

Russian navy chief calls for permanent presence in Mediterranean

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MOSCOW: Russia's navy chief on Friday called for restoring the country's permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea, news agency reports said.

"The Mediterranean is a strategically important zone for Russia's Black Sea Fleet," Admiral Vladimir Masorin said while visiting the fleet's base in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol, RIA-Novosti and Interfax-AVN reported.

"The objective is the permanent presence of the Russian navy in the Mediterranean," Masorin said.

Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Masorin thinks Moscow's navy should sail the Mediterranean..jpg

Soviet navy ships used to be based at Syria's Mediterranean port of Tartus, and Russia still maintains a technical base there to serve its military vessels that regularly go into the Mediterranean.

Independent military analyst Alexander Golts said that from a military point of view it did not make "any sense" for Russia to be present in the Mediterranean.

Commentators have suggested in the past that Russia might seek to relocate part of its Black Sea Fleet to the Mediterranean if it fails to get an extension of its agreement with Western-leaning Ukraine on leasing the Sevastopol port when it expires in 2017.

The Associated Press, Friday, August 3, 2007

Russia weighs relocation of Black Sea Fleet to Syria
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Russian ambitions on Mediterranean stir Cold War chill
August 4, 2007
By Adrian Blomfield

LONDON DAILY TELEGRAPH - MOSCOW — Russia stirred memories of the Cold War yesterday when the head of the country's navy called for the establishment of a permanent naval base in the Mediterranean for the first time since the Soviet era.

Announced a day after an audacious mission to the North Pole to bolster Russia's territorial claims in the Arctic, Moscow's renewed naval ambitions are likely to spread further unease in NATO capitals.

"The Mediterranean Sea is very important strategically," Adm. Vladimir Masorin said on a tour of the Russian navy's Black Sea base in the Crimean port of Sevastopol. "I propose that, with the involvement of the Northern and Baltic fleets, the Russian navy should restore its permanent presence there."

His remarks raise doubts about the Kremlin's denial last year of a newspaper claim that new moorings were being built in the Syrian port of Tartus.

Ivan Safronov, the journalist who died in a mysterious fall from a building in Moscow earlier this year, said Russia also had begun expanding the port at Latakia, also in Syria.

President Vladimir Putin has been eager to restore Moscow's influence in the Middle East, signing contentious arms deals with Syria and Iran that have upset the United States and Israel.

If the port plan proceeds, Russian vessels and warships from the U.S. 6th Fleet, based in Italy, would face each other in the Mediterranean for the first time since the Cold War, when the Soviet navy was based in Tartus.

Russia maintains a symbolic and largely empty logistical facility at Tartus — its only military base outside the former Soviet Union.

Russia's Kommersant newspaper said last year that the Russian navy had dredged the port at Tartus in preparation for deploying a force there. But the newspaper said the navy was, in part, using the Syrian base as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Ukraine over its lease for Sevastopol.

Moscow rents the facilities for \$93 million a year under a 1997 agreement that lasts until 2017. Ukraine has sought to increase the price.

"It has been the dream of our admirals for a long time to restore our naval greatness and keep the task force we had under the Soviet Union," military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer told Reuters news agency.

Russia's new assertiveness has created friction and prompted some Western policy-makers to make comparisons to the Cold War.

Mr. Putin has said Russia would target its missiles at sites in Europe if Washington went ahead with a plan to build elements of a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. He also has suspended Russia's compliance with an arms control treaty.

Washington will be watching both developments in the Mediterranean and the Arctic with concern.

Yesterday, it bluntly warned Moscow that any attempt to claim sovereignty over the Arctic would not be tolerated after Russia planted its national flag under the North Pole on Thursday.

"I'm not sure whether they've put a metal flag, a rubber flag or a bedsheet on the ocean floor," said Tom Casey, a spokesman for the State Department. "Either way, it doesn't have any legal standing."

In a record-breaking expedition led by Artur Chilingarov, a veteran polar explorer, two deep-sea submersibles descended 14,000 feet. The successful operation was greeted with jubilation in Russia, where it stirred memories of derring-do from the golden era of Soviet naval exploration.

Like other countries with Arctic coastlines, Russia has laid claims for greater territory in the oil-rich area and will present its case to a U.N. commission in 2010.

Russian Fleet Worries Israel

// Even though it is nowhere near it

Kommersant - Russia's plans to restore its permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea are causing serious concern in Israel. The Israelis think that the Syrian ports the Russians are most likely to use will turn into major centers of electronic surveillance and air defense centers and, as such, threats to Israel's national security. Russian experts say that Moscow's plans are unlikely to come to fruition any time soon. There is neither the money nor the technical capacity for it.

Commander of the Russian Navy Fleet Adm. Vladimir Masorin announced Russia's plans to return to the Mediterranean at the end of last week in Sevastopol. He did not say whether new bases would be established in the region. It is commonly known, however, that such bases could only be opened in Syria, where ports were used for the same purposes by the USSR. As Kommersant reported on June 2, 2006, Russia is already dredging the port of Tartus and has begun to build a dock in the Syrian port of Latakia. A defense Ministry source at that time revealed that Moscow plans to a squadron of military vessels led by the missile cruiser Moskva to be permanently based in the Mediterranean Sea.

Masorin's announcement, in which those plans were recalled, has caused serious alarm in Israel. The major Israeli newspaper Yediot Ahronot reported yesterday that Israeli intelligence holds that the presence of Russian ships in Syria is a direct threat to Israel's security. In particular, the bases in Tartus and Latakia will turn into centers of electronic surveillance that will be able to monitor not only Israel, but the entire Middle East. There is also concern in Israel that Russia will share that information with its Muslim partners, especially Syria and possibly Iran. In addition, Russia will certainly create a major air defense system to defend its bases that will be able to defend much of Syria from attack as well.

Russian experts say that it is still too early for Israel to sound alarms. "Only the Soviet Navy had the means to maintain a rapid deployment group of ships in the Mediterranean Sea, and it maintain a permanent squadron in which ships from the Black Sea, Northern and Baltic Fleets served in rotation," former commander of the Black Sea Fleet Eduard Baltin explained. "In addition, a rapid response brigade from the Iberian zone near Gibraltar. Judging by the quantitative makeup of our Navy, it would be very hard to maintain a military presence in Mediterranean. Essentially, we only have the capability to maintain a military-political presence in the region."

The main problem with returning to the Mediterranean is money. The Navy is the most expensive of the armed forces. "We have almost no ships left in the Black Sea. There is a balanced group in the Baltic, but it is maintained at the minimum acceptable level. The Northern Fleet, no to mention the Pacific Fleet, is too far away for expeditions to the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, all that Russia can maintain in Syria is a ship or two. That is only a symbolic presence," Konstantin Makienko of the Center for Strategic and Technical Analysis commented for Kommersant.

Dossier

The History of the Russian Base in Syria

The 720th Logistics Support Point at the Syrian port of Tartus is the only Russian military base beyond the CIS. The agreement on the placement of Soviet naval objects at the base was signed with Syria in 1971. The base at Tartus was created to support the activities of a fleet in the Mediterranean Sea, mainly repairing and equipping the ships of the 5th Rapid Response (Mediterranean) Squadron. In Soviet times, such points were also located in Egypt and at the Syrian port of Latakia.

In 1977, the Soviet 54th Rapid Response Brigade of service vessels evacuated their bases at Alexandria and Mersa-Matruh. The ships and property from those bases were transferred to Tartus, where the 229th Naval and Estuary Vessel Support Division was formed in April 1977. In 1984, a logistics support point was formed at Tartus.

In 1991, the Mediterranean Squadron ceased its existence. Since then, there have been only one-time expeditions by Russian Navy vessels to the Mediterranean Sea. The logistics support point in Syria is now part of the Black Sea Fleet and consists of three floating docks (of which only one is operational), a floating workshop, storage facilities, barracks and other facilities.

Olga Berezintseva, Konstantin Lantratov

After his claim to the Arctic, Putin plans a warship base in the Med
04.08.07 This is London, thisislondon.co.uk

Russia is to open a naval base on the Mediterranean for the first time since the Cold War.

The day after the Kremlin staked a claim to the North Pole with a daring mission to plant a Russian flag on the Arctic seabed, military chiefs revealed Vladimir Putin's latest plan.

The aim is to "restore the greatness of the Soviet era," experts said.

"The Mediterranean Sea is very important strategically for the Black Sea fleet," head of the navy Admiral Vladimir Masorin said yesterday.

"I propose that, with the involvement of the Northern and Baltic fleets, the Russian Navy should restore its permanent presence there."

Buoyed by huge oil revenues and with President Putin showing increasing assertiveness, Russia has been boosting military spending.

At the same time, it has been using diplomacy to broaden Moscow's sphere of influence, especially in the Middle East, and a Russian force would further this cause.

However, it would mean sharing Mediterranean waters with the US Sixth Fleet - whose home base is in Italy - and this could further exacerbate recent tensions between the two.

Russia's new forcefulness has created friction and prompted some Western policymakers to make comparisons with the Cold War.

Mr Putin has said Russia would target its missiles at sites in Europe if Washington went ahead with a plan to build elements of a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe.

He has also suspended Russia's compliance with an arms control treaty.

During the Cold War, the Soviet navy had a permanent presence on the Mediterranean, using the Syrian port of Tartus as a supply point.

"It has been the dream of our admirals for a long time to restore our naval greatness and keep the task force we had under the Soviet Union," said military expert Pavel Felgenhauer.

Analysts say the Russian navy is only just recovering from the under-funding of the 1990s when many sailors left the accident-prone fleet.

It has not been revealed where the fleet would be based, but the most likely option would be reviving the Tartus base.

"We still maintain a naval station in Syria but that has been mostly standing empty because, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the naval task force was withdrawn," said Mr Felgenhauer.

He believes Russia has so few ships it would be unlikely to tip the strategic balance in the Mediterranean.

"The surface fleet right now is very small. There have been excursions (into the Mediterranean) several times in the 1990s, but I do not think right now we have the naval capability to keep a sizeable force there all the time."

Mr Putin's increased defence spending could see an expansion of the fleet, however.

If Russia does build up a base in Syria, it could anger Israel, which has criticised Moscow for supplying weapons to Damascus.

On Thursday, Russian explorers dived deep below the North Pole in a three-man mini-submarine and planted a national flag on the seabed to stake a claim to the energy riches of the Arctic.

A mechanical arm dropped a speciallymade rust-proof titanium flag on to the Arctic seabed at a depth of 13,980 ft (4,261 metres).

Russia wants to extend the territory it controls in the Arctic right up to the North Pole.

The area is believed to hold vast reserves of untapped oil and natural gas, which is expected to become more accessible as climate change melts the ice.

In June, a Moscow newspaper printed a map of the area Russia is claiming - a triangle five times the size of Britain with twice as much oil as Saudi Arabia.

Observers say the moves to expand in the Arctic and the Mediterranean are typical of President Putin's muscle-flexing as he tries to increase his country's power.

Critics accuse the Kremlin of embarking on a campaign of new colonialism.

Russian Navy to operate from Syria - ynetnews

For first time since fall of Iron Curtain, Russia plans to build permanent bases on Syrian soil as part of large arms deal between two countries. Defense establishment officials fear Russian ships may try to spy on Israel's weapon systems

Aryeh Egozi, Alex Fishman Published: 08.06.07, 09:07 / Israel News

For the first time since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russia plans to re-operate the Tartus and Latakia ports in Syria as permanent bases for the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean basin, according to recent western media reports.

Rumors on the growing Russian activity in the Mediterranean began spreading following a statement by Russian Navy commander, Admiral Vladimir Masorin, as he visited the Russian Navy base in the Sebastopol port in Ukraine.

Regional Ties

"Being present in the Mediterranean is very important for our Navy in the Black Sea," the admiral said.

The Qatar-based television network al-Jazeera quoted a senior Russian Defense Ministry official over the weekend, who declared that Russia must be permanently present in the Mediterranean again.

According to the reports, Syria plans to let Russia use its ports as part of the large arms deal signed between the two countries in the past year.

The breakthrough which led to the arms deal was made possible after the two parties resolved their financial differences.

Over the years, Syria had accumulated a huge debt of approximately \$11 billion to Russia. The Russians recently conceded more than 70% of the debt. The remaining debt will be returned by Syria partly in cash and partly through permanent port services to the Russian Navy ships in Latkia and Tartus.

Israeli security officials estimated that the renewed Russian activity in these bases, which were active throughout the Cold War, was related to the renewed tensions between Russia and the United States, mainly in light of the American plan to station antimissile missile systems in Europe – a plan Moscow views as a threat to its security.

"The bases will allow Russia to protect its interests in the region," the sources estimated.

While US naval forces are permanently present in the Mediterranean, Russian Navy ships have so far settled for exercises and friendly visits to different countries in the region.

Since the Soviet Union's disintegration the Russian Navy has been experiencing a crisis, but in the past two years efforts have been made to rehabilitate the warships and the submarines.

The Russian Navy is known to massively operate spy ships.

Israeli officials estimated on Sunday that a renewed base in Syria will help the Russians carry out spy missions also against Israel, particularly electronic spying aimed at observing new weapon systems and the flow of information in channels used by the army and the defense establishment.