
US, Russia standoff takes to the Black Sea

By Yusuf Fernandez
Press TV / Madrid - 3/9/2008

Washington's confrontation with Moscow has reached a new level now that Russia has withdrawn its troops from most of the Georgian territory it took during the war provoked by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. Russian and US warships have been engaged in a standoff in the Black Sea in recent days.

The US Coast Guard Dallas carrying aid docked at the Georgian port of Batumi on August 28. US guided missile destroyer USS McFaul has also landed at the port.

By choosing Batumi, the US chose a less confrontational path than docking at Poti, a Georgian port where Russian troops are still stationed. The US also allegedly feared that Poti harbor could have been mined.

The USS McFaul enjoys an array of weapons, including Tomahawk cruise missiles, which can carry either conventional or nuclear warheads. It also has a sophisticated radar system.

Washington has also ordered the flagship of the 6th Fleet, the sophisticated command ship Mount Whitney, into the area. These ships are from the NATO Maritime Group One, which normally operates in the Mediterranean.

Russia says the USS McFaul supplied new weapons to Georgia under the pretext of aid delivery. "Of course, they are bringing in weapons," Russian President Dmitri Medvedev told the BBC in an interview. "We are not trying to prevent it."

"Battleships do not normally deliver aid. This is battleship diplomacy, this does not make the situation more stable," said Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

The Black Sea has seen a lot of tension since Russian troops defeated the Georgian army. The Georgian aggression against South Ossetia has brought into sharp focus the strategic value of the resource-rich area surrounding the Black Sea.

During the Cold War, shipping in the Black Sea was carried out on a small scale, as the Lower Danube region was a part of the Soviet block. But with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the wars in former Yugoslavia, the Danube has become a key transportation route. Now, Central European exports, especially from Germany, can be floated down the river to the Black Sea, which is much less expensive than transporting them to the ports of the Baltic Sea by land. The struggle for control over the Black Sea has been the root cause of several conflicts in the past, including the Crimean and the Russo-Turkish Wars in the 19th century and the Allied Dardanelles campaign against Turkey during World War I.

Control over the Black Sea is essential for the US in projecting its force onto the region because the Carpathian Mountains in Romania and the Caucasus Ridge restrict it from land-based action against Russia from the south. The Black Sea is therefore the only path through which a potential enemy could threaten Russia from this area. Modern weapons systems such as submarine- and ship-launched cruise missiles and carrier-launched jets would be able to target Russian territory if the US were to gain supremacy over the Black Sea.

The Black Sea is close to the Caucasus and the Russian oil-rich regions of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. It offers any Russian enemy a direct route to two Russian energy lifelines. The Black Sea thus has special strategic significance for Russia as well; the area would become a major point of conflict in case there is a military confrontation between the US and Russia.

The US wants the Black Sea to fall under NATO control. A major part of Black Sea waters is controlled by NATO members Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria. Georgia and Ukraine, whose pro-Western presidents want their countries to join the alliance also have control of certain parts of the area. Russia has a short coastline with the important port of Novorossiisk. Now that Russia is working with Abkhazia as an independent state, however, it enjoys a longer Russian-friendly coastline and the deep-sea port of Sukhumi.

The strategic importance of the Black Sea explains why Russia responded harshly to the increased military presence of NATO there. Russian General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, who has recently claimed that 10 NATO warships are in the Black Sea with eight more on the way, says international conventions prevented the alliance from bringing more vessels into the region. "In light of the build-up of NATO naval forces in the Black Sea, the (Russian) fleet has also taken on the task of monitoring their activities," he said.

US ships in the Black Sea are capable of carrying nuclear missiles that can hit Russian targets as far away as Saint Petersburg. Nogovitsyn has warned that US ships can only stay in the Black Sea for 21 days according to the 1936 Montreal Convention, which regulates the passage of warships to and from the Black Sea.

He says if US warships do not leave, Turkey would be responsible. "Can NATO - which is not a state located in the Black Sea - continuously increase its group of forces and systems there? It turns out that it cannot," Nogovitsyn said.

Carmen Romero, a NATO spokeswoman, said the alliance had applied for transit into the Black Sea in June and stressed that the vessels would stay less than 21 days as required by the convention.

Russia has sent its missile cruiser Moskva and two smaller ships to Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, one of the two regions whose independence Moscow has recognized. Russia has responded to the apparent -if officially denied- NATO naval deployment by increasing its warships in the Black Sea. Russia returned the Moskva to the Black Sea a mere 72 hours after the giant warship departed for its base port Sevastopol, Ukraine, from Georgian waters. Normally, Sevastopol-based Russian warships spend most of the year in port, and take to open waters after months of preparation.

In Sukhumi, Russian Deputy Admiral Sergei Menyailo said that the Russian warships had arrived to "support peace and stability". He said, "Our tasks include the control of Abkhazia's territorial waters and the prevention of arms shipments."

The dockings came a day after Russian President Dmitry Medvedev recognized the two Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, a move which has prompted harsh criticism from Western governments. Abkhazia's President Sergei Bagapsh said he would invite Moscow to establish a naval base at Sukhumi and called for a military cooperation agreement with Russia.

In order to counterbalance the perceived NATO build-up, Russians have reportedly massed three destroyers, two frigates, five corvettes and scores of missile boats at the Sevastopol naval base it leased from Ukraine. Former

Russian commander Admiral Eduard Baltin also said that NATO's 10-piece naval squad is no match for Russia's Black Sea Fleet and would fall to pieces should the fleet launch a single missile salvo. "A single missile salvo from the Moskva missile cruiser and two or three missile boats would be enough to annihilate the entire group", he declared.

Russia also enjoys vast air superiority in north of the area. It seems that it desperately seeks to prevent NATO from taking control over the strategic region. In a way, US plans to turn the Black Sea into a private lake controlled by NATO may be doomed to failure.
