's border, in addition to those inside Crimea, estimated at as many as 25,000.

A senior Ukrainian official said Thursday that the number of Russian troops in the area was closer to 100,000.

A senior U.S. official said that 100,000 figure was "way too high."

"It's not the number that matters most. They have enough to move in now, regardless, and in the right composition to be dangerous," the senior U.S. official said. "What matters is the intent. And we don't have a clear sense of that."

Another senior military official said the Pentagon was increasingly worried that the Russians have moved into place additional

supplies including food and spare parts that could both support an exercise or a military incursion into Ukraine. Putting in place the logistics support could allow Russian forces to sustain themselves if they were to cross into eastern Ukraine.

"They are positioning logistics. That is necessary for the exercise but could also be used for further aggression if they choose to go,"

Still unknown is Mr. Putin's game plan, or whether he has one.

the senior military official said. "They have in place the capability, capacity and readiness they would need should they choose to conduct further aggression."

Rear Adm. John Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman, said Thursday that Russia has continued to send more troops to its border with Ukraine.

While Russia has said the troops were sent to the border to conduct military exercises, Adm.

Kirby said the U.S. has "seen no specific indications that exercises are taking place."

U.S. spy agencies have struggled to intercept telltale communications in which Russian leaders, military commanders or front-line troops have indicated their military plans, said U.S. officials.

Intelligence officials are using an array of intelligence tools, including imagery and human sources to discern Russia's next moves.

Russia is often very good at operational security and may be working actively to not voice intentions because they know they might be overheard, U.S. officials say.

A U.S. official said the U.S. is tracking the Russian efforts closely and has "visibility into the Russian troop buildup along the Ukrainian border."

The senior Obama administration official acknowledged the difficulty of collecting intelligence about Russian intentions, calling the country a "hard target."

Military officials said the camouflage has further complicated U.S. efforts to assess the size and

scope of the military forces being put in place.

"They have moved into concealed positions," said a senior military official.

The official said concealment could be aimed at obscuring images taken by American spy satellites.

The concealment effort may also be designed to obscure location and size of their force from the Ukrainian military.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has told U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel that Russia has no designs to invade Ukraine.

But the Pentagon is concerned that the Russian minister isn't the final word on Russia's intentions in the region.

On Tuesday, U.K. Defense Minister Philip Hammond expressed concerns that Mr. Putin is directly controlling strategy and that the views of ministers like Mr. Shoigu may be "moot."

Adm. Kirby said Wednesday that the Pentagon shares that concern.

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contributed to this article.