

After nuclear-capable B-52 flies near Russian airspace, British and German warplanes intercept Russian jet over Baltic

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In a highly provocative move, British and German fighter jets intercepted a Russian refueling aircraft Tuesday over the Baltic Sea during a routine flight from St. Petersburg to the exclave of Kaliningrad. Coming the same day as the downing of a US drone by Russia, the interception, which was justified by Britain's royal Air Force as necessary because the Russian plane approached Estonian airspace, underscores that tensions between the NATO imperialist powers and Russia are stretched to breaking point in the Baltic region as well as in Ukraine.

The British and German jets reportedly escorted the Russian plane for several minutes before allowing it to proceed on its way. The operation was the first time that British and German fighter jets collaborated as part of the Baltic air policing programme, which Britain will lead for the coming four months.

Less than 72 hours before the interception, a US nuclear-capable B-52 bomber came within a few kilometres of Russian airspace in the Gulf of Finland. The incident was clearly pre-planned and aimed as an intimidatory act. The B-52 flew northwards from Poland through Swedish and Finnish airspace before turning back shortly before reaching the Russian island of Gogland, known as Suursaari in Finnish, in the Gulf of Finland. The island, which lies just 40 kilometres off the Finnish coast and less than 200 kilometres west of St. Petersburg, is home to a Russian radar station and helicopter base. On its return flight, the B-52 passed over the Baltic republics.

Although the incident was barely reported outside of the Swedish and Finnish media, military analysts in the region made no bones about its significance. Mika Aaltola, director of the Finnish Institute for

International Affairs, commented on Twitter, "The Gulf of Finland is one of Europe's most strategically important straits, [and one] where Russia has increased its activities, for instance on Suursaari. This is how de facto allies are taken care of and a counter-deterrent message is sent."

There is much to suggest that the B-52's flight was a calculated provocation discussed at the highest levels. Immediately prior to the B-52's flight, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö was in Washington for talks on Finland's NATO membership with US President Joe Biden. As they met March 9, a story published by the Finnish state broadcaster YLE noted that Russia has stepped up military activity on Gogland significantly since 2014.

The fact that the highly unusual flight hardly received any media coverage makes it all the more sinister. Based on what is known about the flight, there is little doubt that it came perilously close to triggering a Russian response. What precisely would have happened had the B-52 strayed into or too close to Russian airspace? Would Russia have fired on it from its Gogland base? And given the highly tense stand-off in the region involving NATO and Russian land, air, and naval forces, what would have been the response to such an incident?

The flight also occurred shortly after the resumption of talks between Finland, Sweden, and Turkey on the two Nordic countries' admission into NATO. Although Ankara gave the green light for Finnish membership Friday, Turkey continues to refuse to approve Stockholm's application, citing Sweden's support for organisations like the PKK that Ankara views as terrorists. Earlier this week, Swedish Prime Minister

Ulf Kristersson acknowledged for the first time publicly that Finland may become a NATO member prior to Sweden due to Turkey's continued opposition to approving Stockholm's application. When Finland joins NATO, the military alliance's border will be significantly extended with Russia, which shares a 1,300-kilometre border with Finland.

Niinistö was in Turkey Friday for talks with Erdogan, who announced following their meeting that Turkey would give its approval to Finland joining NATO.

Finnish and Swedish NATO membership is fully endorsed by the major imperialist powers within NATO as a means to open up a northern front in the war with Russia. American imperialism is already in the process of vastly expanding its presence in the Nordic region, which will give it improved access to the Baltic Sea and Russia's borders with Norway and Finland. Last June, an updated defence cooperation agreement came into force between the US and Norway that grants American troops unimpeded access to "agreed areas" and places the soldiers under American rather than Norwegian law. Similar agreements are in the works with Finland and Sweden. Strategic locations like the Baltic Sea island of Gotland and an airbase in the Finnish Arctic could become "agreed areas" in agreements with Stockholm and Helsinki.

The dangerous escalation of tensions in the Baltic and High North comes as Washington and its European allies prepare the ground for a further expansion of their involvement in the Ukraine war. Following Russia's downing of the American drone Tuesday, Polish President Andrzej Duda announced that Warsaw would provide Ukraine with up to 12 MIG-29 fighter jets, with four to be delivered immediately. Slovakia followed suit Friday, committing to send a small number of MIG-29s to its Ukrainian neighbour. Although these announcements stop short of sending modern NATO warplanes to Kiev, a precedent has now been set for more jets to follow.

The increasingly desperate military situation facing Ukraine, which has suffered upwards of 100,000 military deaths since the war began according to a recent Politico report, is increasing the likelihood of a catastrophic escalation culminating in a direct clash between nuclear-armed powers. If the US and its European imperialist allies are to preserve the credibility they have staked on inflicting a devastating

military defeat on Russia, they will soon have little choice but to deploy troops of their own on the ground and ship modern NATO warplanes to Kiev.

NATO is in the midst of numerous military exercises across Europe involving many thousands of soldiers. A March 13 press release reported: "In March, 20,000 NATO troops, plus Finland and Sweden, train to defend Norway in exercises 'Joint Viking' and 'Joint Warrior,' the largest drills in Europe's Arctic this year. In the Mediterranean, ships, submarines and aircraft from nine NATO Allies conducted anti-submarine warfare drills during exercise 'Dynamic Manta.' France is holding its largest military drill in decades as part of 'Orion 23,' involving 19,000 Allied troops over three months. Around 600 German troops are practicing defending Lithuania during 'Griffin Lightning.' Flying out of Spain, US B-52 bombers hold joint drills with Allied air forces across Europe."

In June, the German air force will lead Air Defender 2023, the largest military operation in the air since NATO's founding. More than 10,000 soldiers from 18 countries, including 210 warplanes, will conduct war games in European airspace. Aircraft will operate from bases across Germany, the Netherlands, and Czech Republic between June 12 and 23.

To speak of this coordinated continent-wide military mobilization as separate "exercises" is a distortion of reality. What is increasingly coming into view is the open preparations by the US-led aggressive military alliance for a direct shooting war with Russia, which is brought ever closer due to the deepening crisis of the far-right regime in Ukraine.



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