

# Russia Boosts Military Presence at Home and Abroad

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Russia is looking at boosting its military presence in the Mediterranean with plans to set up two naval bases in Syria. Together with the production of intercontinental ballistic missiles in the works and an air defense missile system in the Moscow region, this may be one of the first signs of the "asymmetrical" response to the United States that President Vladimir Putin spoke of in February. But while the West is already alarmed by the response, it may not be as threatening as it appears.

Russian Navy Chief Admiral Vladimir Masorin announced Friday in a televised address to journalists that Russia would return warships to the Mediterranean, marking the first military presence outside Russia since the breakup of the USSR. While Masorin did not mention Syria as the host of any bases, the Arab state has two ports, Tartus and Latakia, that hosted Soviet bases until 1992, making them the only likely ports to accommodate the new Navy bases. "The Mediterranean Sea is very important strategically for the Black Sea Fleet," Masorin told journalists in the Crimean port town of Sevastopol, the home of Russia's Black Sea fleet despite being on Ukrainian territory. "I suppose that, with the involvement of the Northern and Baltic fleets, the Russian Navy should restore its permanent presence there," RIA Novosti quoted Masorin as saying.

The development has already startled Israel, where the Yediot Aharonot came out with a front page headline, "The Russians are Coming." Israel fears that Russia could use the bases as intelligence centers to share information with countries like Iran. Analysts in Russia, however, tended to downplay the threat that this seemingly symbolic act held.

Speaking in Sevastopol on Sunday, Masorin also revealed that Russia has ordered production of components for the Bulava-M missile, designed for a new generation of nuclear submarines. These intercontinental missiles were successfully test launched June 29 from a submarine in the White Sea to the Far East Kamchatka. This move to boost a key component of Russia's strategic forces was immediately interpreted as a response to U.S. plans to install 10 missile interceptors in Poland.

In a separate development, meanwhile, the S-400 Triumph missile defense system went into to combat alert in the Moscow region, Alexander Selin, Commander in Chief of Russia's Air Force, announced Monday. Designed to destroy aircraft made with Stealth technology, small cruise and tactical missiles, and warheads, the S-400, which operates from the town of Eletrostal, is intended to protect Moscow from missile threats.

Together the moves showed that Moscow was taking its words about an "asymmetric" response seriously.

"Moscow has said several times that it does not intend to get into an arms race (this is completely meaningless, considering U.S. capabilities), but is ready for asymmetrical responses," says Fyodor Lukyanov, who edits the foreign policy journal Russia in Global Affairs. "Testing new weapons is certainly in this category, although their development began a lot sooner."

Whether meant as a response or not, these developments followed an unusually reconciliatory stance from the European Council, which said U.S. plans for the missile shield were not conducive to mutual understanding. "Especially not the way they tried to get it through and I am very happy that today there is a common working group between the U.S. and Russia so that they hopefully can find a common solution that is convenient for both parties," Rene van der Linden, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, said in an interview last week with the Russia Today channel. "It is in my view a negative element if member states of the EU and of the Council of Europe on their own take the decisions without consultation with Russia."

As for bases in Syria, the threat signaled to Israel and the United States seems more immediate but is not as strong as the Israeli media may suggest. Ivan Safranchuk, director of the Russian branch office of the World Security Institute, doesn't see the plans as a necessary response to the United States.

"Of course the United States will take it badly," he told The Moscow News. "The United States has been conducting an operation to liquidate Syrian and Iranian influence in the Middle East since 1994. And Syria is the only adequate ally Russia has in the Middle East."

Lukyanov, meanwhile, says that it is too soon to draw any conclusions from the plans for the naval bases, but added that it might negatively impact Russia's relationship with the United States, which views Syria as an "unfriendly state."

On the other hand, Russia's plans in the Mediterranean might only signal that the country has the resources to begin reestablishing its world presence. Russia had a naval base in Tartus since 1971. It was shut down in 1991 simply because Russia didn't have the means to sustain it considering its internal upheavals. Safranchuk agrees that it was closed not as a friendly gesture to the United States, but because Russia had no money.

According to the Kommersant daily, money is indeed still the main obstacle in reestablishing a fleet in the Mediterranean. "All that Russia can afford to base in Syria is one or two warships," Kommersant quoted Konstantin Makienko of the Center for Analysis of Strategy and Technology as saying.

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