

Russia's Black Sea Fleet Heads to Atlantic Amid NATO Tensions

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet is heading for the Atlantic Ocean with a group of escort ships as Moscow works to project its military power far beyond the confines of the Black Sea into the Mediterranean and beyond.

"In the coming days, a detachment of ships under the flag of Deputy Black Sea Fleet Commander Vice-Admiral Valery Kulikov will proceed past the Strait of Gibraltar and will begin to fulfill its objectives in the waters of the Atlantic ocean," a statement on the Defense Ministry's website said Tuesday.

The cruise comes at a time of heightened tension between Moscow and Western military alliance NATO, which has accused Russia of aggressively probing alliance airspace since the Ukraine crisis began last year.

The force will be led by the Black Sea Fleet's flagship, the guided missile cruiser Moskva, and a handful of support ships. The Moskva last visited the Atlantic in 2013, one year before Russia

annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, where the Black Sea Fleet is based.

The fleet's fortunes have improved dramatically since the annexation, which annulled an agreement with Ukraine that allowed Russia to maintain a base in Crimea but on condition that the fleet not be expanded or upgraded.

Freed from Kiev's restrictions, Moscow has been dumping resources into re-equipping and training the force in a bid to regain its Soviet-era footing in the Mediterranean and south Atlantic.

Though numbers of Black Sea Fleet exercises in 2013 were not reported, the head of Russia's navy, Admiral Viktor Chirkov, said last week that across the entire navy the number of exercises has increased by 20 percent since January of last year.

The Black Sea Fleet concluded a series of joint exercises with the Chinese navy in the Mediterranean Sea in May, and recently finished another series of drills with the Egyptian navy earlier this month.

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