

NATO scrambles jets against Russian aircraft over the Baltic Sea

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NATO fighter jets intercepted nearly two dozen Russian aircraft flying in international airspace over the Baltic Sea in the last two weeks of July, according to the *Financial Times*.

On July 24, British RAF Typhoons, flying out of the Amari airbase in Estonia, intercepted ten Russian military aircraft flying in formation over the Baltic in international airspace. According to the British Ministry of Defense, the fighter pilots identified four Sukhoi jets, four MiG fighters, and two transport planes engaged in routine training exercises.

This was followed, on July 29, by the intercept of a dozen Russian aircraft in international airspace off the Latvian coast also engaged in routine activity.

The Russian aircraft that were intercepted were traveling in an air corridor regularly used to reach Kaliningrad, Russia's westernmost district, located on the Baltic Sea. Kaliningrad is home to the Chernyakhovsk, Donskoye and Chkalovsk airbases as well as the Russian Navy's Baltic Fleet.

The 1991 dissolution of the USSR with the restoration of capitalism in Eastern Europe left the Russian-administered Kaliningrad region cut off from any land route to the rest of Russia. The territory is surrounded by Poland to the south and Latvia to the north and east, all of which have subsequently become members of NATO. As a result, any Russian military plane flying to and from Kaliningrad must fly past the airspace of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, making them targets for NATO intercepts.

NATO officials have seized upon these Russian flights to portray Russia as carrying out an aggressive military escalation threatening Europe.

"In the last year, Russia's air activity close to NATO borders has increased in quantity and complexity," a NATO official told the *Financial Times*. "Russian

aircraft often fly without their transponders switched on, without filing flights plans and without communicating with air traffic authorities."

In fact, the confrontation that is now escalating in the Baltics is due above all to a provocative military escalation by the United States and the NATO powers in Eastern Europe since last year's NATO-backed putsch in Kiev led to a proxy war between NATO and Russia in Ukraine.

The British Typhoons are taking part in NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission involving alliance fighter jets deployed on a rotating basis to police the airspace over Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. NATO takes responsibility for the airspace over the Baltic States, as they are too small to have their own air forces.

The patrols, which began in 2004 after the Baltic States officially became members of NATO, were significantly expanded last spring following the US-backed coup in Ukraine and ensuing civil war. NATO forces began flying missions from Amari airbase in Estonia for the first time in April last year while the number of fighter jets involved was expanded from four to sixteen.

As well as the four British Typhoons in Estonia, fighter jets from Norway, Italy and Belgium are currently patrolling the skies over the Baltic. Norway is leading the mission with four of its F-16s flying out of Šiauliai airbase in Lithuania complemented by four Italian Eurofighter jets. Four Belgian F-16s stationed at Malbork airbase in Poland are also participating in the mission.

So far in 2015, NATO fighter jets have been scrambled more than 250 times throughout Europe to intercept Russian aircraft, with 120 of these encounters occurring over the Baltics. The number of intercepts by NATO aircraft is expected to surpass the approximately

400 in all of 2014, which was already a fifty percent increase from 2013.

The air intercepts over the Baltic are just one part of the escalating military buildup by US and NATO forces throughout Eastern Europe aimed against Russia. Since the US- and German-backed coup in Kiev last year, the US and NATO have been engaged in an unprecedented string of military exercises involving tens of thousands of troops, heavy equipment and aircraft across the European continent from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea. Military exercises involving the US and other NATO allies took place this month in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova.

In September of last year, US President Barack Obama traveled to Estonia where he pledged the United States' "unwavering" and "eternal" commitment to militarily defend the Baltic States from an attack under Article 5, the collective defense clause of the NATO treaty.

The growing number of intercepts by NATO jets of Russian military aircraft over the Baltic Sea increases the danger of an incident between Russia and one of the Baltic States that could trigger Article 5 and rapidly escalate into full-scale war between the United States and Russia.

US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced in June that the Pentagon would deploy heavy artillery as well as tanks and other military equipment on a rotating basis throughout Eastern Europe. At the same time, NATO announced the tripling of its Response Force, which is aimed at Russia and is also building up its new Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, which has been developed to deploy anywhere in Europe in two days.

The alliance is currently in the final stages of preparations for Trident Juncture 2015, the alliance's largest military exercises since 2002, which will involve 36,000 soldiers from more than 30 countries participating in drills in Spain, Italy and Portugal.



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