

Canada deploying fighter jets to Romania in training mission

By Roger Jordan
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Less than three weeks after announcing with considerable fanfare the withdrawal of Canada's CF-18 fighter jets from the Mideast war in Syria and Iraq, the Liberal government revealed February 25 that four of these aircraft will deploy directly to Romania for joint exercises with the NATO member's air force.

One hundred Canadian military personnel will take part in the month-long training exercises from a Romanian air force base in Constanta. The deployment involves the Royal Canadian Air Forces' 2 Wing, an air expeditionary force tasked with being ready for rapid deployment in Canada or anywhere around the world.

While not formally being conducted through NATO, exercise "Resilient Resolve" is nonetheless an important part of the alliance's military build-up throughout Eastern Europe aimed at encircling and isolating Russia. Romania is one of the six Eastern European countries where NATO agreed to establish forward command bases in the wake of the Ukraine crisis in 2014—bases due to become operational in the early part of this year.

Canadian CF-18s operated in the country for the first time during the summer of 2014, when six jets took part in exercises at Campia Turzii. The three-month-long exercise was the first overseas mission involving the newly-created 2 Wing. Making clear the offensive purpose of 2 Wing, Lt.-Col. Luc Girouard told Canwest foreign affairs correspondent Mathew Fisher at the time, "We learned our lessons from Haiti, Aviano and Libya. We need to deploy quickly and we need people with experience to do it. That is our *raison d'être*. It is a concept that has been developed over the years."

NATO, led above all by the United States, is preparing to expand its presence in the region. The Canadian deployment took place after last month's announcement by the Pentagon that it is increasing its military budget for Europe four-fold. An additional three brigades are to be deployed, mainly in Eastern Europe, with the prospect that up to 1,000 soldiers could conduct exercises in Romania from 2017.

Later in February, a NATO defence ministers' summit in

Brussels announced the creation of a 40,000-strong rapid response force capable of being deployed on the alliance's eastern flank.

In close collaboration with Washington, Canada has significantly increased its military presence in Eastern Europe. Around 200 Canadian soldiers are currently deployed in western Ukraine, training Ukrainian Army and National Guard units alongside US forces, and a further 250 are at a NATO facility in Poland. A Canada warship, the HMCS Fredericton, is part of the NATO intervention in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey. Under the pretext of combatting "smugglers" and turning back refugees, this naval operation is creating the conditions for NATO's direct intervention into the Syrian war.

The fighter jet deployment once again makes clear that the Liberals' "anti-war" stance in last year's election campaign was a cynical fraud. The jets' withdrawal from the bombing of Iraq and Syria was a tactical repositioning of Canadian forces, so as to enable the Trudeau government to otherwise expand Canada's participation in the US-led war in the Middle East, while also bolstering US-NATO pressure on Russia.

Furthermore, the retention of the fighter jets in active service in Europe could enable them to rapidly deploy elsewhere, such as in Libya. Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan and leading military personnel have stated that Canada is prepared to take part in a US-led intervention aimed at combatting "terrorism" in Libya which was thrown into chaos by the 2011 NATO air-war which, in league with Islamist forces, overthrew the Gaddafi regime.

Canada's Liberal government has made clear that it is no less determined than its Conservative predecessor to pursue an aggressive course towards Russia. In January, Foreign Minister Stephane Dion was criticized by the Conservative opposition in parliament when he announced Ottawa was reestablishing high-level diplomatic contact with Moscow. But in a one-day visit to Kiev at the start of February, he explicitly stated that any talks with the Kremlin would see Ottawa take a hard line. "The Canadian government intends

to speak clearly, bluntly and directly to Russia about its unacceptable actions in Ukraine,” a statement from Dion’s department declared.

Ottawa has already loaned the pro-western regime in Kiev \$400 million, provided non-lethal aid to its armed forces, and signed a free trade agreement which is awaiting implementation. In addition, volunteer organizations established by Ukrainian-Canadians with ties to the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC) and through the UCC to the Canadian government have worked closely with ultra-nationalist groups in Ukraine to supply arms and military equipment to the front lines of the Ukrainian civil war.

The Trudeau government is also keen to step up pressure on Russia in the Arctic. The Canadian Press reported late last month that the Department of National Defence is shopping for drones and expects to have several options to choose from by April. A DND spokesman noted that a major task of the drones would be surveillance patrols of Canada’s coast in the Arctic, where successive governments have sought to assert Canadian sovereignty against counter-claims from, among others, Russia. Ottawa also announced last month the expansion of its military base at Resolute Bay in Nunavut so that it can accommodate soldiers all year round, and conducted two weeks of Arctic exercises involving reservists. NORAD Commander Admiral Bill Gortney recently warned that Russia’s intervention in Syria had security implications for the Arctic region.

The RCAF is demanding that the drones eventually purchased be capable of using lethal force. In a review of the proposal to purchase drones from June 2013 and recently accessed by the Canadian Press under “freedom of information,” the RCAF said they want the remote-controlled aircraft to be capable of “carrying and employing precision-guided munitions.”

The Liberal government is preparing to conduct a defence review in which Russia will feature as one of its main opponents. A report from the influential Conference of Defence Associations aimed at influencing the parameters and outcome of this review urged the government to increase its participation in NATO’s operation Reassurance in Eastern and Central Europe, including by considering joining the alliance’s AWACS air surveillance program. It also called for Canada to strengthen its “deterrence” activities towards Russia through participation in NATO’s rapid reaction force in Eastern Europe and the stepping up of Canada’s military engagement in the Arctic.

Romania is an important strategic ally in the US-led confrontation with Russia. As well as being Ukraine’s southern neighbour, it shares a border with Moldova, which

the European Union is anxious to bring under its economic and strategic dominance. Russian peacekeeping troops are stationed in Moldova’s eastern breakaway province of Transnistria, a region which could easily become the next flashpoint between Moscow and NATO. At its 2014 Wales summit, NATO adopted a policy aimed at assisting Moldova with capacity-building in its defence sector so as to modernize its armed forces and make them interoperable with NATO members. A recent analysis by the Stratfor website, which enjoys close ties to US intelligence, claimed that Moldova could become Putin’s “next target” and urged that measures be taken, including possibly of armed conflict, to “stop” Russia.

The Canadian government’s press release announcing the CF-18 Romanian deployment stated that the exercises are aimed at “strengthening mutual confidence in using common NATO procedures.” In this regard, it could be merely a foretaste of what is to come. Romania is due in September to receive a delivery of a first batch of F-16 fighter jets refitted by the US contractor Lockheed Martin. Last month, its defence minister announced plans to purchase 12 additional F-16 fighters next year.

Romania will also reportedly push for the creation of a permanent Black Sea flotilla at NATO’s upcoming summit in Warsaw later this year. NATO has previously sent warships into the Black Sea for exercises on an ad hoc basis. Under the Montreux Convention, ships from countries not bordering the Black Sea are only able to remain there for 21 days, meaning that a permanent rotating system would have to be created if Bucharest’s proposal were to be adopted.

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