

Russia: mock de-escalation around Ukraine

Andrzej Wilk

During a meeting with President Vladimir Putin on 14 February, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that some of the large-scale exercises of the Russian Armed Forces had ended, while others were close to completion. The next day, the Ministry of Defence announced that subunits of the Western and Southern Military Districts (MDs) were to return to their base locations. The announcement was preceded by a statement by Maria Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, who stated that 15 February would go down in history as the day Western war propaganda failed and the West was humiliated and destroyed without a shot being fired. The Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov echoed her, calling the reports by some Western officials giving dates for Russia's 'invasion' of Ukraine "a maniacal information frenzy".

Despite Russia's announcements, however, units are still being moved around the area of the Western MD. This has been signalled by local observers and Western sources, who say that most of the subunits are not going to their permanent bases, but towards the Ukrainian border, deploying at distances of between 10 to 20 kilometres from the border line. Subunits of the 41st Combined Arms Army (CAA; from the Central MD) were to move from the Smolensk to the Bryansk oblasts, while sub-divisions of the 1st Tank Army (permanently stationed in the Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod oblasts) were to move the Belgorod and Voronezh oblasts. Additional aviation units are also being deployed in an area of potential conflict: a total of 70 attack and support helicopters from the 4th Air & Air Defence Army (AADA; from the Southern MD), and the entire assault aviation regiment of the 11th AADA from the Eastern MD (32 aircraft) is already in Belarus. The Russian Navy has also started exercises in the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, the effect of which is to impede the movement of all vessels to the main Ukrainian ports. In total, the size of the Russian Federation's Armed Forces in the regions bordering with Ukraine, in territories occupied by Russia and in Belarus, should be estimated at 150,000–200,000 soldiers and sailors.

Commentary

- Russia's announcements that it has begun withdrawing some units back to their permanent bases should be considered an element of the information war, intended to discredit and undermine the credibility of the US and other Western countries which stated that Russia is preparing an act of aggression against Ukraine. Moscow's aim is to present these warnings as unbelievable, and consequently, to break up the unified position adopted by the West, which has so far unanimously emphasised the threat of a Russian attack, and at the same time to bring about its political incoherence.

- The Kremlin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation are using their messaging to mask the next phase of increased movement by units in the Western and Southern MDs, which may only partially mean the actual return of soldiers to the barracks. Some of these soldiers have been outside their places of permanent location since December, and this kind of rotation is natural. There was no information in the Ministry of Defence's announcements regarding the presence of units from the Central MD in the area of the Western MD, which have been assembling there since spring 2021 and (as in the case of the Eastern MD units in Belarus) already includes contingents of all the operational units from Siberia (which began with the 41st CAA, and from January has also included the 2nd CAA).
- The report from the Ministry of Defence makes no reference to the presence in Belarus of the contingent from the Eastern MD, the number of which is estimated at 30,000 soldiers: this figure significantly exceeds the acceptable standards adopted under the so-called confidence-building measures included in the OSCE Vienna Document. The total number of Russian and Belarusian soldiers exercising should not exceed 13,000, while observations of the training activities taking place shows that both sides have involved at least 60,000 soldiers in the Allied Resolve 2022 exercise. The active phase of the exercises is scheduled to end on 20 February, and only the observation of the subsequent movements of Russian units in Belarus will allow Moscow's real intentions to be assessed. On 14 February, Alyaksandr Lukashenka said, that the decision to withdraw Russian troops from Belarus would be taken jointly with President Putin after the end of the exercises. His statement indicates that the option of leaving some of the Russian units on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border is being considered. Contrary to the Allied Resolve 2022 exercises, the vast majority of the manoeuvres taking place in the Western and Southern MDs are unannounced combat readiness tests, and so their time frames have not been publicly defined.
- The next phase of Russia's demonstration of power involves moving columns of its troops directly towards the Ukrainian border, transferring additional planes and helicopters to air bases in the border regions, and preventing Ukraine from accessing the main seaports under the pretext of the Russian fleet's exercises. The forces and resources Russia has assembled mean it can launch an operation against Ukraine at almost any time, and any demonstrative reduction in their size will not reduce Russia's advantage. It is important for Moscow to precede any military actions with a provocation which would allow it to blame Kyiv for their initiation. Even in this scenario, however, a full-scale Russian invasion remains unlikely, as the Kremlin wishes to have its demands met without causing a large-scale conflict. Much more likely is an escalation of military activity in the Donbas, which could eventually be expanded to include air attacks on targets in other regions of Ukraine.