

Russian navy to start sorties in Mediterranean

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MOSCOW (Reuters) - Russia said on Wednesday it would start the first major navy sortie into the Mediterranean since Soviet times, the latest move by an increasingly assertive Moscow to demonstrate its military might.

"The aim of the sorties is to ensure a naval presence in tactically important regions of the world ocean," Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov told President Vladimir Putin, who wished the sailors well. The rest of the meeting was closed.

Serdyukov said 11 ships, including an aircraft carrier, would take part in the sortie and be backed up by 47 aircraft -- including strategic bombers.

Admiral Kuznetsov - Russia's Aircraft Carrier

{youtube}A-OalTqzH6E{/youtube}

Buoyed by huge oil revenues, Russia under Putin has been boosting military spending while at the same time using diplomacy to broaden Moscow's influence.

Earlier this year Putin announced that long-range strategic bombers would resume patrols around the world and Russia's long-range nuclear forces have test-fired new missiles.

But analysts say the navy, once the focus of national pride and symbol of the Soviet Union's military might, is still reeling from more than a decade of underfunding.

A series of accidents -- such as the sinking of the Kursk nuclear submarine in 2000 -- have hurt the Russian navy's reputation at home and abroad.

Serdyukov said the navy's flagship aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, and anti-submarine ships had set out for the Mediterranean on Wednesday from the Northern Fleet's base in Severomorsk, in the Arctic Circle.

Black Sea fleet ships and aircraft support would meet them in the Mediterranean. He said military exercises would be held during the sorties and that the group would visit six foreign states. He did not name them.

He also said Northern Fleet would make sorties into the northern Atlantic.

Russia has long been talking about reviving a permanent naval base in the Mediterranean. During the Cold War, the Soviet navy had a permanent presence on the Mediterranean, using the Syrian port of Tartus as a supply point.

By Guy Faulconbridge, Copyright © 2007 Reuters

More on the Admiral Kuznetsov Here

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