

### Tensions Between Russia and Ukraine Escalate as Moscow Engages in Bellicose Behavior on the Border

After international outcry over its actions, Russia has begun withdrawing troops from its border region with Ukraine. In the last few days, Russia had built up its forces in Crimea, near the Ukrainian border, citing military exercises in the Black Sea. The massive troop build-up was the largest ever Russian military deployment in the region, according to European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell. The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union had all issued statements calling for restraint, and criticized the aggressive and bellicose actions of the Kremlin. Russia argued that the military build-up in Crimea was solely to test the combat readiness of its armed forces, and defense minister Sergei Shoigu claimed that he withdrew many of the amassed units after “being convinced of their capabilities.” Russia had been threatened with sanctions and other retaliation had any offensive been launched against Ukraine. The American ambassador to Russia, John Sullivan, also returned to the United States for consultations, indicating the Biden administration’s increased attention to the situation.

In the preceding weeks, clashes between Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian military have increased in the Donbass region of Ukraine. Fighting has been ongoing there since the rebels seized large swaths of territory in 2014, shortly after Russia unilaterally annexed Crimea. However, the recent clashes have escalated rapidly, heightening concerns of another potential widespread conflict. Russia has maintained that Ukraine and NATO are to blame for provoking tensions by heightening their combat readiness. However, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has called for talks with Russia in the Donbass region in order to end the conflict. Zelenskyy has also called for Ukraine to be admitted into NATO as a full member state. Currently, Kiev is an ally of the bloc, but without full member status.

Russia’s withdrawal of forces came immediately after President Vladimir Putin’s annual state of the nation address, in which he warned Ukraine, NATO, and others against crossing a “red line” with Moscow. Continued military provocation and the imposition of sanctions are seen as two ways of crossing this red line, with the United States in particular considering the latter. Ukraine had called for the European Union to impose sanctions, but that request was rebuffed by Brussels. After ordering the withdrawal, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu said that he had been satisfied with the military’s immediate combat readiness.

Partly as a result of escalating tensions in Ukraine, relations between the United States and Russia have been tetchy in recent weeks. Moscow continues to be aggravated over the presence of American navy vessels in the Black Sea, and what it perceives as a NATO provocation led by the United States. The United States also recently imposed sanctions on Moscow as a result of the Kremlin’s election interference and cyber espionage campaigns. In retaliation, Russia is expected to expel several diplomats, and American Ambassador John Sullivan has been recalled to Washington for consultations. The Biden administration is also considering a request from the Zelenskyy government to purchase additional military equipment. Despite the increased tension between the United States and Russia, President Biden has called for a summit between himself and Vladimir Putin to be held over the summer in a neutral third country.