

Russia Inches Toward Permanent Naval Presence in Mediterranean

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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In a move that brings the Russian navy one step closer to establishing a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea Fleet Commander Alexander Vitko announced on Thursday that he would take personal command of upcoming exercises with a Mediterranean naval task force designed to test the water for a future long-term deployment.

The Soviet Union's Fifth Naval Squadron maintained a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea for most of the Cold War. But as its economic and military power shrank in the 1990s following the fall of communism, Russia disbanded the unit, limiting itself to temporary tours in the area.

But the ambition remained. Recently, with the ongoing modernization of the Black Sea Fleet following Crimea's annexation from Ukraine in March, Russian naval planners have re-energized plans to re-establish the permanent force, which would allow Russia to secure

shipping access to the Suez Canal and extend its influence in the Middle East.

During the upcoming exercises, Vikto and his staff will work on how a squadron could best achieve these aims, state news agency RIA Novosti reported Thursday.

Currently, the task force is made up of temporarily assigned ships borrowed from Russia's Northern, Baltic and Black Sea fleets.

Any permanent Russian Mediterranean Force would be based out of Sevastopol or Novorossiisk on the Black Sea, since Russia's small Tartus naval station in Syria is incapable of supporting an entire squadron of ships.

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