

Senior NATO Commander Says Alliance Is Responding to Russian Expansion With Exercises, New Command

NATO has seen the effects of a modernized Russia's navy and its increased activities in all the waters around Europe, and the alliance is responding with multinational exercises and new organizations, including a command focused on ensuring the flow of forces and supplies across the Atlantic during a conflict, a senior NATO commander said.

"We see the consequence of modernization of Russian naval forces. We've seen increased activity" in the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Baltic Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, said British Air Chief Marshall Peach Stuart, chairman of the NATO Military Committee. "NATO takes its maritime security very seriously. The way we make that real is through a series of patrols, and multinational groupings of ships, in standing naval groups," Stuart told a Defense Writers' breakfast on Nov. 13.

"We have to take a balanced approach to that presence and to reassure our allies. And the way we conduct our naval operations is, of course, coordinated with allies and partners" and conducting international exercises, Stuart said. He cited Trident Juncture, a massive exercise involving nearly

50,000 personnel from 31 nations in and around Norway in October and November 2018. Stuart called that "a very impressive grouping of capabilities, including maritime."

Asked about the concerns expressed by U.S. commanders of the potential challenge to getting reinforcements and supplies across the Atlantic due to the updated and expanded Russian submarine fleet, Stuart said: "Our role is to deter. All our naval operations I just described are part of that deterrent posture. Of course, the Atlantic Ocean is vital to the economic well-being of the whole of Europe as well as North America. Therefore, we continue to take everything that might affect that very seriously."

"The exact response is to create a new headquarters, called Joint Forces Command in Norfolk," which is co-located with the headquarters of the recently re-established U.S. Navy 2nd Fleet, both of which are commanded by U.S. Navy Vice Adm. Andrew Lewis, he said. Disbanded after the end of the Cold War, the 2nd Fleet was reactivated in August 2018 by then Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson, who cited the increased tensions between Russia and NATO. Joint Forces "is forming actively as a NATO headquarters as we speak," Stuart said.

"Yes, we do observe the increased [Russian] activity, and we are responding to that increased activity with the formation of an additional

headquarters, which its primarily focus would be, should it be necessary to provide the ability to reinforce across the Atlantic Ocean.”

Stuart also noted there was “more tension” in the eastern Mediterranean, where Russia has deployed some of its newest ships and demonstrated the capabilities of its latest ship-launched land-attack missiles in support of the Syrian regime. “NATO continues to operate in accordance with international law,” he said, adding that “freedom of navigation is important everywhere, not just in Asia.”

Despite Russia’s increasingly aggressive behavior, Stuart said the alliance has continued its dialog with Moscow through the NATO-Russia Council based at NATO headquarters in Brussels. “That dialog is an important structure, but it is not business as usual. NATO does not recognize [Russian]

occupation of
Crimea.”

Asked about the status of Turkey in NATO after its increased ties with Russia, including buying the S-400 advanced air defense system, Stuart said: “Turkey has been an important ally since the 1950s. That has not changed. ... The capabilities Turkey brings to the alliance are very important,” and NATO’s relations with the Turkish military “continues very close.” As for the S-400, he said, “procurement is a sovereign issue.” But, he added, “interoperability is important to the alliance.” U.S.

officials have
said the S-400 cannot be interoperable with NATO systems.