
RUSSIA TO CONDUCT MILITARY DRILLS AMID UKRAINE TENSIONS

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□□□□□□ President Vladimir Putin ordered snap military drills Thursday to test the combat-readiness of troops on the countrys western flank.

The exercises, announced by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, come amid heightened tensions with Ukraine. Russia, which is covertly supporting separatists in its neighbors east, blamed Ukraine for the deaths of two service members earlier this month in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014.

The exercises will test the ability of forces in the south to deploy promptly self-sufficient forces to localize crisis situations and for forces in the western and central districts to send support to the southeast, the Defense Ministry said. They will last through the end of the month.

Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov had been ordered to inform foreign military attachés about the drills, the ministry said.

Mr. Shoigu told a meeting of top military officials that troops in the southern, western and central military districts, the Northern Fleet, aerospace forces and airborne troops were put on full combat alert at 7 a.m. for the drills.

Thursdays announcement comes as Russia is sending tens of thousands of troops to new military installations on its border with Ukraine as part of what Moscow calls a strategy to counter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Military analysts say it looks more like an effort to base a permanent military threat on its

neighbors border that can be sent in at any time to support pro-Russian separatists who have carved out two unrecognized statelets in a two-year war. Russia has sent troops and weapons systems into eastern Ukraine to fend off government forces, Western and Ukrainian officials say. Russian officials deny this.

Russia sees Ukraine, led by a Western-leaning government, as part of its sphere of influence. Ukraine on Wednesday celebrated the 25th anniversary of its independence with a military parade.

Russia has increased the frequency of drills on its western borders in the past two years in what it calls a response to threats. It also plans to conduct major annual military exercises, called Kavkaz 2016, near its border with Ukraine next month.

Kaynak/Source: