

Russia Signals It Will Withdraw Troops From Ukraine Border

Vladimir Putin Says He Had 'Ordered a Partial Withdrawal' of Forces

By
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Russia signaled on Monday it was pulling some troops away from its border with Ukraine, a move that met with skepticism in the West but could represent the Kremlin's first notable concession after weeks of frantic diplomacy by the U.S. and Europe.

It remained unclear just how many troops Russia was withdrawing. The German government said President [Vladimir Putin](#) told Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#) by phone that he had "ordered a partial withdrawal" of military forces massing along Ukraine's eastern border.

Russia's Defense Ministry said an infantry battalion—a relatively small number of troops—had been ordered to return from a position near Ukraine to their base some 800 miles to the east. Ukrainian officials said as many as 20,000 Russian troops had apparently been moved back from the border in recent days, but that some 40,000 remained.

U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said he couldn't confirm whether Russian forces were pulling troops back. "There is still a tremendous buildup of Russian forces on that border," Mr. Hagel said.

Last week Western officials said Russian military forces were seen massing along the Ukraine border, prompting fears that the Kremlin was preparing for another incursion into the territory of its largest western neighbor. The ensuing military campaign would likely be more deadly than the practically bloodless takeover of Crimea, the pro-Russian region of Ukraine that Russia occupied and annexed in recent weeks.



Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, left, visited a school Monday in Crimea's capital, where he also pledged to make development a priority. *ITAR-TASS/Zuma Press*

But the troop movements disclosed Monday appeared to reinforce suspicions among Western diplomats that Mr. Putin was hoping to use the positioning of his military forces as a bargaining chip in his bid to prevent Ukraine from drifting into the West's orbit.

In an hourlong phone call Friday that the Kremlin initiated, President Barack [Obama](#) urged Mr. Putin to stop his troop buildup. Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) said after a meeting in Paris with his Russian counterpart Sunday that "any real progress in Ukraine must include a pullback of the very large Russian force that is currently amassing along Ukraine's border." Russian officials have said they have no intention of invading Ukraine, but say they retain the right to protect ethnic Russians who live in the eastern half of the country. In return for easing military tensions, Moscow appears to be pushing harder on the diplomatic front in its bid to influence Ukraine's future.

In his meeting with Mr. Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister [Sergei Lavrov urged a constitutional overhaul](#) in Ukraine in which the provinces would have greater autonomy from the government in Kiev. U.S. and Ukrainian officials say they worry such a formula could provide the Kremlin with a virtual veto over Kiev's political system.

Despite Russian assurances, Western officials warned on Monday that the military threat to Ukraine had by no means passed.

"We are not yet seeing the type of activity that would lead us to believe that a significant withdrawal is in progress," a North Atlantic Treaty Organization spokesman said.

In Berlin, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble said that Mr. Putin's argument that he had a duty to protect Russian minorities abroad mirrored Adolf Hitler's pretext in the 1930s for invading the Sudetenland, a largely German-speaking region of Czechoslovakia, in October 1938.

"Those are the methods that Hitler has applied in the Sudetenland," Mr. Schäuble said during a question-and-answer session with schoolchildren, according to people in the audience. "We know all about that from history."

His comments jar with Chancellor Merkel's finely calibrated approach to Moscow since the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine. The chancellor has gradually ramped up her criticism of Russia while eschewing harsh rhetoric and stressing the need for dialogue. A spokesman for the German Finance Ministry confirmed his comment but said Mr. Schäuble made clear he wasn't "comparing Russia in any way with the Third Reich."

Ukrainian officials said some of the troop movement appeared to be the routine rotation of draftees who had reached the end of their service. Russian officials declined to comment beyond the official report on the battalion returning to base. That report included no details on the number of troops involved.

Asked about Ukraine's request for additional military supplies, Mr. Hagel noted that the food rations promised by the U.S. have arrived and the government is continuing to discuss Kiev's requests. He said aid to Ukraine would also be discussed at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers this week.

While Western leaders appeared focused on eastern Ukraine, Moscow moved to further cement its hold on Crimea. [Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev](#) became the highest-level Russian official to visit the region since the disputed March referendum vote to join Russia and announced a series of programs aimed at swiftly incorporating the territory into Russia's economy and infrastructure.

At a cabinet meeting held in the regional capital of Simferopol on Monday, Mr. Medvedev announced the creation of a new ministry for Crimean affairs.

"The development of Crimea and Sevastopol has become a state priority for us," he said. "Every deputy prime minister, every minister is fully responsible for the Crimean situation within the areas under their command."

His visit likely put to rest whatever doubt remained about Russia's intention to proceed with fully absorbing Crimea since it voted to secede from Ukraine in mid-March and Russia agreed to annex the territory.

Mr. Medvedev said work would begin quickly to move Crimea away from dependence on energy and water supplies from Ukraine, and that construction of a bridge connecting the peninsula to mainland Russia across the Kerch Strait would start as soon as possible. In the short term, a ferry service crossing the strait will be increased.

He also said a fiber-optic cable to connect Crimea to Russian telecommunications networks would be laid by mid-April and integrating the region into Russia's banking system would be completed in the near future.

—Naftali Bendavid, Gregory L. White, Julian E. Barnes and Andrea Thomas contributed to this article.

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