The Moscow Times
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Russia Says Crimean Military Buildup Completed

By The Moscow Times

March 30, 2015



A serviceman carries ammunition next to Sukhoi Su-25 jet fighters.

Russia has restored its forces in Crimea to full strength and intends to use its presence there to spearhead Russian interests into the Mediterranean Sea, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was quoted as saying by news agency RIA Novosti on Monday.

Shoigu said that President Vladimir Putin ordered the deployment of a "self-sufficient interdepartmental force" tasked with defending Russian national security in and around Crimea last year.

"This goal was completed by the end of 2014," Shoigu said during a meeting of Russian defense officials on Monday.

Shoigu added that the Black Sea fleet, stationed in Crimea's Sevastopol, will be used to extend Russia's presence in "long-range sea zones."

Ships from the Black Sea fleet, as well as vessels from the Northern and Baltic fleets, maintained a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea last year, Shoigu said.

The Soviet Union maintained a permanent presence in the Mediterranean for most of the Cold War, but with the fall of the Soviet Union most of its naval forces were stuck in port with no money to operate or maintain them.

Another major area of concern for the Crimean forces, Shoigu said, is the continued development of Russian air force units stationed there.

The Defense Ministry is overhauling existing bases and building new barracks and other infrastructure to support the deployment of more active duty air defense troops, RIA reported.

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