

Russia Sending Warships to Syrian Base

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The  Moscow Times

Russia is sending a flotilla of warships to its naval base in Syria in a show of force that suggests Moscow is willing to defend its interests in the strife-torn country as international pressure mounts on President Bashar Assad's government.

Russia, which has a naval maintenance base in Syria and whose weapons trade with Damascus is worth millions of dollars annually, joined China last month to veto a Western-backed UN Security Council resolution condemning Assad's government.

The Izvestia newspaper reported on Monday, citing retired Admiral Viktor Kravchenko, that Russia plans to send its Admiral Kuznetsov flagship aircraft carrier, along with a patrol ship, an anti-submarine craft and other vessels.

"Having any military force apart from NATO is very beneficial for the region because it prevents the outbreak of armed conflict," Kravchenko, who was navy chief of staff from 1998 to 2005, was quoted as saying by Izvestia.

A navy spokesman quoted by the newspaper confirmed that the Russian warships would head to the maintenance base Russia keeps on the Syrian coast near Tartus, but said the trip had

nothing to do with the uprising against Assad.

The paper said the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier would be armed with at least eight Sukhoi-33 fighters, several MiG-29K fighters and two helicopters.

It will also have cruise and surface to air missiles, the paper said.

A navy spokesman was not available to comment.

Yegor Engelhart, an analyst with Moscow-based defense think tank CAST, said Moscow did not want its position to be ignored while the Assad government was under pressure.

"At the very least, Moscow wants to show that it is willing to defend its interests in Syria," he said.

Russian officials say the naval base at Tartus, Syria, is used for repairs to ships from its Black Sea fleet, and Izvestia said about 600 Russian Defense Ministry employees worked there. There are currently no Russian ships there, the paper said.

Russia, a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, abstained from voting on a resolution that paved the way for Western military intervention in Libya but later criticized the mission saying NATO overstepped its mandate and interfered in a civil war.

Russia said it lost of tens of billions of dollars in potential arms deals with Moammar Gadhafi's fall and is loath to lose another customer in the region. Syria accounted for 7 percent of Russia's total of \$10 billion in arms deliveries abroad in 2010, according to CAST.

Moscow has traditionally used what influence it still has in the Middle East as a lever in diplomatic maneuvering with Europe and in particular the United States, Moscow's Cold War foe.

Arab League sanctions and French calls for the establishment of humanitarian zones in Syria have increased international pressure on Assad to end bloodshed that the United Nations says has left 3,500 people dead during nine months of protests against his rule.

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