

UK plans naval intervention against Russia in the Black Sea

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Britain is again putting itself at the forefront of NATO's escalation of the war with Russia over Ukraine. On Monday the *Times* reported, "Britain is in discussion with allies about sending warships to the Black Sea to protect freighters carrying Ukrainian grain."

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss has discussed the plans with Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis. He explained that participating countries "could provide ships or planes that would be stationed in the Black Sea and provide maritime passage for the grain ships to leave Odessa's port and reach the Bosphorus in Turkey".

Landsbergis said of Britain's response to this proposal, "From my perspective the British government is interested in assisting Ukraine in any way it can."

A diplomatic source confirmed that Truss is in favour once the practicalities are agreed, including "demining the harbour and providing Ukraine with longer-range weapons to defend the harbour from Russian attack," according to the *Guardian*.

These plans are already in motion. US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Monday that Washington would be supplying Ukraine with Harpoon anti-ship missiles, via a deal with Denmark. The *Daily Mail* reports that "a handful" of countries are willing to do the same, according to US officials and congressional sources.

Earlier this month, former senior NATO commander Admiral James Stavridis wrote for *Bloomberg* on May 6, "It's worth considering an escort system for Ukrainian (and other national) merchant ships that want to go in and out of Odesa ... The vast Black Sea is mostly international waters. Nato warships are free to travel nearly wherever they want, including into Ukraine's territorial waters and its 200-mile exclusive

economic zone. Conceding those waters to Russia makes no sense. Instead, look for them to become the next major front in the Ukraine war."

The Lithuanian foreign minister claimed, "This would be a non-military humanitarian mission and is not comparable with a no-fly zone... We would need a coalition of the willing—countries with significant naval power to protect the shipping lanes, and countries that are affected by this".

The "coalition of the willing" is the formulation used to describe the imperialist-led alliance which carried out the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. A NATO-led naval intervention would be a deliberate military provocation, designed to create a pretext for a direct clash with Russian forces, carried out under the cover of a "humanitarian mission" to avert a global hunger crisis over which the imperialist powers do not lose a wink of sleep.

Strategic analysts have been more honest about what is involved. Sidharth Kaushal of the Royal United Services Institute military think tank told the *Financial Times*, "To maintain a functional convoy system, you'd have to have a huge western fleet stationed in the Mediterranean to rotate through the Black Sea" and risk "escalatory confrontation with Russian warships".

On May 17, NATO began a "vigilance activity", Neptune Shield, involving 19 nations and centred on the USS *Harry S. Truman* Carrier Strike Group in the Mediterranean. The strike group includes the *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier, the USS *San Jacinto* cruiser, five US destroyers and a Norwegian frigate.

The eastern Mediterranean is a permanent home to NATO's Standing Maritime Group 2, composed of 14 ships including 10 frigates and the UK's *HMS Diamond* destroyer.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba

bellicosely announced the war plans being discussed behind the scenes, saying of the Russian presence in the Black Sea that there was “a military solution to this: defeat Russia.” He continued, “If we receive even more military support, we’ll be able to throw them back... defeat the Black Sea fleet and unblock the passage for vessels.”

A defence advisor explained to the FT the aggressive operations being considered, noting, “Russia’s diesel-powered submarines also have to resurface regularly, which makes them vulnerable to attack” and adding, “Destroying the Kerch Strait Bridge that Russia uses to supply Crimea could also leave Putin’s forces struggling with the same kinds of logistical problems it has faced elsewhere.”

The incendiary character of the plans being discussed is prompting nervous responses. Kaushal asks, “How many countries would want to risk their ships going cheek by jowl with the Russian navy?” The *Daily Mail* cites a US official who “said no nation had wanted to be the first or only nation to send Harpoons, fearing reprisals from Russia if a ship is sunk with a Harpoon from their stockpile.” The *Daily Telegraph* quotes foreign office sources saying, “current discussions don’t go ‘as far as using warships’ to help unblock the war-torn country’s ports.”

But the trajectory of the NATO-Russia conflict is towards such confrontations. Lawrence Freedman, an emeritus professor of war studies at King’s College London, writes in the *New Statesman*, “The view up to now has been that this would be an unduly provocative move, subject to the same misgivings that led Nato to reject calls for a ‘no-fly zone’ above Ukraine.” But the Russian naval operation is an “aspect of this war... now coming into focus—where pressure could build for a Nato operation.” If the war “drags on, this is an issue that will not go away... The major naval powers need to be thinking ahead.”

A NATO offensive in the Black Sea has been long in the making, with the UK playing a prominent role.

In June 2021, NATO carried out its largest ever operation in the region, Sea Breeze, involving 32 countries, 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft and 18 special operations. The exercise was hosted jointly by the US and Ukrainian navies and directly targeted Russia, with NATO’s statement announcing the

operation reading, “NATO supports Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, extending to its territorial waters. NATO does not and will not recognize Russia’s illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea and denounces its temporary occupation.”

On June 23, just days before Sea Breeze 2021 began, British destroyer *HMS Defender* engaged in a major provocation by entering waters off Crimea claimed by Russia. The Russian armed forces fired warning shots and dropped a bomb in the path of the warship, later threatening that if something similar happened again they could bomb “on target”.

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed the UK ship was acting in coordination with a US reconnaissance aircraft, “trying to uncover the actions of our Armed Forces to stop a provocation.”

The region has clearly been extensively prepared as a theatre for combat with Russia. American media reported that the US was critically involved in the Ukrainian strike that sunk the Russian flagship the *Moskva* on April 14.

That these moves are now being made under the banner of alleviating a world hunger crisis is grotesque hypocrisy. This was underscored by former UK Foreign Secretary/Conservative Party leader William Hague in an opinion piece for the *Times* Tuesday, “Putin’s next move? A truce to split the West”.

Hague urges NATO powers not to accept any Russian proposals for peace talks, explicitly deriding calls to do so to avert a further catastrophic escalation of either the war or global price rises.

“Ideally for you,” Hague writes of Putin, “western commentators will say, ‘Hurray, we always knew he wanted an off-ramp’, and, ‘All wars end in agreement’ and discuss how the cost-of-living crisis could be helped by your very generous offer to desist from the war you started.” This is unacceptable to Hague. What matters is not peace or hunger but pursuing NATO’s war aims.



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