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U.S. Ship Movement Spurs Jitters About Ukraine

The U.S. Navy announced Thursday that a guided-missile destroyer, the USS Truxtun, has left Souda Bay in Greece and will steam toward the Black Sea -- and the crisis in Ukraine.

Pentagon officials insisted that the move was unrelated to the rising tensions in the Crimean peninsula, which was seized by Russian forces last week. Still, with the United States and Russia locked in a tense standoff over the future of Crimea, the U.S. moving military assets toward Ukraine is fueling new jumpiness in the already unsettled region.

In one example, the Hurriyet Daily News newspaper in Turkey reported Wednesday that a U.S. military ship would be maneuvering through the Bosphorus Straits on its way to the Black Sea in the following two days. The newspaper did not name the ship, but linked the plan to the crisis in Crimea.

Navy officials said the Truxtun's deployment has been planned for months. The ship's crew will train alongside counterparts from the Bulgarian and Romanian militaries. The Truxton carries about 300 sailors and is typically armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles and a variety of other weapons.

"While in the Black Sea, the ship will conduct a port visit and routine, previously planned exercises with allies and partners in the region," Navy officials said. "Truxtun's operations in the Black Sea were scheduled well in advance of her departure from the United States."

Still, the move - even if previously scheduled - increases the United States' naval presence in the Black Sea at a sensitive time in which Russian Vladimir Putin remains at odds the Obama administration and the European Union over the future of Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Crimea occurred at a time in which the Navy had no working ships in the Black Sea. Navy officials told Foreign Policy on Feb. 28 that the only ship in the area was the USS Taylor, a frigate typically carrying about 200 sailors. That ship, though, is stuck in port in Samsun, Turkey, where it needs unspecified repairs, Navy officials said.

News of the Truxtun's move to the Black Sea came one day after Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the U.S. military would conduct more aviation training exercises with Poland and expand its role in NATO's air patrols over Baltic countries like Lithuania. The latter move was widely seen as an attempt to calm the nerves of U.S. allies in Eastern Europe following Russia's aggressive actions in Crimea.

In the Baltics, the United States will boost its number of F-15 fighters from four to 10, and add a KC-135 tanker plane, Pentagon officials said. The size of the U.S. military's expanded presence in Poland is not yet clear, but the Pentagon said this week that it was consulting with Polish officials about adding new troops to the detachment of U.S. forces servicing aircraft there.