

# NATO Says Sending Ships to Baltic to Bolster Defense of Eastern European Allies

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BRUSSELS — NATO is sending part of its naval rapid reaction force to the Baltic Sea as part of measures to step up the defense of its Eastern European allies in response to the Ukraine crisis, the alliance said Thursday.

A multinational group of five small ships — four minesweepers and a support vessel — will be sent to the Baltic Sea "for the foreseeable future," a spokesman for NATO's Maritime Command said.

NATO has made clear it does not plan to get involved militarily in Ukraine, which is not a NATO member.

But it said Wednesday it would send more ships, planes and troops to Eastern Europe to reassure allies worried by Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region.

The ships will visit Baltic ports and take part in a previously scheduled exercise next month to hunt for mines and torpedoes from both world wars.

Russia says deployment of significant NATO forces in Eastern Europe, close to Russia, would violate the 1997 Founding Act, a cooperation agreement between Moscow and the alliance.

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