

Ukraine conflict

Vladimir Putin ready for talks on security but keeps pressure on west

Russian military units returning to base after completion of drills, according to defence ministry



Chancellor Olaf Scholz, left, and President Vladimir Putin attend a press conference in the Kremlin after three hours of talks over Ukraine and Russia's security demands © Mikhail Klimentyev/Sputnik/AFP/Getty

Max Seddon in Moscow, **Polina Ivanova** in Kyiv, **Guy Chazan** in Berlin and **Sam Fleming** in Brussels YESTERDAY

Vladimir Putin eased tensions in the Ukraine crisis on Tuesday, drawing down some Russian troops from border areas to enable “dialogue” with the west while keeping the threat of invasion hanging over his neighbour.

Russia’s president said he was prepared to hold negotiations on intermediate nuclear missile forces and confidence-building measures with the west if the US and Nato agreed to discuss [Moscow’s grievances](#) with the transatlantic alliance — including its chief demand that it pledge to never admit Ukraine.

The comments, made after three hours of talks [with German chancellor Olaf Scholz](#), were Putin’s strongest indication yet that Russia was ready to de-escalate despite western warnings of Moscow’s plans for a renewed invasion of Ukraine.

Speaking alongside Putin, Scholz said diplomatic options were “not by any means exhausted”.

“The fact that we’re now hearing that some troops are being withdrawn is a good sign, and we hope that more will follow,” the chancellor said.

Putin said “a decision has been taken to partially withdraw forces” following what Russia claims were [exercises](#) involving more than 130,000 troops near the border

with Ukraine and in neighbouring Belarus.

But he said future negotiations would hang on the “real situation on the ground”, which he said was unpredictable and “does not only depend on us”.

Putin said Nato countries told him they would not admit Ukraine tomorrow but “only when they’ve got it ready”.

“That might be too late for us. So we want to solve this issue right now . . . as part of a peaceful negotiating process,” he added.

Addressing one of Russia’s crucial demands, Scholz said Ukraine’s Nato membership was “not on the agenda”.

“That is not an issue that’s going to come up again while we’re in office. I don’t know how long the president intends to stay in office, I have the feeling that it will be a long time, but not forever,” Scholz said.

The talks between Scholz and Putin were the latest in a [series of last-ditch efforts](#) by western leaders to talk the Russian president out of invading Ukraine.



A Russian defence ministry picture of a tank being loaded on to a railcar in southern Russia © Russian Defense Ministry/AP

Speaking in Brussels, Nato’s secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg said he had not seen “any sign of de-escalation” by Russian troops near Ukraine, but added there was reason for “cautious optimism” in signs that Russia wished to continue with diplomacy.

He warned that the security alliance had not seen indications of a reduced military

He warned that the security alliance had not seen indications of a reduced military presence and that Moscow still had the means to mount an attack.

“What we need to see is a significant and enduring withdrawal of forces, troops and not least the heavy equipment,” Stoltenberg said.

In a [call with Sergei Lavrov](#), Russia’s foreign minister, Antony Blinken, US secretary of state, said Washington remained committed to “pursu[ing] a diplomatic solution to the crisis Moscow has precipitated” and believed “that a window remains to resolve the crisis peacefully”.

Blinken said the US hoped for a written response from Moscow on “concrete areas for discussion regarding European security” [sent by the US and Nato to Russia](#) last month, according to the state department’s account of the conversation.

While Lavrov complained about the “aggressive rhetoric spread by Washington and its allies”, he “stressed the importance of ongoing work” on draft security guarantees, according to Russia’s foreign ministry.

Earlier, Russia’s defence ministry said units from the country’s southern and western military districts were heading back to base following the completion of drills. “The units . . . have already started loading on to rail and road transport and will start moving to their military garrisons today,” said Igor Konashenkov, a ministry spokesperson.

[European and US equities](#) rose on Tuesday in the wake of the Russian announcement, while the oil price fell.

Russia has threatened “the most unpredictable and grave consequences” if the west did not agree to two draft security protocols that would roll back Nato’s presence in eastern Europe.

In a sign of continuing tensions, Russia’s lower house of parliament asked Putin to sign a resolution recognising two Moscow-backed separatist states in eastern Ukraine.

The Kremlin has given no indication as to whether Putin would back the measure, which would probably put an end to the fraught Minsk peace process governing the conflict in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region.

Additional reporting by James Politi in Washington

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