

Russian Troop Movements and Tensions Along the Ukrainian Border

November 19, 2021

Starting in [mid-October 2021](#) and [continuing](#) through the beginning of November, social media and news outlets have [reported](#) significant movement by Russian military forces, with [limited Russian transparency](#), on or near the Ukrainian border. These movements, which follow a similar military buildup in March-April 2021 and Russia's [Zapad military exercises](#) in September 2021, come amid [increasingly aggressive rhetoric](#) reported from Russian policymakers about the so-called encroachment of [NATO near Russia's borders and the geopolitical status of Ukraine](#). Many observers, including some in Congress, have expressed concerns that such buildups and exercises could be the prelude to a second Russian invasion of Ukraine or other significant events.

Russian Troop Deployments

Many [analysts](#) characterize Russia's recent troop movements as significant and as falling outside normal troop rotations or military exercises, due to the deployment of units over long distances and far away from their usual training grounds. At the same time, some observers raise doubts that these recent movements [necessarily](#) indicate Russia is preparing for an [imminent](#) incursion into Ukraine.

Figure 1. Russian Borders with Ukraine and Belarus



Source: Congressional Research Service.

Recent reports center on Russia's shift of equipment and units from the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA) from the Central Military District, headquartered in Novosibirsk, Siberia. Units from the 41st CAA reportedly had been stationed at the Pogonovo training grounds outside Voronezh since March; they did not return to permanent basing after the conclusion of the Zapad 2021 exercises in September (see **Figure 1**). In mid-October, social and news media reports indicated these units, which include heavy artillery and a battalion of Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles, were moving toward Yelnya, in the Smolensk region on Belarus's eastern border.

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Yelnya is home to the 144th Motor Rifle Division and has [permanent basing facilities](#) seen as more appropriate for the long term garrisoning of units and equipment.

Analysts and media outlets also have [reported](#) the movement of two battalion-sized units (400-600 personnel) from the 4th Tank Division and 2nd Motorized Rifle Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army (based outside Moscow) to Voronezh, closer to the Ukrainian border. Troops from Russia's Southern Military District also have conducted [military exercises](#) in Ukraine's occupied Crimea region.

Russian Force Posture

Assessing the extent and possible intent of a Russian military buildup depends on what most analysts consider Russia's status quo military presence on the border of Ukraine and in occupied Crimea. A comparison between this stance and the movement or presence of new units and personnel reveals that Moscow had established significant capabilities in the region as part of its revamped force structure even before the recent movements.

Since 2014, Russia has created new units in the Western and Southern Military Districts on the border with Ukraine. Russia also has created two new armies, the 20th CAA in the Western Military District and the 8th CAA in the Southern Military District, to oversee, coordinate, and manage command and control of units transported to the border during a crisis or conflict.

In the [Western Military District](#), covering the northern border with Ukraine and Belarus's eastern border, the 20th CAA (headquartered in Voronezh) is assessed to consist of two maneuver units: the 144th and 3rd Motor Rifle Divisions. In the [Southern Military District](#), Russia established the 8th CAA (headquartered in Rostov-on-Don and Novocherkassk), which is assessed to consist of the 150th Motor Rifle Division and the 20th Motor Rifle Brigade. The 8th CAA also reportedly commands separatist units in Donetsk and Luhansk inside Ukraine. [Both CAAs](#) have support, artillery, air defense, and electronic warfare units.

Russia's military capabilities in occupied Crimea center on (1) the Black Sea Fleet and (2) ground, air, and coastal defense units focused on defending the peninsula and denying freedom of movement to Ukrainian and foreign actors.

Observers consider Russia's military forces in Crimea to be [primarily defensively oriented](#). Russian ground forces are concentrated under the 22nd Army Corps. Other units include the 810th marine infantry brigade and a [new airborne regiment](#). Although capable of defending Crimea, these units likely could not undertake sustained offensive operations without reinforcement.

Possible Russian Intentions

Analysts have speculated about numerous possible motivations for the increased presence and movement of Russian units on or near the Ukrainian border. Some possible motivations include

- The presence of units from other regions may be intended to fully staff the units and CAAs established since 2014 on the Ukrainian border.
- The movement of the 41st CAA to Yelnya may reflect the Russian military's concerns regarding a [potential future conflict](#) requiring [Russian intervention](#) in Belarus. The positioning of the 41st CAA could be intended to improve the Russian military's ability to rapidly conduct operations in Belarus or on Russia's northwest border.
- Moscow may be [preparing](#) for a [possible](#) future [conflict](#) with Ukraine. The positioning of units and equipment closer to the Ukrainian border would enable a shorter mobilization time for Russia, should it choose to conduct offensive operations or respond to a Ukrainian effort to retake the Donbas [militarily](#).

- Moscow may be using troop movements to coerce Ukraine into negotiating a diplomatic solution to the Donbas region on terms more [favorable to Russia](#).
- Troop movements may be in response to what Russia views as increased [U.S. and NATO](#) presence in the [Black Sea](#) and military and political support to Ukraine.

An additional motivation for conducting recent troop movements without transparency may be to increase ambiguity regarding Russian intentions. These motivations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Initial U.S. Responses

In November 2021, Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns [traveled to Moscow](#) for a series of meetings with Russian officials, during which he reportedly conveyed U.S. concerns regarding Russian troop movements. On November 10, Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosted Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba upon signing a new U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership. During a joint [press conference](#), Secretary Blinken stated, “We’re concerned by reports of unusual Russian military activity near Ukraine” and noted, “any escalatory or aggressive actions would be of great concern to the United States.”

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