

RUSSIA LAUNCHES BELARUS MILITARY DRILLS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

War games: The S-400 air defence system being prepared during the joint exercise of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus in the Brest region of Belarus. AFP/AFP

Russia rolled its tanks across Belarus on Thursday for live-fire drills that drew an ominous warning from NATO and added urgency to Western efforts to avert a feared invasion of Ukraine.

NATO said Russia's deployment of missiles, heavy armour and machine-gun toting soldiers marked a "dangerous moment" for Europe some three decades after the Soviet Union's collapse.

The war games — set to run until February 20 — followed a gradual Russian military build-up around Ukraine that some U.S. estimates say has reached 1,30,000 soldiers grouped in dozens of combat brigades.

Western leaders have been shuttling to Moscow in an effort to keep the lines of communication open, giving Russia a chance to air its grievances about NATO's expansion into eastern Europe and ex-Soviet states.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss took a tough message to Moscow on Thursday, accusing Russia of adopting a "threatening posture" and urging the Kremlin to withdraw its forces to prove it had no plans to mount an attack.

Kiev denounced the war games as "psychological pressure", while French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called the exercises "a very violent gesture".

Six warship

Russia has also sent six warship through the Bosphorus for naval drills on the Black Sea and the neighbouring Sea of Azov.

Kiev condemned their presence as an "unprecedented" attempt to cut off Ukraine from both seas.

Moscow and Minsk have not disclosed how many troops are participating, but the United States has said around 30,000 soldiers were being dispatched to Belarus from locations including Russia's Far East.

Russia's Defence Ministry said the exercises would centre around "suppressing and repelling external aggression". The Kremlin has insisted that the troops will go home after the exercises.

But Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said "the accumulation of forces at the border is psychological pressure from our neighbours".

Kiev has launched its own military drills expected to mirror Russia's games, but officials have said little about them out of apparent fear of escalating tensions. "All the (Russian) talk about some mythical threat from NATO or Ukraine is nonsense," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said.

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