

Medvedev visits Crimea, as Putin announces partial troop withdrawal from Ukraine border

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Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev's visit to Crimea yesterday was a pledge by Moscow that the peninsula's integration into Russia will proceed rapidly. Russia formally annexed Crimea on March 21, after a March 16 referendum was held.

Medvedev promised to pour funds into education, health care and infrastructure such as roads, railways and airports as quickly as possible, and to boost salaries and pensions. A special government ministry has been created to oversee Crimea's development.

In a television broadcast, he said the Russian government will create a special economic zone to incentivise investment with lower taxes. With Crimea dependent on Ukraine for the bulk of its water and electricity, Medvedev also pledged to work on long-term solutions possibly linking Crimea to Russia's power grid and to do the same regarding water in addition to building new reservoirs.

Medvedev's visit was intended to make clear that Crimea's annexation to Russia is permanent, but that it would proceed peacefully. At the same time, in an attempt to defuse tensions with the United States in the aftermath of Sunday's failed talks in Paris between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of State John Kerry, Russia announced that a motorized infantry battalion was being withdrawn from Rostov, near Ukrainian's eastern border.

Later Monday, Germany reported that Russian President Vladimir Putin had informed Chancellor Angela Merkel in a telephone call of a "partial withdrawal" of troops from the border with Ukraine.

Kerry has insisted that Russian forces withdrawing to their March 1 positions was a precondition for a de-escalation of the situation, along with direct talks between Kiev and Moscow, and recognition of the Ukrainian

presidential elections scheduled for May 25. Lavrov countered on Sunday that Ukraine should become a federal republic, granting wide-ranging autonomy to regions in the east and west, where Russia enjoys influence, the recognition of Russian as a second language and a guarantee Ukraine will not join NATO.

Ukraine's Western-installed government denounced the proposals as "proof of Russia's aggression." It called Medvedev's pledge to Crimea a "crude violation" of international rules.

The issue of Russia's troop build-up has dominated the world's media for weeks, part of a coordinated campaign to justify US and European aggression against Russia that centres on the incorporation of neighbouring states in the Caucasus into NATO and the stationing of troops in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Poland.

Kerry spoke of a climate of "fear and intimidation" being generated by Russia, after talks in which Lavrov stated that any troops near Ukraine's borders were there solely to conduct military exercises. "We have absolutely no intention of, or interest in, crossing Ukraine's borders," said Lavrov.

Russia's Defense Ministry has said previously it is carrying out snap military exercises in its southern and western districts involving 8,500 members of artillery units in the Rostov, Belgorod, Kursk and Tambov regions, all near the border with Ukraine, and about 4,000 paratroopers in airborne exercises in the Kursk region.

NATO's supreme allied commander Europe, General Philip Breedlove, has declared that Russian force near the Ukrainian border was "very, very sizeable and very, very ready" and could pose a threat to Moldova's mainly Russian-speaking separatist Transdnistria (also known as Transnistria) region.

There has been no verification of the massive Russian

troop movements claimed by Washington, or of the actual numbers involved, but this has not stopped the ostensibly-liberal *Guardian* from proclaiming, “Russia sets terms for Ukraine deal as 40,000 troops mass on border.”

Estimates cited by US sources have ranged from 30,000 to 80,000. Ukraine’s estimate last week was 88,000, while a National Security Council source put the number at up to 100,000.

The *Wall Street Journal* asserted that Russian troops are concealing their positions, using “camouflage” to obscure images taken by American spy satellites.

“It is believed that an additional 50,000 troops may have flooded the region in the last few days,” reported Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, citing “new US intelligence assessments” that “there are more indications than ever that Russia could invade eastern Ukraine.”

Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, for his part, told Fox that there remained “a huge possibility that Russia could invade and seize Ukrainian territory.”

It remains unclear whether any of the wildly varying figures cited include the 22,000 troops known to be stationed in Crimea. But the central problem for the US in painting a picture of imminent military aggression by Russia is that no one has produced evidence to back up the claim of such a major troop build-up.

The reverse is true.

On March 28, Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* wrote in sarcastic tones of going “in search of Putin’s invisible army.”

Reporter Roland Oliphant was writing from Kursk, where President Barack Obama “gave a warning on Friday that Russian troops were ‘massing along that border’.”

“But the Russian invasion force--if it is here--is very well camouflaged... In a 200 mile trip along the border region, the only Russian armour on display in this flat landscape was of a much older vintage, and stood on plinths in town squares. The war memorial T-34s, which won one of the biggest tank battles in history here in Kursk in 1943, do not look as if they are about to roll off their pedestals and head west into Ukraine.”

Two days later, NBC News ran a more damning report still, in which reporter Jim Maceda found in a tour of the Ukraine-Russia border that there were “no signs of a military buildup.”

Maceda and colleagues Dmitry Solovyov and Alexei Gordienko drove a minivan along the 1,200-mile border. At Sudzha, a small town in Kursk, “we saw no tanks, or even armored personnel carriers.”

“We traveled some 500 miles along the border... before we came across any sign of military activity,” Maceda writes—two MI-24 helicopters at a military base and some “heavy trucks... but where were the tanks and artillery?”

“We found more army bases,” he continues, “but the only activity we saw was some serious latrine duty and a band of conscripts enjoying a friendly wrestling match. We ended our journey in Rostov-on-Don, where the Russian-Ukrainian land border melts into the Sea of Azov, after 1,000 miles and 80 hours.”

In response to Putin’s conversation with Merkel, government sources in Ukraine told CNN that Russian troops “were not backing away but were simply repositioning their forces farther north.

“One Ukrainian official said intelligence indicated that Russian troops are ‘conducting unclear maneuvers at the Ukrainian border’... During a daily briefing Monday, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesman Evhen Perebyinis said Russia had not told Kiev about the intentions of any military forces in the area. ‘At some border districts the troops are withdrawn, in others they approach the border,’ he said. ‘We are concerned about this movement of the army’.”

The US and its puppet regime in Ukraine know they are lying, as do the media. It should be noted that yesterday, Dmitry Tymchuk, head of the Kiev-based Centre for Military-Political Information, said in a Facebook post that Russian troops numbers on Ukraine’s border had in fact been reduced to just 10,000. Tymchuk is no friend of Russia. The *Kyiv Post* states that he set up the Centre for Military-Political Information to “counter Russian propaganda lies about the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula...”



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