

Russia Plans to Establish Air Base in Belarus

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, left, greeting Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in Minsk on Tuesday. **Handout**

The military plans to deploy fighter jets in Belarus this year and eventually establish an air base in the former Soviet republic, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

The moves would increase Russia's military presence in Belarus, viewed by Moscow as a buffer between Russia and NATO, and could unnerve neighboring members of the Western alliance.

Russia agreed in 2009 to set up a joint air defense system with Belarus, and talks were held before then on establishing an air base there, but few concrete steps have been taken.

"We have begun considering the plan to create a Russian air base with fighter jets here," Shoigu said Tuesday at a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in the

capital, Minsk.

"We hope that in 2015 there will be a regiment of warplanes [in Belarus] that will serve to defend our borders," Shoigu said in a portion of the meeting shown on Russian state television.

Shoigu said the plan was for the first fighter jets to arrive in Belarus this year. Russian aviation regiments normally consist of roughly 60 warplanes.

While Russian and NATO officials say armed conflict between the former Cold War adversaries is all but unthinkable, relations are strained and former Soviet satellites now in the Western alliance are particularly wary of the Russian military.

An anti-missile shield the United States is deploying in Europe together with NATO nations is a chief source of tension.

Shoigu's remarks coincided with a meeting in Brussels at which Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told NATO that Moscow still wants guarantees that the system would not be used against Russia, despite a recent decision to scale it back.

Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Moscow defense think tank CAST, said the deployment of fighters in Belarus would do little to increase security and would be seen by Russia's Western neighbors "as a display of hostility."

Russia has a military presence in a number of former Soviet republics, including air bases in Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, and it is the most powerful nation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a security alliance of former Soviet states.

Russia uses a Soviet-era early-warning radar station in Belarus and has supplied it with weapons including air defense missile batteries.

Lukashenko told Shoigu that the West "should understand that if they look at us with ill intentions, we will react," according to Belarussian state news agency Belta.

But he made no specific public comment on Russia's plans for the deployment of fighters or a base, and the Foreign Ministry declined to comment.

A Moscow Times reporter contributed to this report.

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