

Russia summons French ambassador over near-miss in European air space

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The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a sharp protest to France Monday after a fighter jet nearly collided with a passenger jet carrying top Russian officials near the Franco-Swiss border.

The Russian Foreign Ministry said it had summoned French Ambassador Jean-Maurice Ripert to Moscow to “give explanations regarding a dangerous near-collision of a French Air Force jet with an airliner carrying a Russian parliamentary delegation headed by Russian Federation Chairman of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly Sergei Naryshkin ... which took place in [French] national airspace the same morning.”

Suggesting that the passengers aboard the Russian flight had feared for their lives, the ministry added that Russian officials might refuse to return to France in the future. “Deep concern has been voiced over the incident,” the Foreign Ministry said. “This could undermine trust with Paris and prevent it from hosting major political events.”

In a statement later accepted by Moscow, the French Foreign Ministry declined responsibility and, contradicting the pilot of the Russian jetliner who had identified the fighter jet as French, said that the aircraft involved in the incident was Swiss. It added that it “regretted” that Ripert had been summoned to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

The Swiss Defense Ministry subsequently took responsibility for the incident. Spokesman Peter Minder said, “It was a Swiss F/A-18 [fighter jet] which departed from Biel at 10:20. It checked the tail numbers of the Russian aircraft bound for Geneva. This is standard procedure and there was no ‘dangerous proximity.’”

Whatever the nationality of the fighter jet that nearly collided with the Russian jetliner near Geneva, it is clear that a serious diplomatic incident occurred.

The Swiss statement is simply not credible. It is not routine to scramble fighter jets so dangerously close to jetliners that the fighter pilot can visually read their tail numbers. Jetliners are identified by radar and through radio contact between air traffic controllers and the pilots. A jetliner is rarely trailed by fighter jets unless there is a suspicion that it has been hijacked or lost control, and that it may be necessary to shoot it down.

No allegation has yet been made to indicate that the Russian plane broke off radio contact with French or Swiss authorities, so it remains unclear why the Swiss military would have sent a fighter to intercept it.

Significantly, however, the Russian, French and Swiss accounts all agreed that a Western European fighter had taken the extraordinarily provocative measure of intercepting a passenger plane carrying top Russian officials at extremely close range. This underscores the extreme tensions that are erupting across Europe amid rising conflict between the European and NATO powers and Russia.

The fear of the Russian jetliners’ passengers that they might be targeted for assassination by a French or Swiss fighter jet emerges directly from the ever more aggressive policies pursued by the NATO powers over the last two years.

Tensions surged between NATO and Russia after Moscow granted temporary asylum to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013, following the revelation of illegal mass Internet and telephone surveillance by US intelligence on the world’s population.

France worked closely with US authorities to block Bolivian President Evo Morales’ plane from using French air space to return from Russia to Bolivia, fearing that Morales might be hiding Snowden aboard. By blocking Morales’ plane, which was too low on fuel

to reach Bolivia while avoiding French and Portuguese air space, they forced it to land in Vienna and be subjected to a blatantly illegal search for Snowden by Austrian authorities.

Snowden was not aboard the plane, but Bolivian Defense Minister Ruben Saavedra called it “a hostile act by the United States State Department, which has used various European governments.”

Then, the United States and other NATO powers, including prominently France, backed a coup in Ukraine to oust Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovych; the country was plunged into a civil war between the NATO-backed regime in Kiev and Russian-speaking areas of eastern Ukraine. Since then, the NATO powers have also imposed financial sanctions targeting top Russian officials.

Last year, Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down over Ukraine by a Buk surface-to-air missile, a munition which is stocked in the arsenals of both the Ukrainian regime in Kiev and the Russian government. The NATO powers accused Russian-backed forces of shooting down the jet, while Moscow blamed the pro-NATO regime in Kiev.

While the recent report on the MH17 shoot-down published by the Dutch government remarkably declined to identify who had fired the fatal Buk missile, Moscow’s counter-report presented detailed evidence that MH17 was shot down by a Buk fired by the NATO-backed Ukrainian forces.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that Russian officials would be concerned that their plane might be forced down over Europe.



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