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Putin Endorses Permanent Russian Navy Presence in Mediterranean

By Ilya Arkhipov
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President Vladimir Putin endorsed a plan by the Russian navy to keep a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea, where the Syrian crisis is adding to the region's instability.

Russia's Mediterranean fleet of 16 ships will visit ports in Syria, which hosts the country's only military base outside the former Soviet Union, during a mission that will include missile practise, commander Yuri Zemskoy told Putin via video link during a news conference in Moscow today.

"This is a strategically important region," Putin said today at a meeting with military commanders. "We have our national interests here, linked to the need to maintain national security. Resuming a permanent Russian military naval presence in the Mediterranean sea isn't saber rattling."

Russia stepped up patrols in the Mediterranean in 2010 amid escalating unrest in Syria. In January, the country held its biggest naval maneuvers in the region in more than two decades. The defense ministry decided to make the fleet a standing force in March, the same month Putin ordered a large-scale unplanned exercise on the Black Sea involving 36 warships and almost 7,000 personnel.

The navy's Mediterranean presence, becoming permanent in for first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union more than two decades ago, will be modeled on the Soviet fleet stationed in the region during the Cold War to balance U.S. deployment, according to the defense ministry. The force will draw on Russia's Black Sea, Baltic and North Sea fleets.

"The group is ready to respond to unexpected tasks as the situation in the region is changing," Zemskoy said.