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U.S. and Russian Navies Hold Talks on Avoiding Accidental Clashes

By The Moscow Times

June 12, 2015

The U.S. and Russian navies met this week for the first time since the Ukraine crisis began to discuss how to avoid an accidental clash at sea or in the air, a U.S. naval commander said on Friday.

Russia has stepped up its probing of NATO's defences since Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region last year caused the worst crisis in East-West relations since the Cold War. NATO has responded by increasing patrols and exercises in eastern Europe.

The European Leadership Network, a think tank, last November chronicled almost 40 potentially dangerous incidents over that period involving Russian and Western militaries, including near-misses in the air and at sea.

A Russian Navy delegation led by Vice-Admiral Oleg Burtsev met a U.S. team led by Rear Admiral John Nowell at U.S. Sixth Fleet headquarters in Naples, Italy, on Wednesday.

"There was an open, frank and direct discussion ... about how we can better operate in the same bodies of water and avoid miscues, mistakes or miscalculations," Vice-Admiral James Foggo, deputy commander of U.S. naval forces Europe, told reporters on a conference call, giving no further details. "I think that dialogue was productive."

The two navies, which signed an agreement in 1972 on operating safely in international waters, last met in November 2013.

Foggo is leading a 49-ship international fleet in an exercise in the Baltic Sea involving 17 NATO allies or partner nations with 61 aircraft and 5,600 personnel.

The exercise is held annually, but this year's edition is the largest and, NATO says, a demonstration of its resolve to defend the Baltic region, where allies feel threatened by an increasingly assertive Russia.

Foggo rejected suggestions that any NATO navies were being intimidated into avoiding the Baltic or the Black Sea.

"We are here with 49 ships right now and we are operating in areas all over the Baltic Sea," he said. "I frequently operate in the Black Sea with destroyers from the Sixth Fleet, so no, they are not no-go areas, and we will continue to operate in both places."

Russia plans to modernise and expand its Black Sea fleet, which was based in Crimea even before last year's annexation and is seen by Moscow as a platform for projecting power beyond the Black Sea into the Mediterranean.

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