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Russia Withdraws Docking Request Before Spain Can Even Say No

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Russia has withdrawn its request for a naval battlegroup led by the flagship aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to refuel and resupply at the Spanish port of Ceuta, the RIA Novosti news agency reported Wednesday, citing a statement from the Russian embassy in Madrid.

The planned pit stop sparked outrage among the NATO military alliance, of which Spain is a part. Kuznetsov is heading toward Syria, where Western officials believe it will participate in attacks on Syrian opposition forces in the beseiged city of Aleppo.

Read this week's Moscow Times cover story *about Kuznetsov's deployment to Syria.*

The Spanish Foreign Ministry, in the face of the backlash, said it was seeking clarification from Moscow on the eight-strong battlegroup's destination and ultimate intent. But Madrid

has so far stopped short of formally refusing the Russian navy access to Ceuta, an enclave on the North African coast. Complicating the matter is the open nature of Ceuta's port.

Though formerly a Spanish naval base, Madrid opened the facility for commercial use in 2010. Since then, at least 60 Russian warships have used the port to resupply on trips to and from the Mediterranean.

“The latest stopover requests are being reviewed at the moment based on the information we are receiving from our allies and from Russian authorities," the Spanish Foreign Ministry said in a statement, Reuters reported.

Kuznetsov, Russia's only aircraft carrier, set sail from its base on Russia's Arctic frontier on Oct. 15. NATO has raised the alarm on its deployment to the Syrian coast, claiming its aircraft will be used to intensify bombardment of the Syrian opposition stronghold of Aleppo.

The Kuznetsov is leading a battlegroup of eight Russian warships. The group includes the battlecruiser Peter the Great – the world's most powerful surface ship, not including Western aircraft carriers. Some experts speculate the group is being escorted by nuclear submarines.

The battlegroup made waves on Oct. 21 as it made its way through the English Channel. While the Kremlin may have hoped to make a strong impression with its fleet, the moment was spoiled by Kuznetsov's dramatic trailing of a billowing smoke cloud.
The ship
was ruthlessly mocked.

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