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Russian Warships to Reinforce Black Sea Forces Amid U.S.-Led Drills

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Russia's Defense Ministry has said it will be closely monitoring NATO's two-week exercises. **Vitaly Nevar / TASS**

A Russian warship equipped with long-range cruise missiles plans to return to annexed Crimea to reinforce its military amid tensions over an ongoing U.S.-led NATO exercise in the Black Sea, Interfax reported Monday.

The Navy's Black Sea Fleet said the Kalibr cruise missile-equipped frigate Admiral Essen and the Moskva missile cruiser are en route to their home base from the Eastern Mediterranean, where they had been deployed for bombardment missions in Syria.

"After arriving in Sevastopol, the ships will replenish their material reserves, conduct a scheduled technical inspection and continue performing tasks for their intended purpose in accordance with the fleet's combat training plan," it said.

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The warships will join the S-400 and Pantsir-S missile systems, as well as 20 warplanes and helicopters, that have been activated for training checks against the backdrop of NATO's Sea Breeze 2021 drills last week.

Russia's Defense Ministry has said it will be closely monitoring the two-week exercises and acting if needed to protect its national security.

Ukraine and 32 NATO members launched the exercises last Monday, involving 5,000 military personnel, 40 aircraft and 32 warships. On Monday, the official Sea Breeze Twitter account said this year's drills have become "the largest in the history of its existence" since 1997.

The muscle flexing has been accompanied by a series of close encounters between the Russian and Western militaries.

The latest incident, reported Saturday, allegedly involved Russian warplanes buzzing and warships shadowing the Tomahawk cruise missile-equipped USS Ross destroyer that is taking part in Sea Breeze 2021.

Russia said on June 23 that one of its fighter jets dropped four bombs in the path of the British destroyer HMS Defender and a border patrol ship fired warning shots.

The Netherlands accused Russian fighter jets of "unsafe" behavior in an encounter with its frigate HNMLS Evertsen a day later.

The incidents took place in waters considered internationally as Ukrainian but which Russia claims as its own after its annexation of Crimea in 2014.

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