Russia's Increasing Aggression in Black Sea Region Disturbs U.S. Naval Commander



The Italian frigate Virginio Fasan (F 591) approaches the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Ross (DDG 71) for a replenishment-at-sea approach drill in the Black Sea during the Bulgarian-led Exercise Breeze, July 15, 2021. *U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Claire DuBois*

ARLINGTON, Va. — Russia's aggressive behavior during a recent multinational exercise in the Black Sea, hosted by the United States and Ukraine, underscores Moscow's increasingly provocative actions in the air and at sea, says the commander of U.S. Naval Forces in Europe and Africa.

For nearly a decade, a resurgent Russia has mounted a huge military buildup in the North Atlantic, the Eastern

Mediterranean, the Arctic and the Black Sea. “They want to be in control of those waters, for their own exclusive use,” said Adm. Robert Burke, adding “We can’t cede that to the Russians.”

Noting that Russian aircraft overflew U.S. Navy ships at dangerously low altitudes during the recently ended Exercise Sea Breeze 21, Burke said they were creating a tactical risk that could morph into a strategic issue. “And that’s a big concern with this increasing aggressiveness,” he said, adding “We’re not going to flinch and we’re not going to take the bait.”

Sea Breeze, a long-standing exercise in the Black Sea to enhance interoperability and capability among participating forces in the region, has grown from eight participants in 1997 to 32 this year. The 2021 exercise included 5,000 personnel, 32 ships and 40 aircraft supplied by from 17 NATO members, U.S. allies like Australia, and partner nations like Sweden and Senegal.

The admiral praised U.S. and allied commanders for their controlled reaction to Russian belligerence. “When a strike aircraft overflies a destroyer at 100 feet altitude, right over top, our COs are making a judgment call of whether that strike fighter is on an attack profile or not,” said Burke, who is also commander of Allied Joint Forces Command Naples. “It could be argued that they’re baiting us into shooting first. We’re not going to do that first without provocation, but I’m also not going to ask my commanding officers to take the first shot on the chin,” he added without elaboration.

When officials notified Russian authorities about their plans three weeks before Sea Breeze 21 began, the Russians reacted by closing off half of the western part of the Black Sea and announcing their own ship bombing exercise. “If it wasn’t so threatening, it would be laughable,” Burke told a livestreamed edition of the United States Navy Memorial’s SITREP speakers

series July 20.

Such “extreme bullying” at other times has led some smaller nations to avoid those areas, “which is exactly the behavior the Russians are seeking.” Burke said. China acted similarly in the South China Sea, he said, building “stationary aircraft carriers” on coral islands where ownership is disputed by neighboring countries. Elsewhere, he said, the Chinese Communist Party’s Belt and Road Initiative is seeking to expand its influence through infrastructure projects – with financial strings attached – in 52 of Africa’s 54 nations, while Chinese entities hold a controlling interest in 15 European ports.