The First Destroyer of NATO’s Missile Shield Soon in Spain

Article by Philippe Regnier on page 9 of Le Soir of February 10, 2014

The USS Donald Cook, a powerful guided-missile destroyer of the U.S. Navy, was sailing at full speed on Sunday, headed for the Bay of Cadix in the South of Spain. On board of this impressive Aegis destroyer are the first naval elements of the anti-missile shield which the United States is setting up under a NATO umbrella.

According to the promoters of the ‘shield,’ its objective is to protect the territory and the population of the European continent from possible hostile ballistic missiles coming from the Middle and Far East and which the missiles launched...
from the USS Cook are supposed to be capable of intercepting and destroying before they can hit their target.

But the destroyer’s mission will not be limited to anti-missile defense. The ship may contribute to the free circulation of commercial vessels in the Mediterranean, participate in anti-piracy mission off Africa, and be used for bilateral or multinational military exercises. It might even contribute to securing the neutralization of the Syrian regime’s chemical arsenal in international waters, which will soon take place on the U.S. Navy’s MV Cape Ray.

The destroyer has increased its speed these last hours. The USS Donald Cook left its base, Norfolk in Virginia, on Friday, January 31. It was headed for the storm that was hitting the South West of Europe’s shore, with waves of up to 8 meters being expected. This is why Commander Scott A. Jones and his crew decided to turn the machines at full speed, in order to arrive in the Bay of Cadix before the bad weather.

On Friday, February 7, i.e. one day earlier than planned, the USS Donald Cook was waiting for us in the port of Funchal, a tiny island in the Madeira islands where the temperature was 18 Celsius. Together with a few other European media, Le Soir was allowed to board the ship. It is a rare privilege organized by the U.S. Navy for civilians. Missile defense is clearly something important.

The Cook left Funchal shortly after midnight on Friday to sail along the coast of Africa before reaching Cadix and its final destination normally on Tuesday, i.e. the Spanish naval base of Rota not far from Gibraltar. This is the result of a cooperation agreement that was concluded between Spain and the United States and was signed by then Spanish Socialist Prime Minister Zapatero at the very end of his mandate.

It is in Rota that the United States will permanently anchor the Donald Cook and three other destroyers of the same type by the end of 2015. These heavily armed vessels which carry a lot of expensive technology will complete a broader system, i.e. a powerful radar installation in Turkey and a missile launcher base that will be set up in Romania next year and in Poland by 2018. ‘At this stage, it is first and foremost American equipment. But Europeans are contributing,’ Roberto Zadra, head of the missile defense unit at NATO’s investments department, said at NATO headquarters on Friday morning.
This shield will be gradually set up by the end of the decade and will be ‘adapted’ based on the evolution of threats. It is the multilateral and European version, developed under a NATO umbrella, of the project promoted by President Obama and replacing the one of his predecessor George W. Bush, which was more conceived to protect the U.S. than the Old Continent. Bush had unilaterally negotiated the installation of missiles in Poland and of a radar system in the Czech Republic, i.e. two countries that the then neo-conservative U.S. Administration called ‘the New Europe’ for having supported the disastrous invasion of Iraq in March of 2003. This was to the great displeasure of other Allies, who were facing a fait accompli, and of Russia, which still does not like the installation of this shield, even the Obama Administration’s revised version.

Moscow accuses NATO’s Allies of weakening Russia’s deterrence capacity by setting up a shield against the proliferation of ballistic missiles coming from North Korea, Iran, or elsewhere.

The United States and NATO do not agree (with Russia’s position.) ‘It is their point of view,’ said - shrugging his shoulders - Robert Bell, the U.S. Defense Secretary’s representative in Europe. The U.S. and NATO resolutely continue this muscle building operation, especially since the Atlantic Alliance is gradually going to disappear from Afghanistan’s radar screens.

‘The arrival of the ship underlines the fact that missile defense is really a very important mission for NATO,’ the 40-year-old USS Donald Cook Commander Scott A. Jones summarized. Storm or not, the 300 crew members of the Donald Cook, which is 154-meter long and weighs 8,900 tons, are resolutely headed for Rota.