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# NATO Head Urges Ukraine Withdrawal at Meeting With Lavrov

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Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Belgian counterpart Didier Reynders (R) attend a signing ceremony of a bilateral agreement on double taxation between Russia and Belgium, at the Egmont Palace in Brussels, Belgium, May 19.

BRUSSELS — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and Russia's foreign minister met Tuesday for the first time in three months, and Stoltenberg said he restated the "very strong NATO position" against Moscow's annexation of Crimea and its support for rebels in eastern Ukraine.

Speaking later to journalists, Stoltenberg said he called on the Russians to withdraw their forces from Ukraine and to stop backing the armed insurgency in that country's east.

Moscow flatly denies Western accusations it is aiding or supplying anti-government forces in Ukraine.

Before the meeting in Brussels, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said he would "listen to what they tell us," but placed the blame on NATO for the worsening of relations with his

government since the onset of the Ukraine crisis.

"We never walk away from contacts," said Lavrov.

It was the first meeting between the alliance chief and Russia's top diplomat since talks in Munich last February.

Stoltenberg said he also pushed the case for "more transparency and predictability" in future Russian military activities. He said NATO is concerned about the large number of military exercises conducted by the Russians on short notice. He said it was important to make sure that incidents did not occur which could "spiral out of control."

The NATO chief said he also pointed out to Lavrov that the military-to-military channel of communications remains open between the alliance and Russia.

NATO accuses Russia of backing the pro-Moscow rebels in Ukraine's east, and relations between the alliance and Russia have dropped to their lowest point since the Cold War.

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