

Defense Minister Shoigu Concerned At U.S., NATO Military Activity

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Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told Hagel that Russian forces had returned to their permanent positions.

The Russian defense minister has expressed concern about what he called an unprecedented increase in U.S. and NATO military activity near Russia's borders and urged U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to help "turn down the rhetoric" over the Ukraine crisis.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held a "candid" hour-long telephone conversation with Hagel and the men agreed to remain in contact, the Russian ministry said in a statement that suggested no other agreement emerged from the call.

On Monday, a deployment of U.S. troops arrived in the Baltics along with four British fighter jets as NATO looks to step up efforts to reassure its allies in the face of Russian tensions with the West over Ukraine.

A total of 600 U.S. troops have now been deployed to Poland and the Baltics for infantry exercises, where they are expected to remain on rotation until the end of the year.

"Clearly we are here to reassure our Baltic allies that we are able to protect their airspace, should it be needed," RAF commanding officer Simon Hulme said.

Russia has massed forces near Ukraine's border after annexing the Crimea region and reserved the right to send them in to protect Russian-speakers, raising fears in the West that Moscow could invade to support separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Shoigu told Hagel that Russian forces, which had further alarmed the West by starting drills near the border last week after Ukraine launched an operation against the separatists, had since returned to their permanent positions, the ministry said.

But it gave no indication of whether the overall number of Russian troops deployed near the Ukrainian border, which NATO has put at about 40,000, along with tanks, aircraft and other equipment, had been reduced.

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