

Senator Confirms Plans for Mediterranean Naval Force

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Russia plans to keep a regular force of naval ships in the Mediterranean Sea to defend its interests in the region, the head of the Federation Council's Defense Committee said Thursday at a meeting with foreign military attaches.

Senator Viktor Ozerov said that being a "naval power," Russia will maintain a permanent group of ships in the Mediterranean, a key location for French and U.S. fleets.

"We want this force to solve tasks for our state, of course, following all international laws," Ozerov said, addressing a group of more than 60 military attaches from 48 countries, including key NATO members the United States and Britain.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said earlier this week that Russia had the resources to build and maintain such a naval force, noting a "positive trend in the development of [Russia's] Navy."

But some of the military attaches present at Thursday's meeting expressed doubts that the country will be able to achieve this goal, noting that Russia's Navy is undersized and aging quickly.

The government has plans to upgrade the Navy as part of a 20 trillion ruble (\$650 billion) revamping of its military by 2020.

Ozerov said that in addition to its plans in the Mediterranean, the country is preparing to return to its former naval base in Kamran, Vietnam, that it abandoned in 2002.

According to Defense Ministry plans, Russian naval forces from the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Arctic are planning to carry out military exercises this year in the Mediterranean.

Russia currently has a small base in the Syrian coastal city of Tartus, which military analysts have said Russia could lose if its ally Syrian President Bashar Assad falls to rebel forces that his regime is fighting.

One Western military attache who attended Thursday's meeting with Ozerov said it was difficult to know whether Russia could follow through on its intentions in the Mediterranean.

"We are not children. Russia has declared so many plans, but no figures are provided to prove it," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity to express his views freely.

Former head of Navy headquarters Admiral Viktor Kravchenko has said Russia could likely only spare one to two ships each from its Northern, Baltic and Black Sea Fleets for a Mediterranean force, while various experts have estimated that Russia should have up to 20 ships for it.

The United States currently maintains a fleet of about 40 ships in the Mediterranean Sea.

Alexander Perendzhiyev, head of the Association of Military Political Experts, said the military attaches who attend meetings with defense officials often get no "satisfaction" because the Russian side cannot produce a clear vision of its military strategy.

He said the same is true of Russian lawmakers, many of whom cannot present independent views because of their close ties to the Kremlin.

"They [the military attaches] don't need to hear our political secrets," Perendzhiyev said. "All they need is to hear is our political goals."

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