

MILITARIZATION OF THE BALKANS: Directed against Russia? U.S. Leads Largest Air Combat Exercises In Bulgaria's History

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On April 18 U.S. Air Forces in Europe began the largest air exercise in the history of Bulgaria, no doubt in that of the Balkans as a whole, when 24-32 American F-16 fighter jets and 500 airmen joined Bulgarian counterparts for the opening of the almost month-long Thracian Star 2012.

Described by the Sofia News Agency as “the most large-scale military aviation drills of their type,” they include both squadrons of the U.S. 31st Fighter Wing based at the Aviano Air Base in Italy and the air forces of Bulgaria and Romania. According to the same Bulgarian news source, “Because of the large number of US F-16 fighter jets participating in the drills – two squadrons of 16 planes each – Bulgarian media have been quick to note that the Aviano Air Base has moved to Graf Ignatievo,” the Bulgarian air base from which the exercise is coordinated.

The commander of the base, Brigadier General Tsanko Stoykov, was quoted by the U.S. European Command website as stating:

“Bilateral training is important for us at Graf Ignatievo because it gives us a chance to implement new tactics and procedures and increase our combat capabilities. It also gives us a chance to improve our interoperability with our NATO allies and partners.”

The amount of F-16 Fighting Falcons and personnel accompanying them this year, “about twice the amount than any other U.S. Air Forces in Europe wing thus far” according to EUCOM, substantially surpasses the numbers in past joint U.S.-Bulgarian and U.S.-Bulgarian-Romanian air force exercises.

The first U.S.-led air combat drills in Bulgaria, Viper Javelin in 2005, included one of the fighter squadrons assigned to the 31st Fighter Wing, the 510th, which returned in 2007 for Rodopi Javelin.

In the first Thracian Star exercise in 2010, the U.S. deployed the 480th Fighter Squadron from Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany with sixteen F-16s and 280 support and maintenance personnel.

Thracian Star 2012 includes as many as twice the number of American warplanes and nearly twice as many airmen as its predecessor.

Thracian Star exercises are one of several regular joint U.S.-Bulgarian drills which also

include Thracian Spring and Thracian Fall exercises.

The first joint air exercise, Viper Javelin 2005, occurred the year after Bulgaria joined NATO and the year before the U.S.-Bulgarian Defense Cooperation Agreement was signed, replicating a similar agreement with neighboring Romania the year before.

The pact allowed the Pentagon to station as many as 2,500 troops at four military facilities in Bulgaria: The Graf Ignatievo and Besmer air bases, the Novo Selo Training Range and the Aitos Logistics Center.

In 2009 the U.S. armed forces publication Stars and Stripes disclosed that the Pentagon was spending \$110 million to “build new military bases” in Bulgaria and Romania.

The newspaper specified that Washington was allotting funds for “a \$50 million military base in Romania that could house 1,600 U.S. troops, and another \$60 million facility for 2,500 troops in Bulgaria.”

The locations of the bases weren't divulged, but indications are that the U.S. has upgraded and expanded Bulgaria's Besmer and Graf Ignatievo and Romania's Mihail Kogălniceanu airfields.

The U.S. created the Joint Task Force-East (now simply Task Force-East) for permanent deployments to Bulgaria and Romania in 2004, bringing it to full operational capability in 2008.

The task force, which has used the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment for Afghan war pre-deployment training in Bulgaria and Romania (for three months in 2009, with 30 Stryker Combat Vehicles), has operated out of the Novo Selo Training Area in the first country and the Mihail Kogălniceanu Airfield and Babadag Training Area in the second.

In 2010 the U.S. Marine Corps inaugurated the Black Sea Rotational Force, which has been conducting multilateral training exercises, including live-fire combat drills, with the militaries of Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Greece for further NATO integration and for “downrange” military operations like the war in Afghanistan.

The ongoing Thracian Star air force exercises in Bulgaria are also being used for current and future combat applications, in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Thracian Star 2010 not only provided the venue and opportunity for U.S. F-16s to practice low-altitude training and practice for advanced weapons delivery, fighter maneuvers, tactical intercepts, defensive and offensive counter-air, destruction and suppression of enemy air defenses, large force engagement and close air support, it did so by pitting U.S. combat aircraft against Bulgarian Russian-design opposite numbers – MiG-21, MiG-29 and Su-25 military aircraft – the U.S. and its NATO allies can confront in the Baltic Sea region, the South Caucasus and elsewhere. (Washington has been pressuring Bulgaria to purchase 16 F-16s and Romania as many as 48 of the aircraft to displace and replace Russian aircraft.)

According to the Bulgarian press, this year's Thracian Star – “the most large-scale stationing of military staff and equipment from Bulgaria's allies” – includes Bulgarian MiG-29s and

Su-25s and Bulgarian and Romanian MiG-21s. Drills will include “US F-16 strikes at the Koren training ground” with Bulgarian planes supporting them against “enemy” Romanian aircraft.

In early February Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Bulgaria and stated:

“Bulgaria is a very important, productive NATO partner. There will be a series of joint military exercises between Bulgaria and the U.S.

this year. We are seeking ways to enhance the military cooperation and make a thorough review of its conditions and where it will go in the future.”

Shortly after Clinton departed, James Townsend, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for European and NATO Policy, and Major General Mark Schissler of U.S. European Command arrived in Sofia. Standart News reported that “military cooperation between Bulgaria and the USA was discussed,” adding that “This extraordinary visit has additionally fed rumours about coming military operations in the Middle East and the formation of new coalitions of the kind existing against Iraq in 2003.”

The Bulgarian news source also said that “the situation in Syria was particularly paid attention to” and “Diplomatic sources...commented that the real reasons behind Clinton’s visit to Bulgaria are still to be unveiled.”

As many as 32 U.S. F-16s currently at the Graf Ignatievo air base could be used for an air assault against Syria. Or Iran. And in the future if a new Georgia-Russia conflict erupts in the South Caucasus.

There are precedents.

F-16s attached to the 31st Fighter Wing at the Aviano Air Base were used for missions over Bosnia in 1994 and 1995. The U.S. F-16 shot down over Bosnia in 1995 was part of the 555th Fighter Squadron, along with the 510th assigned to the 31st Fighter Wing.

In NATO’s 78-day bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999 the 31st Air Expeditionary Wing, the largest expeditionary wing in U.S. Air Force history, flew almost 9,000 combat sorties over Yugoslavia, with the Aviano-based 510th and 555th squadrons accounting for 2,400 of them.

The 510th (afterward nicknamed the Balkan Buzzards) dropped 136,508 pounds of ordinance over Iraq in late 2002 as part of Operation Southern Watch.

The two U.S. fighter squadrons in Bulgaria have proven what they are capable of doing. At this very moment and in the future.

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