

Putin reveals US involvement in provocations by British warship in Black Sea

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Tensions continue to mount following the provocative and massive operations mounted by the NATO powers off Crimea's coast in the Black Sea.

Speaking on his annual question and answer session with the population on the *Direct Line* show Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin revealed information showing that the US government was directly involved in the June 23 operation by the British destroyer warship HMS Defender—which entered 3km into waters claimed by Russia off the Crimean coast. In retaliation, Russian patrol ships fired warning shots at the British ship and Russian fighter jets dropped bombs in its path.

Putin revealed the information in response to journalist Yekaterina Berezovskaya asking, “It is related to the British warship near Crimea. Do you think the world was on the brink of a Third World War, of all things?”

Putin denied that the incident could have led to a world war, stating, “No, I do not think so... To begin with, this was a comprehensive provocation, and it was conducted not only by the British but also by the Americans. The British entered our territorial waters in the afternoon, whereas earlier, at 7:30 am, a US strategic reconnaissance plane took off from a NATO military airfield in Greece, I think from Crete. I was briefed on this, of course, I know all about it. If I remember correctly, tail number 63/9792. We saw it very clearly and monitored it. It was clear that the destroyer entered [Russian territorial waters] in pursuit of military objectives, trying to uncover the actions of our Armed Forces to stop a provocation, with the help of the reconnaissance aircraft they were trying to identify how we operated, and where things were located and how they operated. We saw this and sent them the information which we deemed necessary. I may have let this slip; I hope the military will forgive me. This is the first thing.”

Another journalist stated, “The Sea Breeze exercise is underway now, and yesterday there was a Dutch frigate.”

This was a reference to a statement by the Dutch Ministry of Defence on Tuesday that Russian fighters had, the previous week, come dangerously close to one of its frigates,

Zr. Ms. Evertsen, in the Black Sea. The Netherlands government said this occurred on June 24, one day after the HMS Defender carried out its provocation. The statement said, “the fighters armed with bombs and so-called air-to-surface missiles, intended to fire at a target from the air” and “repeatedly”, between 3.30pm and 8.30pm, “flew dangerously close by and low [over the frigate], performing feint attacks.” Russia then caused “disruptions to the Evertsen's electronic equipment”.

Evertsen is a heavily armed warship with weaponry including machine guns, a vertical missile launch system, surface-to-air missiles and torpedo launchers with Raytheon torpedoes. It possesses a sophisticated long-range air and surface surveillance radar system.

Putin replied with an extraordinary statement indicative of the state of tensions between nuclear armed powers: “You said that this put the world on the brink of a global war. No, of course, not. Even if we had sunk that ship [HMS Defender], it is nevertheless difficult to imagine that this would have put the world on the brink of a third world war because those who did this know they could not win a war like that.”

He continued blithely, “I do not think that we would have been happy at the turn of events you mentioned [a world war breaking out!], but we at least know what we are fighting for: we are fighting for ourselves and our future on our own territory.”

Of the ongoing NATO Sea Breeze operation, the largest ever held by NATO in the Black Sea and involving 30 countries, Putin said, “It was not us who covered thousands of kilometres by air and sea towards them; it was them who approached our borders and entered our territorial sea, which is a crucial component in the overall situation.”

While playing down the dangers of a global conflagration, Putin insisted, “Russia's economic sovereignty is increasing and its defense capabilities have reached a very high level.” He warned, “No matter what sanctions are imposed on Russia, no matter what the scaremongering, Russia is developing and in some respects our country has surpassed

the European countries and even the US... If they cross some boundaries, we will take asymmetric responses that will be sensitive enough for our partners.”

The US government all but confirmed Putin’s claims. Asked about Putin’s statements, Chief of public affairs for the US European Command, Navy Captain Wendy Snyder, declared, “Yes, we did have aircraft in operations... We are operating in and watching everything in the Black Sea region, as we always do.”

The reckless operation to enter Russian territorial waters had been planned for months. In January, the UK Defence Journal website noted that Evertsen was listed by the UK’s Ministry of Defence as a component part of NATO’s UK led Carrier Strike Group from fellow NATO countries. The Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21) is led by the UK’s new £3 billion HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, which remained in the Mediterranean Sea at the ready while HMS Defender carried out its Black Sea provocation.

CSG21 will next head to the Indian Ocean and then carry out operations in the South China Sea. The MoD’s January statement read, “The group includes NATO’s most sophisticated destroyers coming together from the Royal Navy, the US Navy and the Dutch Navy. The group includes NATO’s most sophisticated destroyers—the Royal Navy’s Type 45s HMS Diamond and HMS Defender and US Navy Arleigh Burke-class USS The Sullivans as well as frigates HMS Northumberland and HMS Kent from the UK and the Dutch Navy’s HNLMS Evertsen.”

Prior to this, in September 2020, Evertsen was part of an HMS Queen Elizabeth Task Group carrying out GROUPEX (Group Exercise 2020) and Joint Warrior Exercises. Those operations included nine warships, F-35B Lightning jets, 11 Fleet Air Arm helicopters and nuclear submarines. Group Exercise 2020 included drills in the North Sea with the Royal Navy commenting in October, “British and American jets carried out strike missions from the [Queen Elizabeth] carrier using live weapons for the first time, while newly-modernised support ship RFA Fort Victoria and HMS Kent undertook the Royal Navy’s first transfer of ammunition at sea in three years.” The operation also saw heavy involvement of US forces. The arrival of F-35B strike fighters from VMFA-211 in September “marked the first time HMS Queen Elizabeth had embarked a squadron from the US Marine Corps.” It added, “GroupEx 2020 was followed by Exercise Joint Warrior, in which the Carrier Strike Group joined other NATO warships for a series of demanding scenarios across air, land and sea.”

Contrary to Putin’s dangerous bluster, with such a massive presence of NATO’s armed forces on Russia’s doorstep, any incident could be the spark for a disastrous military conflict.

Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov responded to the HMS Defender provocation by stating that if such an incident happened again, Russia’s response would not be to fire warning shots: “we can bomb... on target.”

These comments should be understood in the context of a *Daily Mail* article Wednesday revealing, “On the same day [as HMD Defender was fired on by Russia for encroaching on its claimed territory], US Navy’s Arleigh Burke class destroyer USS Ross (DDG-71) was shown on ship tracking services as sailing with a Ukrainian patrol boat just five miles off the coast of the contested Crimean Peninsula in the middle of the night.”

It added without apparent conviction, “The US Navy denied that the ship was ever near Crimea, and it is believed it could be an instance of deliberate spoofing of maritime tracking data.”

Under Article 5, NATO powers are committed to coming to defence of a NATO ally which comes under armed attack.

This week the *Washington Examiner* reported that in a “virtual [May 9] meeting with [US] President Joe Biden a group of nine Eastern European NATO countries led by Romania called for a bigger allied military presence on the Eastern Bloc.”

Asked by the website and weekly magazine what commitment Biden gave, Romanian Foreign Minister Bogdan Aurescu replied, “...the message of President Biden was very strong as far as the commitment to Article 5, the importance of making the trans-Atlantic bond even stronger. He said that this is not only uniting the two shores of the Atlantic, but it’s going across Europe towards the Black Sea, including this very important [area] from a strategic point of view for the alliance.”



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