

UPDATE: Artillery units move to Crimean border

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Long-range Russian and Ukrainian tube and rocket artillery systems have been deployed to opposing sides of the confrontation lines in Crimea over the past seven days, raising the level of firepower available to both sides if armed conflict should break out.



Airbus Defence and Space imagery shows Russian troop movements on the Russian side of the Kerch Strait just east of Crimea. Image dated 13 March 2014.

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Russian heavy weapons deployed into Crimea now include at least one battery of BM-21 multiple rocket launchers and a battery of D-30 122 mm towed howitzers. These weapons were moved to Crimea from Russian mainland bases since the start of the crisis on 27 February, joining four 2S1 122 mm self-propelled guns permanently based in Crimea with the Russian Black Sea Fleet's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade.

The Russian artillery appears to be heading towards the north of Crimea to reinforce naval infantry and paramilitary forces digging in along the new de facto Ukraine-Russia border.

Meanwhile, a contingent of at least three Ukrainian 2S3 152 mm self-propelled guns has also been identified in media reports on the northern side of this new border, reinforcing Ukrainian airborne troops who established a series of blocking positions from 7 March onwards.

The deployment of the BM-21s adds significantly to the firepower of the Russian garrison in Crimea, with the system having a range of between 20 and 45 km, depending on the type of rocket employed. Images of the six BM-21s first appeared on social media sites on 8 March when the rocket unit was filmed approaching the Taman Peninsula, where the main ferry link to Crimea is located. They were moving as part of a large convoy that included around 30 BTR armoured personnel carriers as well as 60 trucks and soft-skinned vehicles. One of the command vehicles appeared to be flying a Russian infantry battle flag, indicating the unit was a motor rifle battalion.

A day later images of BM-21s with the same unit markings were then posted on the internet showing them driving away from the Kerch ferry port in Crimea.

On 10 March images of eight D-30s in a convoy of Russian vehicles near Sevastopol emerged. Footage of the 810th Brigade's 2S1s in Sevastopol was broadcast on news networks at the start of the crisis on 28 February.

On 12 March the Ukrainian Border Guard issued its own assessment of the level of Russian troop movements in Crimea, reporting that between 28 February and 11 March some 15 Russian naval vessels and 48 aircraft had landed in Crimea. Russian forces had passed through the Kerch ferry port, bringing 139 vehicles with them, including six armoured personnel carriers, 111 trucks, six special vehicles and seven cars, five minibuses, and four missile systems, according to an announcement on the border guards' website.

Meanwhile, on 11 March NATO's supreme allied commander Europe, US Air Force General Philip Breedlove, issued an analysis countering Russian government statements that military forces in Crimea were locally recruited 'self-defence units'.

"After extensive review of multiple information sources we believe these are Russian military forces acting on clear orders to undermine Ukraine forces in Crimea," said Gen Breedlove. "This conclusion, although hastily stated by some members of the press, is based on deliberate and painstaking scrutiny of the many sources of data available to our professional military analysts. As we move forward and continue to closely monitor the situation in Ukraine, it will be with the understanding of the real identity of these forces."

An interim report from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe - whose team was turned back from entering Crimea at gunpoint between 6 and 8 March - presented similar evidence of the Russian military presence in Crimea.

This article, first published on 13 March 2014, has been updated with new imagery.

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