

Russia's Black Sea Fleet Will Get 80 New Warships to Repel NATO

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Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a welcoming ceremony as he inspects the Vice-Admiral Kulakov anti-submarine warfare ship in Novorossiisk

Russia will construct a second naval base on the Black Sea and reinforce its fleet with 80 warships to ward off what it sees as an increasing NATO presence in the waters around the recently annexed Crimean Peninsula, the head of the Russia's Black Sea fleet said Tuesday.

A new base in the city of Novorossiisk will be built by 2016, and by the end of the decade Russia's Black Sea force will tally 206 ships, Admiral Alexander Vitko was quoted as saying by state news agency TASS.

"With Crimea's return to Russia, the relevance of this base has increased due to the fact that NATO ships are consistently present in the Black Sea," Vitko told President Vladimir Putin, who visited the construction site of the new base in Novorossiisk on Tuesday.

Moscow views the Black Sea as strategically significant because of its proximity to several areas of potential conflict, such as Ukraine and Georgia, and the Kremlin fears Western intervention in the region. The Black Sea also serves as a springboard for Russian naval expansion into the Mediterranean Sea — a capability sought by Russia for centuries but lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Vitko said Novorossiisk would become the epicenter of Russia's naval buildup in the Black Sea because the historic Crimean port of Sevastopol does not have room for additional naval facilities and expanded civilian shipping infrastructure.

Russia has tapped Sevastopol to become a hub for Russian commercial shipping as the government works to integrate Crimea, which Moscow annexed from Ukraine in March, into Russia.

That land grab spiraled into the worst Russia-West standoff since the Cold War and has revitalized the West's military alliance, NATO.

By 2016, the Black Sea Fleet will receive six brand-new Kilo-class submarines that will be stationed at Novorossiisk. The Kilo submarines are ideal for operating in the Black Sea, and are particularly adept at hunting enemy surface vessels, such as those NATO vessels patrolling the Black Sea.

Since Crimea's annexation, the Russian media has made a point of regularly announcing the arrival of NATO vessels on patrol in the Black Sea.

Vitko also on Tuesday stoked Russian fears by saying NATO was planning to build a new base on the Black Sea. A NATO source told Reuters that he was unaware of any such plans.

Three NATO countries — Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey — have stretches of coastline on the Black Sea and bases that could be used by the 28-member alliance.

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