

Leaked documents confirm UK discussed possible military response by Russia to Black Sea/Crimea provocation

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Classified UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) documents supposedly left accidentally at a bus stop in Kent confirm that the incursion by HMS Defender into Russian territorial waters of Crimea was a calculated provocation, planned at the highest levels of the government and the armed forces.

Two sets of documents were found sodden by a member of the public on last Tuesday morning. One set details discussion held Monday evening on the possible reaction by Russia to HMS Defender's passage through disputed waters off the Crimea coast that took place on Wednesday. The other leaks outline plans for a possible UK military presence in Afghanistan after the US-led NATO operation ends.

The member of the public, who wishes to remain anonymous, handed the documents to the BBC, allowing for them to be made known prior to the military incursion Wednesday, possibly making it impossible to carry out had the state broadcaster not sat on them.

The almost 50 pages of documents include emails and PowerPoint presentations of alternative routes that might have been taken by the Defender, a Type 45 destroyer that is part of the UK Carrier Strike Group led by the aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth, now heading to the Indo-Pacific region. They originated in the office of a senior official at the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

It was already announced earlier this month that the Defender was to break away from the larger strike group and conduct what the MoD insists was an "innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters," with guns covered and the ship's helicopter stowed in its hangar. But the documents confirm that

the UK was aware of a possible hostile response by Russia and decided to proceed anyway.

The UK's pose of innocent intent is premised on the assertion that the waters concerned are Ukrainian. The 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea determines that the passage of a foreign ship is regarded as "innocent" when "it is not prejudicial to the peace, good order, or security of the coastal state." But Russia has claimed sovereignty over the waters off Crimea since it was annexed in 2014, amid rising tensions with the rightist government installed by a coup in Ukraine that was backed by the United States and the European imperialist powers.

An official at the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ), which encompasses the UK Army, Navy and the Air Force, asks, "What do we understand about the possible 'welcome party'...?"

Potential Russian responses were outlined ranging from "safe and professional" to "neither safe nor professional." The documents concluded that "neither safe nor professional" was a distinct and growing possibility.

It was noted that recent interactions in the eastern Mediterranean between Russian forces and the Carrier Strike Group had been unremarkable, "in line with expectations." However, "Following the transition from defence engagement activity to operational activity, it is highly likely that RFN (Russian navy) and VKS (Russian air force) interactions will become more frequent and assertive."

Two routes were considered, including passing through "a short stretch through a 'Traffic Separation Scheme' (TSS) close to the south-west tip of Crimea," or one that kept HMS Defender out of contested waters.

This was rejected because it would be portrayed as “the UK being scared/running away,” when the UK’s intent was to reinforce Ukraine’s claim to the disputed waters.

“We have a strong, legitimate narrative,” the documents stated, with the presence of embedded journalists, Jonathan Beale from the BBC and Marc Nicol of the *Daily Mail*, providing “an option for independent verification of HMS Defender’s action.”

The Defender sailed about 12 miles off the coast of Crimea, where it was first shadowed by 20 Russian aircraft and two coastguard ships before warning shots were fired and bombs dropped in its path by Russian jets.

Most of these papers are marked “official sensitive,” to be distributed on a “need to know” basis. But the papers also include a document marked “Secret UK Eyes Only,” addressed to Defence Secretary Ben Wallace’s private secretary, which outlines the recommendations for the UK to possibly stay in Afghanistan, following the end of NATO’s Operation Resolute Support.

It notes an American request for British assistance, warning that “Any UK footprint in Afghanistan that persists... is assessed to be vulnerable to targeting by a complex network of actors.”

The deliberations are bound up with discussions over Britain’s post-Brexit foreign policy, including over where arms export campaigns put the UK in competition with European powers. But the main concern is over the intentions of President Joe Biden’s new administration, including the fact that there is “still much continuity from the previous administration” regarding its focus on China and the Indo-Pacific.

The leak was a major political embarrassment, with the MoD initially stressing that the employee concerned with the loss of documents had reported it promptly last week and that “It would be inappropriate to comment further.”

This satisfied no one, given that the leak clearly came from the office of a senior official at the MoD and could indicate something more than carelessness. A police investigation has been announced, reportedly involving a “top official,” who may even face prosecution under the Official Secrets Act—given that the documents should never have been removed from the building and the strange place they were then

discovered before being passed to the BBC.

A source told the *Daily Telegraph*, “The Ministry of Defence Police were immediately informed and have launched an urgent investigation. Nothing is being ruled out at this stage and it is entirely possible that this could result in a prosecution for the person responsible.”

An incensed Rear Admiral Chris Parry, a former naval commander, told the *Telegraph*, “In future if people find sensitive documents, they should take them to the police. You might as well take it to the Russian embassy as the BBC.

“The person responsible should be severely dealt with. They should lose their security classification. This person has proven themselves untrustworthy with secrets at the highest level.”

Amid a potential government crisis, Labour has said nothing about the reckless provocation carried out by the Royal Navy that ramped up tensions with Russia and could have sparked military conflict. Afterwards Moscow summoned British Ambassador Deborah Bronnert to the Foreign Ministry, with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warning that should such an event occur again, “we can bomb... on target.”

Labour’s sole concern is to support a swift investigation by Wallace and the Conservative government to reassure the House of Commons and the public that no military operations had been put at risk. Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey said, “Ultimately ministers must be able to confirm to the public that national security has not been undermined, that no military or security operations have been affected and that the appropriate procedures are in place to ensure nothing like this happens again.”



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