

# U.S. And NATO Accelerate Military Build-Up In Black Sea Region

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In the post-Cold War era and especially since 2001 the Pentagon has been steadily shifting emphasis, and moving troops and equipment, from bases in Germany and Italy to Eastern Europe in its drive to the east and the south.

That process was preceded and augmented by the absorption of former Eastern Bloc nations into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization beginning in 1999. In one of the first nations in that category, Poland, the initial contingent of what will be over 100 U.S. troops arrived in the town of Morag this week, as near as 35 miles from Russian territory, as part of a Status of Forces Agreement between Washington and the host country ratified this February.

Also in February, the governments of the Black Sea nations of Romania and Bulgaria confirmed plans for the U.S. to deploy a land-based version of Standard Missile-3 anti-ballistic interceptors on their territory.

The U.S. Sixth Fleet, headquartered in Italy, has deployed warships to the Black Sea with an increased frequency over the past few years, visiting and conducting joint drills with the navies of Bulgaria, Romania and Georgia.

Last autumn it was revealed that the Pentagon planned to spend \$110 million dollars to upgrade and modernize a base in Bulgaria and another in Romania, two of seven such newly-acquired installations in the two nations.

The air, naval and infantry bases in Bulgaria and Romania have been employed for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and, although not publicly acknowledged, doubtlessly for arming Georgia before, during and since its five-day war with Russia in August of 2008.

The Pentagon's Joint Task Force-East has all but officially been assigned to the Mihail Kogalniceanu Airfield in Romania and also makes regular use of the Romanian Army's Babadag Training Area and the Novo Selo Training Range in Bulgaria, the latter near the strategic Bezmer Air Base and the Black Sea port city of Burgas (Bourgas).

Last year Joint Task Force-East conducted a series of military trainings with Bulgarian and Romanian counterparts from August 7 to October 24. The immediate purpose of the combat drills was for "downrange" operations in Afghanistan, but the lengthy and extensive nature of the maneuvers demonstrated the longer-term and longer-range intents of the U.S. and its NATO allies. The latter also have free use of the Bulgarian and Romanian military bases.

Two squadrons from the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment were among the 2,000 American

troops who participated in last year's war games in the two nations.

American Admiral James Stavridis, commander of U.S. European Command and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, visited Romania on April 27 and 28, meeting with the country's president and defense minister. The main topics of discussion were NATO's new Strategic Concept and its war in Afghanistan, but the issue of stationing U.S. interceptor missiles was surely touched upon as well.

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was in Romania on May 6 and 7 to meet with the president, defense minister, foreign minister and top military commander. The U.S.-NATO missile shield project and the war in Afghanistan were major subjects on the agenda.

Five days after Rasmussen left the capital the Romanian Foreign Ministry announced that "A round of technical US-Romanian talks on Romania's inclusion in the Phased Adaptive Approach of the European missile defense system took place in Bucharest" a day earlier, May 11. [1]

The NATO chief arrived in neighboring Bulgaria on May 20 for similar discussions. The local press announced in advance that "The construction of a common missile defense system and Bulgaria's accession into it, along with reforms in the Bulgarian army and NATO's new strategic concept - these will be some of the issues that NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen is going to discuss with his Bulgarian partners during his two-day visit to Sofia beginning on Thursday, May 20." [2]

In fact, while in the Bulgarian capital Rasmussen met with the nation's prime minister, president and defense minister and, according to a Bulgarian news source, the top issue discussed was "the planned installation of an anti-missile defence system in the region, as Brussels plans to deploy anti-missile units in Bulgaria and negotiations are set to be launched following the Portugal Nato summit" in November. [3]

Rasmussen reiterated the demand that all Balkans nations be incorporated into NATO, which would dictate the inclusion of Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. (As NATO recognizes the last-named as an independent state.)

The host nation's foreign minister, Nikolay Mladenov, spoke after the meeting with NATO's secretary general and linked the North Atlantic bloc's collective military assistance article with U.S.-led missile deployments and anti-Russian energy transit projects. He specifically highlighted "setting up the anti-missile defence shield as a part of Article 5 against new threats" and "the inclusion of energy security to key security issues." [4]

On May 14 Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola was in Romania to meet with Defense Minister Gabriel Oprea, and the "current stage of NATO-led military actions in Afghanistan and Romania's participation in Alliance missions were the main subjects" of deliberation. Romania's defense minister said, "Romania's prompt response to the proposal to install missile shield elements on its soil is a confirmation of the responsibility whereby Romania approaches national, South-East European and Alliance security issues." [5]

The nation, which lost another soldier to fighting in Afghanistan this week, has recently confirmed plans to deploy 600 more troops for the South Asian war, bringing the aggregate number to 1,800.

On May 17 the U.S.'s Black Sea Rotational Force 2010 three-month series of military exercises was launched at Romania's Mihail Kogalniceanu Airfield.

Several days before "more than 100 Marines from across the United States put boots on the ground in Romania and stepped into history as the first Security Cooperation Marine Air-Ground Task Force in the Black Sea region.

"The Marines were deployed to build partnerships with nations in the Black Sea, Balkan and Caucasus regions...." [6]

The Black Sea Rotational Force 2010 drills are being conducted in eastern Romania in Constanta on the Black Sea and Tulcea, also on the Black Sea and close to the border with Moldova, and include over 300 troops from the U.S., the host country, Ukraine and Macedonia.

The U.S. Marine Corps deployment is "the first of its kind for United States Marines to the Black Sea region." [7]

The commander of the Black Sea Rotational Force Security Cooperation Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF), Lieutenant Colonel Tom Gordon, spoke at the opening ceremony at the Mihail Kogalniceanu Airfield. His comments included the following: "Our mission over the next three months will be to conduct multilateral security cooperation activities with partner nations in the Black Sea, Balkan, and Caucasus regions in order to enhance our collective professional military capacity, promote regional stability, and build enduring relationships with our partner nations. As a MAGTF we will simultaneously engage with Romanian Land, Naval, Air, and Special Forces throughout our deployment."

A Romanian officer present said, "This is a great opportunity for us to know the Marines. I expect my men to show they are prepared to fight with America in Afghanistan." [8]

In advance of the maneuvers, the U.S. Marine Corps moved military vehicles from a base in Norway, part of Marine Corps Prepositioning Program Norway.

"The Marine Corps and Norway have developed a unique relationship for the storage and care of prepositioned equipment and supplies. The method of storage to support the prepositioned assets for a MAGTF is a series of six caves in the Trondheim region of central Norway."

To illustrate both the range of military networks stretching from old to new NATO states and where their ultimate downrange destinations are located, a Marine website supplied additional details:

"Norway relies on the Marine's prepositioning program as a major cornerstone of the nation's internal defense plan. With deep-water ports in close proximity to the storage caves, equipment can quickly be loaded aboard available shipping for operations in threatened parts of Europe, Africa or the Middle East. This capability was demonstrated by the supplying of equipment and ammunition in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom." [9]

U.S. Marines will be occupied "working in the Black Sea, Balkan and Caucasus regions" to

“build enduring partnerships and build the capacity of partner nation’s military forces” until the end of July, by which time NATO’s largest military offensive of the nearly nine-year-old Afghan war – the assault on Kandahar province – will be underway.

Shortly before the above-described war games began, U.S. Air Force personnel were deployed from the Ramstein Air Base in Germany to Romania for Operation Carpathian Summer 2010, an air force medical evacuation exercise. “Held at Otopeni Airfield, near Bucharest, Operation Carpathian Summer 2010 was designed to strengthen the partnership between the U.S. and Romanian air forces, while elevating their capability to work together.

“Though this is not the first time American airmen have worked with the Romanian air force, the 86th AES [Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron] has never before joined in the training with their Romanian colleagues.” [10]

At the same time Romanian troops joined colleagues from the U.S., Britain, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland and Slovakia at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany to engage in joint military training with soldiers from the Afghan National Army.

On May 19 the Stars and Stripes armed forces publication reported that “Rapid expansion of the Army’s unmanned aircraft fleet has prompted the service to begin offering initial training in Europe, instead of sending troops to the U.S. to learn....” Among the drones that will be used for the training are the Extended-Range Multi-Purpose MQ-1C Warrior, “which can fly for more than 20 hours and launch air-to-ground missiles,” and the RQ-11 Raven small class unmanned aerial vehicle used by the U.S. and NATO allies.

The news source added that “a course next month at Grafenwohr Training Area, will, for the first time, offer initial operator training on the Raven UAS [Unmanned Aircraft System] in Europe.

“The Army is looking at flying the Raven in Romania and possibly Bulgaria, and attempting to open a range in Italy for the 173rd Airborne Brigade’s unmanned aircraft.” [11]

From April 12-16 a U.S. Air Force team at the Aviano Air Base in Italy, “in an effort to improve an already established military relationship,” provided aircraft maintenance training to the Bulgarian and Romanian air forces. [12]

On May 18 200 U.S. airmen and ten F-15 multi-role strike fighters spearheaded the launching of Operation Sentry Gold at the Graf Ignatievo Air Base in Bulgaria. “The exercise is designed to provide the U.S. Air Force and Bulgarian air force the opportunity to learn from each other and increase their respective NATO interoperability.”

The American commander involved in the maneuvers emphasized that the Bulgarian air force still uses Russian MiG-21s and MiG-29s, saying: “We simulate fighting MiGs all the time. Being here allows us to really see them in action.”

A Bulgarian officer said of the drills, “Sentry Gold increases the realism of our combat training. We get to see how a unit with a tested and proven combat history does things,” and added, “Training together with [U.S. Air Forces in Europe] and the U.S. pilots moves us

closer to NATO standards.” [13]

As noted earlier, NATO chief Rasmussen arrived in the Bulgarian capital on May 20. Five days earlier the nation’s defense minister, Anyu Angelov, affirmed that “We will file a request to join the common European missile shield during NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s visit to Sofia....” [14]

The Bulgarian defense chief also said that his ministry will allot funds to upgrade the nation’s air defense system and that “Brussels has promised to co-finance the initiative, while NATO will allocate US \$7.5 million to complete the construction of the Graf Ignatievo airbase.” [15]

On the eastern shore of the Black Sea, senior Georgian military officials met with the permanent representatives of all 28 NATO member states at a sitting of the NATO-Georgia Commission (created the month after Georgia’s war with Russia in 2008) on May 5. A week later NATO’s South Caucasus liaison officer Zbigniew Ribatski announced that the military bloc will open a representative’s office in Georgia this summer.

On May 14 the Georgian press reported the launching of a U.S.-funded military training simulation facility in the country: “The Simulation Training Center has been formed through the framework of US-Georgia cooperation. The United States, under the ongoing collaboration, donated the Center with the cutting-edge technical equipment and developed special training programs for it.” [16] The inauguration was attended by new U.S. ambassador John Bass and NATO nations’ military attaches.

Even Ukraine under its new president Viktor Yanukovich remains within NATO’s Black Sea plans. The prohibition against the presence of foreign military forces for exercises in the nation, effected by the former opposition against Yanukovich’s pro-U.S. predecessor Viktor Yushchenko, has been reversed, and U.S. and fellow NATO states’ troops may resume Sea Breeze exercises on Ukraine’s Black Sea coast.

The establishment of U.S. and NATO naval, air and infantry bases and interceptor missile installations in Black Sea nations is the prototype for expansive and permanent military build-ups in Eastern Europe and into former Soviet space, which is being replicated in the Baltic Sea region. An imaginary Iranian threat is the subterfuge employed to justify the presence of U.S. and NATO warplanes, warships, troops, mechanized and airborne units, missile batteries, training centers and radar facilities in the Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions.

Iran does not border either of the two seas and has neither the ability nor any reason to threaten nations that do.

Recent news reports from both sides of the Atlantic speak of a warming of relations between Russia and the United States, between Russia and NATO. If so, Russian political leaders won’t have to extend their hands far to clasp those of their alleged Western friends and allies. They need merely reach across their southwestern and northwestern borders on the Black and Baltic Seas.

## **Notes**

- 1) HotNews.ro, May 12, 2010
- 2) Standart News, May 16, 2010

- 3) Sofia Echo, May 20, 2010
- 4) Focus News Agency, May 20, 2010
- 5) The Financiarul, May 14, 2010
- 6) Xinhua News Agency, May 13, 2010
- 7) United States European Command, May 17, 2010
- 8) Ibid
- 9) Marines.mil, May 12, 2010
- 10) U.S. European Command, May 14, 2010
- 11) Stars and Stripes, May 19, 2010
- 12) U.S. Air Forces in Europe, April 20, 2010
- 13) U.S. Air Forces in Europe, May 18, 2010
- 14) Standart News, May 15, 2010
- 15) Ibid
- 16) Georgia Ministry of Defence, May 14, 2010

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