

**Ukraine**

## US believes Russia plans nuclear exercise to warn west over Ukraine

Military officials have briefed lawmakers that Putin intends to stage the drill as a show of force



A convoy of Russian armoured vehicles moves along a highway in Crimea on January 18 © AP

**Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 6 HOURS AGO

US military and intelligence officials believe that Russia is planning to hold a big nuclear weapons exercise this month as a warning to Nato not to intervene if President Vladimir Putin decides to invade [Ukraine](#).

General Mark Milley, chair of the joint chiefs, and Avril Haines, director of national intelligence, told lawmakers in the House of Representatives on Thursday that Putin was planning to start the exercises in mid-February, according to a Congressional aide with knowledge of the closed-door briefing.

Russia generally holds its annual nuclear exercises — which involve testing intercontinental ballistic missiles from land, sea and air — in the fall. But the US believes Putin has decided to hold them earlier this year as a show of strength in the event that he orders his military to further invade Ukraine.

The US believes that the optimum time for a Russian invasion would be from mid-February to the end of March.

Holding the exercises to coincide with an invasion would send a powerful reminder to Nato about the strength of Moscow's nuclear forces, which are the largest in the world. Russia has just under 4,500 nuclear warheads in its stockpile, according to the Federation of American Scientists.

“... 111 . 111 .. 1 0 1 1”

The US has not determined if Putin has decided to invade Ukraine. But with its allies, Washington is increasingly alarmed by the continuing military build-up of Russian forces around the border with Ukraine.

In the past two weeks, Russia has increased the number of battalion tactical groups — which can range from 750 to 1,000 troops — deployed in the border region from 60 to 83, according to one Nato source. Another 14 BTGs are also in transit to the border area. The US believes Russia has also deployed between 1,200 and 2,100 special operations troops in the region.

The new battalion tactical groups and other troops deployed in the area bring the total number of Russian forces in the region to well over 100,000.

Washington estimates that Russia has deployed enough forces for a limited attack but has only positioned 70 per cent of the troops that it would need for a full-scale invasion, which would include an assault on Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital.

US military experts believe Russia has the capability to deploy enough forces for a full invasion by the middle of February, which would coincide with the expected start of its nuclear weapons exercises.

Earlier this week, President Joe Biden ordered the [deployment of 2,000 US troops](#) to Poland and Germany, in an effort to send a signal to Putin about the strength of the Nato alliance. On Thursday, the US accused Russia of [preparing to fabricate an attack](#) by Ukraine or the west, in a “false flag” operation designed to create a pretext for an invasion.

On Tuesday, Putin accused the US of trying to “drag” Russia into armed conflict and said it was ignoring Russia’s security concerns and its demand for a guarantee that Nato would not admit Ukraine in the future.

The Russian leader [received support from Chinese president Xi Jinping](#) on Friday when he visited Beijing for the opening of the Winter Olympics. In a joint statement, they said they “oppose further enlargement of Nato”.

A senior US official said China should have used the meeting with Putin to encourage him to de-escalate in Ukraine.

“If Russia further invades Ukraine and China looks the other way, it suggests that

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.

---