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Monday, July 26, 2010

SENTAKU MAGAZINE

Black Sea challenge by U.S. set to keep Russia on edge

A storm is gathering in and around the Black Sea as Russia faces a mounting challenge from the United States, which is beefing up its military presence in former Soviet satellite countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary.

One look at a map of the region shows the critical geopolitical importance of the Black Sea, as its southern coast connects to the Middle East via Turkey and its northern coast adjoins Ukraine, which is home to Russia's Black Sea Fleet and which houses 80 percent of the pipelines supplying natural gas from Russia to Western Europe.

In Romania, the U.S. has spent \$50 million since last year to expand bases to accommodate 1,700 troops. The principal facility is the Mikhail Kogalniceanu Air Base located in Constanta, facing the Black Sea. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is said to maintain a secret detention facility at the base.

There is nothing new about the U.S. maintaining military bases in Romania, which dates back to the beginning of the Iraq war. What is important is Washington's announcement of its intention to use them indefinitely. In May, a marine corps unit centered around a tank battalion was dispatched to the Mikhail Kogalniceanu base for the first time.

In Bulgaria, meanwhile, the U.S. plans to expand bases there to accommodate 2,500 troops. The core facility is the Bezmer Air Base, about 50 km from the Black Sea southern coast. When the project is completed, the U.S. will have a strategic air base in Bulgaria comparable in scale to the air bases at Inzirlık in Turkey and Appiano in Italy. Joint American-Bulgarian air force drills were conducted in May.

The American move to strengthen its defense capability in countries formerly under Soviet influence is not limited to Romania and Bulgaria. It is also conspicuous in Hungary, although that country does not face the Black Sea. For several years the Papa Air Base in Hungary has functioned as a base for the U.S. Air Force's state-of-the-art Boeing C-17 transport aircraft, making it

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two-thirds of the highly mobile Rapid Reaction Corps of the U.S. Army in Europe will be concentrated in Romania and Bulgaria.

This means that the U.S. front line of defense is shifting from the eastern border of Germany to the Black Sea, which is adjacent to the Middle East, the Caucasus and Russia.

Another source of Russian uneasiness is a move to revive a plan to establish a U.S. missile defense system in Europe. Even though President Barack Obama is said to have abandoned a project involving Poland and Czech Republic, it is said that a similar system will be completed in Romania and Bulgaria between 2018 and 2020.

Romania is ready to accept deployment of 20 SM-3 anti-ballistic missile units, currently installed on American naval vessels with the Aegis Combat System. These missiles could later be replaced with the more advanced terminal high altitude area defense (THAAD) missiles. They will also be deployed in Bulgaria.

Meanwhile, it has become more likely that the X-band radar system, which the U.S. originally planned to install in the Czech Republic, will be set up in Israel.

U.S. destroyers carrying Tomahawk cruise missiles have made a number of calls on Georgian, Romanian and Bulgarian ports since the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

A leading official of the Russian Navy stated recently that an increased U.S. presence in the region would bring about a "dramatic change in the military balance in the Black Sea" and present a "serious threat to Russia." He went on to say that Russia would counter these American moves by further strengthening the Black Sea Fleet.

Washington responded by bluntly claiming that the deployment of the missile defense system is designed to prevent Iran from attacking Europe with its missiles. But anyone with even the most rudimentary military knowledge would admit that Tehran has neither the technology to develop long-range missiles nor the need to attack Europe. Russia's sense of crisis is not groundless.

The only consolation for Moscow of late came in Ukraine's presidential election in February, when pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko lost to pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich. Subsequently, the Ukrainian legislature passed a new law, permitting the Russian Black Sea Fleet to continue using the facilities in Sevastopol for another 25 years. Even so, Moscow does not have any effective means of countering Romania and Bulgaria, which seek to strengthen their military collaboration with the U.S.

The whole world puzzles over Washington's motivation for seeking a greater military presence in the Black Sea region, since it hardly can be interpreted as mere expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Nor is it possible to understand the true motive of the U.S. by reading the Quadrennial Defense Review, announced in February. It appears all but certain that the waves of the Black Sea will only get higher.

This is an abridged translation of an article from the July issue of Sentaku, a monthly magazine of political, social and economic affairs.

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