Report of Russian warship manoeuvres in English Channel highlights growing war danger

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29 November 2014

The Russian state news agency RIA Novosti reported yesterday that Russian naval vessels had staged a drill in the English Channel. The report said the Northern Fleet squadron had passed through the Straits of Dover following exercises in the North Sea that began November 20.

A naval destroyer, the anti-submarine ship Severomorsk, together with a landing craft, a rescue tugboat and a tank ship, had anchored in the Bay of the Seine, off France. RIA quoted a statement from the Russian Northern Fleet that its vessels were in international waters in the Seine Bay to wait for a storm to pass, but added, "While it is anchored, the crew are undertaking a series of exercises on how to tackle… infiltrating submarine forces, and are training on survival techniques in the case of flooding or fire."

Press reports said the Russian Navy could not be reached for comment and the Defence Ministry declined to speak about the report.

Britain and France issued statements denying the RIA claim that the ships were carrying out military manoeuvres. The UK said the ships had been observed by the British patrol ship HMS Tyne and had complied with all orders and stayed clear of British territorial waters.

"We are aware that four Russian naval ships have passed through the Dover Strait from the North Sea into the English Channel, which all ships have the right to do under international law," the Ministry of Defence said.

France's naval information service confirmed the location of the Russian ships and said, "They are not holding exercises. They're just waiting in a zone where they can be several times a year."

Lieutenant-Colonel Jay Janzen, NATO's military spokesman, said, "Our information indicates that the ships are transiting and have been delayed by weather conditions. They are not exercising in the Channel, as some Russian headlines would have us believe."

Such statements notwithstanding, the RIA Novosti report suggests that at least elements of the Russian state were seeking to make a political point. Moreover, the swift dissemination across all media outlets of the report highlights the escalating tensions between Russia and the NATO powers. The conflict centres on Ukraine and involves a policy of NATO expansion to Russia's borders, coupled with sanctions designed to cripple the Russian economy.

This is not the first potential spark for a military exchange between Russia and the UK resulting from the aggressive stance of the US and its allies. In May, a Russian aircraft carrier task group sailing into the Channel was placed under escort by the Royal Navy's HMS Drago and shadowed as it headed back to Russia.

The heavy carrier Admiral Kuznetsov, the nuclear-powered Kirov class cruiser Peter the Great, and several support ships were returning from a five-month mission in the Mediterranean, during which the Kuznetsov's Sukhoi Su-33 fighters and Kamov Ka-27 helicopters were reported to have carried out more than 350 practice sorties.

The stationing of the Russian task force in the Seine Bay off northern France occurred just days after President Francois Hollande reneged on a €1.2 billion deal to supply two helicopter carriers to the Russian Navy, after coming under sustained pressure from Washington. A Russian crew was already aboard the first of the two French-made ships, named Vladivostok,

ready for despatch in Saint-Nazaire. The second, named after the Crimean port city of Sevastopol annexed by Russia in March, is still under construction.

Last week, NATO issued its latest report of increased Russian military activity, particularly involving air encounters. The report stated that its planes have been scrambled 400 times this year in response to a 50 percent rise in Russian military air activity around Europe. NATO said Russia was using its military in a "much more assertive manner."

The largest military manoeuvres presently being staged are by NATO, in Poland, under the Readiness Action Plan agreed at the NATO summit in Wales. They involve the British Army's "lead armoured battle group" of 1,350 British troops and 500 armoured vehicles. In December, NATO will discuss the formation of a new rapid response force for Eastern Europe, under German leadership, to be ready for deployment as early as 2015.

Just four days before the incident in the Channel, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg responded to a treaty signed between the Georgian region of Abkhazia and Russia with a pledge to uphold "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders."

On November 20, at the start of a trip to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Stoltenberg said, "NATO's greatest responsibility is to protect and defend our Allies. And NATO is here to protect and defend Estonia."

He described NATO's new Readiness Action Plan as "the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the end of the Cold War." The presence of NATO jets and troops in Poland from many nations demonstrated "the resolve of all Allies to stand with the Baltic nations."

Stoltenberg went on to note that, "our Baltic air police mission has conducted over 100 intercepts this year—three times more than last year… So NATO remains vigilant. We are here. And we are ready to defend all Allies against any threat."

On November 24, Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, commander of the US Army in Europe, told the Baltic News Service during a trip to Lithuania that hundreds of troops currently in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland (all NATO member states) would stay there for the next year. US forces would "be here for as long as

necessary to assure all of our allies and to deter Russian aggression," he said.

Two days later, US Air Force General Philip Breedlove, the supreme allied commander in Europe, during a visit to Kiev pledged, "We are going to help Ukraine's military to increase its capacities and capabilities through interaction with US and European command" and "make them ever more interoperable with our forces."

Taking his cue from Washington, on Thursday Ukraine's president, Petro Poroshenko, urged the Ukrainian parliament to repeal a 2010 law that codified the country's non-aligned status in order to pursue NATO membership. "Today it is clear that the nonalignment status of Ukraine proclaimed in 2010 couldn't guarantee our security and territorial integrity," he said. "That's why we've decided to return to the course of NATO integration."

Poroshenko spoke of "an intense plan for the next six years, so that the country meets the criteria to join the EU and to join NATO."

Stoltenberg welcomed the announcement, saying, "the door is still open" to Ukraine's membership. Earlier, Czech Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek and Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius jointly said Russia would not be allowed to dictate that Ukraine stay out NATO.

In addition to Ukraine, Finland, which shares an 800-mile border with Russia, is discussing possible NATO membership.

Russia has repeatedly denounced NATO expansion. Last Wednesday, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "We believe, and we've been talking about it since the very beginning of the current historical period, that the reckless, endless expansion of NATO is a mistake that undermines Europe's stability."