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**Opinion & analysis**

**The American landing force will stay out of sight**

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MOSCOW. (RIA Novosti military observer Ilya Kramnik) - The recent beefing up of the US Navy in the Mediterranean has caused concern in Russia and some Mediterranean countries. Experts believe the appearance of US warships off the coast of Syria and Lebanon presages a US military operation in the region.

The recent deployment of the US Navy guided missile destroyer DDG 67 Cole off the Lebanese coast, reportedly sent "to support the ruling coalition" in Lebanon, caused an uproar among the opposition. Lebanese MP Hasan Fadlallah, representing the radical Islamic group Hezbollah, accused the United States of aggression against Lebanon.

How justified are these fears?

In early March the destroyer USS Cole was replaced by a similar, but upgraded new destroyer DDG 71 Ross and the cruiser USS Philippine Sea. All these ships are fitted out with the AEGIS system and various missiles, including Tomahawk cruise missiles and Standard SM-2 anti-aircraft missiles. Unlike the four-stage SM-3s used in the U.S. missile defense system, Standard SM-2 has less capacity to intercept ballistic missiles, but it can successfully intercept aerodynamic targets such as planes, cruise missiles and drones within a range of over 300 kilometers.

But for all their formidable power, the destroyer and the missile cruiser pose a threat not by themselves, but as part of a group. USS Ross and USS Philippine Sea are part of the US Navy's Expeditionary Strike Group (ESG) Nassau (NASSG) headed by the landing helicopter carrier bearing that name, which was deployed on a prolonged patrol mission in the areas of operation of the 5th and 6th Fleets of the US Navy. The areas are in the Indian and Atlantic oceans respectively and intersect in the Middle East and the seas washing the region where the strike group will be on patrol duty.

In addition to LHA 4 Nassau, USS Ross and USS Philippine Sea, the group includes the land attack ship LPD 13 Nashville, the dock-landing ship LSD 48 Ashland, the destroyer DDG 84 Bulkeley and the multi-purpose submarine SSN 753 Albany. On board the landing ships are the marines of the 22nd Expeditionary Unit trained for special operations. The unit can be used autonomously in limited-scale operations or as an advance party in a major military conflict. Marines reach the coast by air-cushion speedboats, helicopters and convertiplanes. The ESG's firepower can be greatly augmented by air support from the aircraft carriers of the 5th and 6th Fleets and US Air Force bases in the region.

During the mission the ESG personnel - both the crews and the marines - are trained for action in the Middle East theater and are even taught basic Arabic.

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The ESG's patrol mission will last several months. It is to leave the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal and head for the Gulf in early April. All this time it will be on full combat alert.

Expeditionary strike groups, along with other instruments, above all powerful transport aviation and aircraft carrier strike units, enable the U.S. Defense Department to quickly build up forces in key regions and if necessary start warfare using all the armed services at short notice, leaving the potential enemy no time for an adequate response, especially if it happens to be a third world country with limited means of reconnaissance over the ocean.

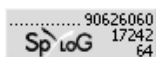
Bearing all this in mind, the concern of the Middle Eastern countries and Russia over the deployment of ESG ships off the Lebanese and Syrian coast is well grounded: a significant unengaged military force has appeared in the region, which can launch combat operations at the drop of a hat. Against this background American reassurances that the destroyer and the cruiser will be out of sight of the shore don't count for much. The landing assets on the ESG's ships enable marines to be landed within tens of minutes without any of the ships approaching the shore close enough to be seen with the naked eye.

*The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.*

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