

US spy plane incident raises more questions over MH17 crash

Our reporter
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Confirmation that a US reconnaissance plane was forced to cross into Swedish airspace on July 18 raises more questions over the crash of Malaysian flight MH17 in east Ukraine just one day before, with the loss of all 298 passengers and crew.

The incident, which was reported in the Swedish media, has only now been confirmed by American military officials.

According to accounts, the US Air Force RC-135 electronic surveillance plane was flying near Kaliningrad, the Russian enclave between Poland and Lithuania, when it was forced to divert. Kaliningrad is a major port for Russia's Baltic fleet.

The US military's European Command said that, when Russia launched a jet to intercept the spy plane, "The aircraft commander, acting in a professional and safe manner, maneuvered the aircraft to avoid a possible encounter by Russian aircraft."

Sweden is not a member of NATO, and the statement said that the RC-135 pilot had been directed toward Swedish territory "incorrectly by U.S. personnel."

According to other accounts, however, the RC-135 deviated into Swedish airspace despite being denied clearance to do so by Air Traffic Control.

These incidents raise new questions as to the conditions under which flight MH17 was shot down, including whether it could have been mistaken for a spy plane seeking to enter east Ukrainian or Russian air space.

The US surveillance plane, a military version of a Boeing 707, looks very similar to civilian aircraft. In August 1983, Korean Air Lines Flight 007 was shot down by Soviet fighter jets after it was mistaken for a military craft and deviated 200 miles from its route into Soviet airspace, with the loss of 269 lives.

The tragedy, at the height of the Cold War, fuelled tensions between Moscow and Russia. It provided political justification for the Reagan administration's

longstanding plans to deploy Pershing 11 and cruise missiles in West Germany, within 10 minutes' striking distance from Moscow.

In the recent weeks, NATO has significantly expanded its use of reconnaissance aircraft in the region, as part of a military build-up against Russia. According to an August 1 briefing from the US Defence Department, Pentagon Press Secretary Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby said that US forces "continue to exercise in Central and Eastern Europe to reassure allies of America's commitment to the region..."

"US troops, aircraft and ships have been continually rotating in and out of the region, Kirby said."

It is only one of a number of scenarios, however. Russia has said that video shots made by its Rostov monitoring centre show the presence of a Ukrainian Air Force Su-25 in the vicinity of MH17 at the time it crashed. The Su-25 attack jet is equipped with air-to-air R-60 missiles that can hit a target at a distance up to 12km.

Russia's Defence Ministry states that a US satellite was over the area of eastern Ukraine at the time of the crash and has urged Washington to publish the photos and data it captured.

None have been forthcoming. Despite the insistence of the US and the European powers that Moscow is responsible for the crash, they have not produced any credible evidence to back up their assertions. More than two weeks on, there is still no report from the investigations into the black boxes recovered from the site.

This is all the more remarkable given that the US was heading a 10-day NATO exercise, Sea Breeze, which concluded the day MH17 was downed.

Warships and aircraft from seven NATO countries, including the US, Britain, Romania and Turkey, took part in the Black Sea drill which involved commercial traffic monitoring and "reaction to asymmetric threat warnings,

anti-submarine warfare and artillery firing.” But the presence of sophisticated electronic intelligence in the vicinity has apparently yielded nothing as to the circumstances surrounding MH17’s crash.

What is certain is that US-led warmongering against Russia is directly responsible for the July 17 tragedy. Having backed the February coup, the Western powers fomented a civil war in Ukraine, turning the entire region into a tinderbox in the process. The Russian/Ukrainian border is especially volatile, with reports of repeated Ukrainian shelling of crossing points between the two countries.

The recklessness of US actions was further underscored by the response to Russia’s announcement that it is undertaking military exercises this week in the central and western regions of the country.

An account by Michael R Gordon and Eric Schmitt in the *New York Times* claimed that the “Buildup Makes Russia Battle-Ready for Ukraine.”

Painting the exercises as proof that Russia is the aggressor, they cited Antony J. Blinken, Deputy National Security Adviser to President Barack Obama, stating the exercise was “potentially positioning Russia for a so-called humanitarian or peacekeeping intervention in Ukraine.”

“[T]here’s urgency to arresting this,” Blinken continued.

It cited another senior American official stating, “The more success Ukrainian forces have, the more pressure there is on Moscow to escalate.”

Such comments underscore the reactionary strategic calculations underlying the US-NATO intervention in east Ukraine. As it presses the Ukrainian regime to crush opposition in east Ukraine, Washington is well aware that this increases pressure on Russia to invade Ukraine to defend ethnic Russians in east Ukraine, triggering a major war.

The question is posed, as the *World Socialist Web Site* raised previously, as to whether the US wants a war with Russia.



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