

History: U.S. Uses NATO For Black Sea Military Buildup

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Important article first published on July 27, 2012 provides a historical perspective on the Black Sea Military Buildup

With permanent access to eight air and other military bases and training facilities in Bulgaria and Romania acquired over the past seven years, and advanced interceptor missiles to be stationed in the second country in three years, the Pentagon is establishing a firm foothold in the Black Sea region from which to continue current and initiate new military operations in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Balkans and the Caucasus.

The U.S. Marines Corps' Black Sea Rotational Force and the U.S. Army's Task Force-East are assigned to the region on a regular basis and American warships are frequent visitors to the Black Sea, notwithstanding the 1936 Montreux Convention which limits the passage of non-littoral nations' military vessels through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits to the Black Sea.

Last year the flagship of the U.S.-NATO interceptor missile system, the guided missile cruiser USS Monterey, participated in the U.S.-led Sea Breeze naval exercise in the Black Sea – a NATO Partnership for Peace initiative – coordinated from Odessa, Ukraine, only 187 miles from Russia's Black Sea Fleet headquarters in Sevastopol.

This year's Sea Breeze [2012], held from July 9-21, was the largest naval exercise held in the Black Sea this year and featured personnel from 17 nations, NATO members and partners (not always publicly acknowledged): The U.S., Ukraine, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Norway, Portugal, Turkey, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Georgia, Israel, Moldova, Qatar, Sweden and the United Arab Emirates. Algeria, Bangladesh, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates participated for the first time. The last two states, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and of NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative military partnership, provided NATO with warplanes for the six-month air war against Libya last year. The United Arab Emirates also has troops serving under NATO in Afghanistan.

Overlapping with the above maneuvers, another NATO Partnership for Peace exercise run by U.S. European Command, Rapid Trident 2012, was launched in Western Ukraine on July 16 and will run to July 28.

An estimated 1,400 service members from 16 countries – the U.S., Ukraine, Austria, Azerbaijan, Denmark, Bulgaria, Canada, Germany, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, Norway, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Sweden – are participating.

The Dacian Thunder 2012 exercise is being conducted by the U.S., Britain and Romania from July 10-31 in the third nation. Led by the U.S. 81st Fighter Squadron and Marines, the three NATO allies are training for, in the words of the U.S. Air Force website, “air-to-air, air-to-ground, combat search and rescue, air defense, air security, air intelligence, tactical command, and cross service logistical support and operations” in preparation for “future contingency operations.”

Earlier this month U.S. Army Europe commander Lieutenant General Mark Phillip Hertling visited Georgia, on the other end of the Black Sea, to meet with the country’s new defense minister, Dimitri Shashkin, and top military commanders.

This week Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery, Deputy Director of Plans, Policy and Strategy for U.S. European Command, met with Defense Minister Shashkin to begin the implementation of this year’s agreement between U.S. President Barack Obama and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to upgrade Georgia’s military capabilities.

This week Saakashvili’s spouse, Netherlands-born Sandra Roelofs, visited the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. to meet with six Georgian soldiers being treated there for injuries sustained in NATO’s Afghan war.

Last week Saakashvili met with Turkish Defense Minister İsmet Yılmaz in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi and stated:

“You know that 2014 has been declared as the year of NATO expansion, and Georgia already has a real chance for full membership in NATO, which represents an important long-term security guarantee for us.”

The Georgian head of state added:

“Turkey is one of the major supporters in our drive to join NATO and for that we are very grateful, because it represents a historic chance for Georgia, for the region and for our good neighborly relations to [have] Georgia protected within this international organization.

“Recently it (Georgia’s NATO membership) became more realistic than it has ever been in history.”

In 2005, the year after Romania became a member of NATO, the Pentagon acquired several military installations in the nation including the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base, previously employed for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The following year it gained bases in neighboring Bulgaria, including the Graf Ignatievo and Bezmer air bases. The above are the first American military bases on the territory of former members of the Warsaw Pact.

The Marine Corps’ Black Sea Rotational Force, which as of this year is spending six months in the greater Black Sea region, frequently operates from the Mihail Kogalniceanu Air Base, as has the Task Force-East.

✘ The Black Sea Rotational Force’s area of operations is formally the Black Sea region, the Balkans and the Caucasus, though in fact it extends into Moldova and Greece as well. That is, it has defined a geostrategically vital area of the world, the junction of Europe, Asia and the Middle East, as its purview, one which includes all the so-called frozen conflicts in former Soviet space: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transdniestier.

The Black Sea region was completely inaccessible, was terra prohibita, to the Pentagon during the Cold War era. NATO expansion, with the incorporation of new members and partners, has opened the sea to U.S. military penetration, presence and use for what are termed downrange operations – armed interventions – to the east and the south.

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