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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Defense Ministry to Expand Black Sea Fleet

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The fleet is seen as a platform for projecting power into the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Russia will beef up its Black Sea Fleet this year with new submarines and warships, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was quoted as saying Tuesday, following the annexation of the Crimean peninsula.

New air defense and marine infantry units would also be deployed at the fleet's bases, which include Sevastopol in Crimea.

"New submarines will join the Black Sea Fleet, as well as new-generation surface ships, this year. All this requires much attention from us," Shoigu was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Shoigu said the fleet would receive funding of 86.7 billion rubles ($2.43 billion) by 2020.

The fleet, which analysts say comprises about 40 frontline warships, is seen as a guarantor of Russia's southern borders and a platform for projecting power into the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in March sparked the worst East-West crisis since the Cold War. President Vladimir Putin said last month that Russia's action over Crimea was partly a response to NATO expansion in Eastern Europe.

Russia also feared Ukraine's new government would cancel a lease allowing the fleet to stay until 2042.

The West has imposed sanctions on Russian officials, businessmen and companies in response to the Crimea annexation, and Washington and Berlin have threatened more penalties if Moscow disrupts Ukraine's presidential elections scheduled for May 25.

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