

# U.S. Concerned Over Reported Russian Troop Movements Amid Heightened Tensions In Eastern Ukraine



Ukrainian servicemen take up positions on the front line with Russia-backed separatists in the eastern Donetsk region last month.

The United States is expressing concern about what it called ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine amid reports of a buildup of Russian troops along Ukraine's border and in Crimea.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by phone with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, and U.S. General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called top military leaders in Russia and Ukraine, the State Department and Pentagon said on March 31.

Blinken reaffirmed U.S. support for Ukraine "in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression" and "expressed concern about the security situation in eastern

Ukraine,” the State Department said.

Defense Department spokesman John Kirby said the Pentagon is aware of Ukrainian military reports concerning Russian troop movements near Ukraine’s borders.

“Russia’s destabilizing actions undermine the de-escalation intentions that had been achieved through an OSCE-brokered agreement back in July of last year,” Kirby told a briefing, referring to a cease-fire brokered by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

“We are discussing our concerns about this increase in tensions and cease-fire violations and regional tensions with NATO allies,” Kirby said.

The OSCE’s civilian Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has reported hundreds of cease-fire violations in recent days. On March 26, four Ukrainian soldiers were killed and two others injured in the eastern part of the country.

The Ukrainian military said its soldiers were hit by a mortar attack it blamed on Russian troops. Russia denies having a military presence in eastern Ukraine, where it backs separatist forces.

Milley spoke with General Valery Gerasimov, the Russian Armed Forces chief of staff, and General Ruslan Khomchak, chief of the general staff of Ukraine’s Armed Forces.

Kirby referred questions about the specifics of Milley’s calls to his office.



Ruslan Khomchak is chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. (file photo)

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Khomchak on March 30 accused Moscow of conducting a buildup near the Ukraine-Russia border and reiterated claims that pro-Moscow separatists continue to violate the July cease-fire.

The buildup is taking place “under the guise of preparing for strategic exercises” and is in addition to thousands of troops in combat brigades, regiments, and supply units deployed in the occupied Donbas with the support of Russian regular troops, the Ukrainian army chief said in an **interview with Voice of America**.

“The Armed Forces of Ukraine respond accordingly to such actions of our eastern neighbor,” Khomchak said. “We are preparing for all possible provocations and reactions to the actions of the enemy.”

Khomchak first made the accusations of a military buildup **in a speech** to Ukraine’s parliament on March 30.

The comments drew a response from Russian President Vladimir Putin during a March 30 video conference call with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Kremlin said.

Putin placed the blame for tensions on Ukraine and urged Kyiv to enter into direct dialogue with local separatist forces.

“The Russian side expressed serious concern over the escalation of armed confrontation that is being provoked by Ukraine along the line of contact and its effective refusal to implement the agreements of July 2020...to strengthen the cease-fire regime,” the Kremlin said in a statement late on March 30.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, in comments to reporters on March 31, said Putin has not drawn any “red lines” regarding the situation in eastern Ukraine.

“In general, the issues on the agenda were the absence of any alternatives to compliance with the Minsk accords and the problem situation that has taken shape in connection with the noncompliance with these agreements,” Peskov said, according to TASS, referring to a 2015 agreement brokered by France and Germany.

A statement from the French presidency indicated that during the video conference call Macron and Merkel urged Putin to take steps to de-escalate.

“The need for Russia to make a determined commitment to stabilize the cease-fire in Ukraine and work out a way out of the crisis while respecting the Minsk Agreements was underlined,” **the Elysee Palace said.**

Germany, Russia, France, and Ukraine are part of the so-called Normandy Format set up to try to resolve the simmering conflict.

Cease-fire violations and flare-ups in violence in eastern Ukraine are common. Fighting between government forces and Russia-backed separatists has killed more than 13,000 people since April 2014.

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**With reporting by Reuters, AFP, and TASS**

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