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Russia announces permanent Mediterranean naval presence

Alexei Anishchuk

Source: Reuters World Service
Date: June 06, 2013

- * First permanent deployment since Soviet times
- * Comes as Syrian civil war grinds on
- * Putin says not sabre rattling, cites "national security"

MOSCOW, June 6 (Reuters) - Russia has deployed a naval unit to the Mediterranean Sea, it said on Thursday, a move President Vladimir Putin said was to defend Russian security but which comes as Moscow faces off with the West over Syria.

In what is Russia's first permanent naval deployment in the Mediterranean since Soviet times, it has stationed 16 warships and three ship-based helicopters in the region, the chief of staff said.

Putin said the deployment was not "sabre-rattling" and not meant as a threat to any nation. Russia cooperates with NATO navies against piracy and its ships call at Western ports.

But its support for President Bashar al-Assad as he fights rebels have put Moscow at odds with the West.

"This is a strategically important region and we have tasks to carry out there to provide for the national security of the Russian Federation," Putin said.

Large-scale naval exercises Russia held in March and ship movements near Syria have been seen in the West as muscle-flexing by Moscow, which has sold weapons to Assad's government and shielded it from any action by the U.N. Security Council.

Russia also has a naval maintenance and supply facility in Syria.

The announcement comes days after Moscow said it planned to resume patrols by nuclear-armed submarines in the southern seas as part of a Putin's broader effort to revive Russia's military might.

Putin has stressed the importance of a strong military since returning to the presidency last May. In 13 years in power, he has often cited external threats when talking of the need for agile armed forces and Russian political unity.

(Reporting By Alexei Anishchuk; Editing by Steve Guttreman and Robin Pomeroy)