

War in Ukraine

US holds first talks with Russian defence minister since Ukraine war began

Lloyd Austin calls for 'immediate ceasefire' in conversation with Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu



US defence secretary Lloyd Austin. His conversation with his Russian counterpart came as German chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke with Vladimir Putin © Bloomberg

James Politi in Washington and **Guy Chazan** in Berlin YESTERDAY

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US defence secretary Lloyd Austin called for an “immediate ceasefire” in Ukraine during his first phone call with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu since the war began almost three months ago, as western allies ramped up direct talks with Moscow.

Austin’s conversation with Shoigu came as German chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke with Vladimir Putin and urged the Russian president to work towards a ceasefire in Ukraine, improve the humanitarian situation and make progress towards a diplomatic solution to [end the conflict](#).

The call between Austin and Shoigu was notable because it was the first since February 18, six days before Russian forces launched their attack on Ukraine, and could help ease fears that the war will spill over into a broader fight between Nato and Russia.

Contact between top US and Russian defence and military officials is considered crucial to prevent any misunderstandings or accidental escalation between the two nuclear-armed powers.

“Secretary Austin urged an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and emphasised the importance of maintaining lines of communication,” Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said in a statement on Friday.

Austin had been rebuffed for weeks in his efforts to speak to Shoigu before the Russian defence minister finally agreed to talk, according to a senior US defence official. “We’ve been consistently asking for this conversation, and Minister Shoigu assented for a call this week, but what motivated them to change their mind and to be open to it? I don’t think we know for sure,” the official said on Friday.

The US defence official added that while the call itself, which lasted about one hour, did not solve any “acute issues” or lead to a change in Russian behaviour, “it was a good sign that they were able to make this connection and the secretary hopes that they’ll be able to stay in touch going forward”.

The conversation, which the official described as “professional”, took place as Russia is [struggling to make progress](#) in its effort to gain full control of the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine, where it has concentrated its forces and firepower after failing in its initial goals of capturing Kyiv and toppling the government.

“The Ukrainian artillery is frustrating Russian efforts to make much ground and including frustrating their efforts to cross the Donets river,” the official said. “[They are] not getting many people across the river and that’s affecting their ability to mass reinforcements in the northern Donbas.”

In a press briefing later on Friday, Kirby said the US would send around 10,500 new military personnel to Europe to replace previously deployed US army units. “These forces are not going to fight in Ukraine,” Kirby said, but rather to “support the robust defence of Nato allies.” He also urged the US Senate to approve a new \$40bn aid package to “continue uninterrupted the flow of aid and assistance into Ukraine”.

“If we don’t get those authorities soon, I mean, it’s possible that there could be a bubble, a period of time in which, you know, there’s just nothing moving and we want to make sure we avoid that,” he said.

Scholz’s spokesman, Steffen Hebestreit, said the German chancellor had urged Putin to work towards a ceasefire in Ukraine as soon as possible, given the seriousness of the military situation and the consequences of the war, especially in the besieged city of Mariupol.

Hebestreit said Scholz also “rejected the accusation that Nazism is widespread in

Ukraine”.

He said the two also spoke about the global food situation, which has become particularly tense as a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Scholz “reminded [Putin] that Russia bears a special responsibility” in the matter.

Scholz later wrote on Twitter that he had made three points in his conversation with Putin: “There must be a ceasefire in Ukraine as soon as possible. The claim that Nazis are in power there is wrong. And I pointed out Russia’s responsibility for the global food situation.”

The senior US defence official noted that Austin’s call for a ceasefire was in “alignment” with the position of other allies and partners.

Additional reporting by Courtney Weaver

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