Russia accuses Britain of blowing up Nord Stream pipelines

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The Russian government has accused Britain of playing a major role in the September 26 blowing up of the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines.

Powerful underwater explosions blew gaping holes in the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, which carry Russian natural gas 760-miles under the Baltic Sea to Germany. The pipelines have a joint annual capacity to provide 110 billion cubic metres of gas, more than 50 percent of Russia's normal gas export volumes.

On Saturday, a spokesperson for Russia's defence ministry said, "According to available information, representatives of this unit of the British Navy took part in the planning, provision and implementation of a terrorist attack in the Baltic Sea on September 26 this year blowing up the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines." The "unit of the British Navy" referred to, as the spokesperson later detailed, were British operatives "in the city of Ochakiv, Mykolaiv region, Ukraine."

The explosions destroyed tens of billions of dollars in infrastructure vital to financing Russia's economy, and powering and heating European industry and households. Russia's state-owned energy company Gazprom is the main owner of the pipelines. The leaks took place on international waters, but of the four explosions two of them were in the Danish exclusive economic zone and two in the Swedish zone, close to the Baltic Sea island of Bornholm.

Nord Stream 1 had been operating for nearly 11 years, while Nord Stream 2 contained gas but had not yet been brought into commercial operation, owing to pressure by Washington on Germany and other EU powers.

The spokesperson also alleged UK involvement in Saturday's attacks on Russian ships in the Black Sea. He stated, "At 4.20am today, the Kyiv regime carried out a terrorist attack on Black Sea Fleet ships and civilian vessels.

"Preparation for the terrorist act and training of military personnel of the Ukrainian 73rd Special Operations Centre Marine Unit was carried out under the guidance of British specialists who were in the city of Ochakiv, Mykolaiv region, Ukraine.

"It should be stressed that the Black Sea Fleet vessels that suffered the terrorist attack are involved in ensuring the security of the grain corridor as part of the international initiative to export agricultural products from Ukrainian ports."

Britain's Ministry of Defence denied the accusations, saying they were made to distract from Russia's "disastrous handling of the illegal invasion of Ukraine".

Russia's statement comes after weeks of insinuations by Britain and other NATO allies that the blowing up of its own pipeline was an act of sabotage by Russia. The incident has been used to further ramp up hostilities between NATO and Russia, with the activation of NATO's Article 5 collective defence clause being mooted.

US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said just days after the explosions that an Article 5 response could not be ruled out, adding, "I'll reiterate that we have been in touch with our European allies and partners about the apparent sabotage of the Nord Stream pipeline. We are supporting European efforts to investigate this."

Before the NATO defence ministers' meeting earlier this month, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg threatened, "Any deliberate attack against Allies' critical infrastructure would be met with a united and determined response… We have doubled our presence in the Baltic and North Seas to over 30 ships, supported by maritime patrol aircraft and undersea capabilities." He pledged "further steps" would be taken to protect Western infrastructure, before also stating, "We will never give up the privilege of defining exactly where the threshold for Article 5 goes. That will be a decision we make as allies taking into account the precise context."

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The propaganda that Russia is an imminent danger to NATO's security and energy infrastructure fed into claims that a "foreign power"—and everyone knows this means Russia—may have sabotaged the German rail network, halting train services across northern Germany on October 8. Services were grounded after two cables critical to the running of the network were cut in two places. Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht, while visiting German troops in Lithuania, demanded that NATO bolster security against Russia. "The fact is that we, Nato, must do more for our common security because we cannot know how far Putin's delusions of grandeur can go," she declared.

From the standpoint of who benefits, the accusation that Britain was responsible, or played a critical role in the bombing of Nord Stream, is far more credible than claims of Russia rendering inoperable tens of billions of dollars' worth of key infrastructure it has been developing over almost three decades since 1997. Moreover, given the UK's intimate relationship with the United States on military and intelligence operations, it is impossible to conceive of Britain blowing up Nord Stream without the direct approval of Washington.

Well ahead of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, British ships were involved in major provocations against Russia in the Black Sea. In June 2021, a British warship entered waters claimed by Russia near Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea. In response, a Russian border patrol boat fired several warning shots and a Russian fighter jet bombed the path of the British destroyer HMS Defender.

Since 2019, the Royal Navy and forces from other NATO countries led by the US have held a series of operations in the Baltic Sea region. On June 25, 2019 the Royal Navy reported, "A British-led expeditionary group that includes the Baltic states will carry out a series of integrated military activities across their part of northern Europe." Britain's expertise in sea operations in the Baltic would mean its forces would have no problem disabling Nord Stream. The Royal Navy statement continued, "Covert amphibious raids, urban ambushes and counter-mine training will mark an action-packed third stage of Baltic Protector, on which more than 3,000 British troops and 16 navy ships are currently deployed."

Just two days before Russia invaded Ukraine, Defence Minister Ben Wallace announced after a summit with the British led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)—involving Denmark, Estonia, Finland and Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden—"We have ... agreed to undertake a series of integrated military activities across our part of northern Europe, at sea, on land and in the air." He added, "For example, we will shortly conduct an exercise demonstrating JEF nations freedom of movement in the Baltic Sea."

In June, just three months before the Nord Stream explosions, NATO conducted its BALTOPS 22 exercise with Britain playing a major role. NATO listed "Fourteen NATO allies, two NATO partner nations, over 45 ships, more than 75 aircraft, and approximately 7,000 personnel" which took part. The Royal Navy said, "Destroyer HMS Defender provides the firepower and leading-edge technology, while six of the smallest craft in the Royal Navy's inventory – Archer, Charger, Explorer, Exploit, Ranger and Smiter – provide the speed, agility and numbers to swarm around participants in Baltops 22." HMS Defender was the destroyer involved in the June 2021 standoff near Crimea.

The claims that Russia destroyed the pipelines are an important second string to NATO's propaganda against Moscow, reinforcing claims that a Russian nuclear attack is the main threat to the world, allowing for an escalation of the war in the naval arena—in which the UK is already playing a leading part.

On October 3, days after the Nord Stream attacks, the Royal Navy sent a frigate to the North Sea. The ship would work with the Norwegian navy "to reassure those working near the gas pipelines." Wallace said at the time of the operation, and after meeting again with the JEF, "the group condemned the blatant attacks against civilian infrastructure."

He stated that Britain will acquire two specialist ships to protect undersea cables and pipes, with the first "multi-role survey ship for seabed warfare" operational by the end of 2023.

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