

# British military to seize Russian ships, threatening shoot-outs

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The UK military will be sent to board ships suspected of being part of Russia’s sanctions-evading “shadow fleet”, threatening shoot-outs between British and Russian soldiers.

Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer perversely declared that this was about “keep[ing] this country safe and protect[ing] British interests here and abroad” in “an increasingly volatile and dangerous world”. In fact, it threatens direct conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

A government announcement makes clear how reckless the plans are: “Military and law enforcement specialists have been put through their paces in preparation for a number of scenarios in recent weeks, including boarding vessels that don’t surrender, are armed, or use high-tech pervasive surveillance to evade capture [*italics added*].”

According to the BBC: “Specialist military units have been undertaking training in recent weeks to wargame different scenarios, including how to deal with armed crews.

“That training is understood to now be complete and Ministry of Defence officials are working on the assumption that the first operation of this type will happen sooner rather than later.

“Those involved could include the Special Boat Service and the Royal Marines, depending on the level of resistance expected from crews aboard the shadow vessels.” These are the Royal Navy’s elite combat units.

This January, the British military facilitated an American operation to seize the Russian-flagged *Marinera* in the sea south of Iceland—in connection with the US blockade of Venezuelan oil. From that point, UK government lawyers were set to work, formulating the legal basis for British soldiers carrying

out these raids themselves; they have decided on the 2018 Sanctions and Money Laundering Act.

Other European nations have already seized alleged Russian shadow fleet ships. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Belgium, Finland and France have seized or detained tankers; Germany, Italy, Latvia, Norway and Sweden have boarded or detained cargo and bulk vessels.

These operations have largely been carried out on the charge of ships flying a false flag, interpreted as the ship being “without nationality” and therefore liable to boarding by government vessels of any other state under Article 110 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Belgian special forces boarded and seized the *Ethera* oil tanker in the North Sea earlier this month for falsely flying the Guinean flag; French forces seized the *Grinch* in the Mediterranean in January for falsely flying the Comoros flag.

The interests at stake, and hence the potential for armed clashes, are enormous. The US and Europe have collectively identified and sanctioned over 540 shadow fleet vessels. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), these and others move an estimated \$87bn–\$100bn worth of oil per year, around 65 percent of Russia’s seaborne oil trade.

Given increasing Ukrainian pressure on Russian shipping in the Black Sea, more is being routed north of Europe, passing around Britain through either the North Sea or the English Channel. Forty-two sanctioned vessels travelled through the Channel this January alone, raising the prospect of frequent military deployments and standoffs.

Moscow has responded by selectively reflagging ships as Russian, affording them state protection. In January, the sanctioned tanker *General Skobelev* was

escorted through the Channel by the missile corvette *Boykiy*.

The Labour government has not said, and the media has not asked, what the British military would do in such a case.

Given Starmer has declared seizing Russian ships a matter of protecting “British interests”, and his housing minister Steve Reed told the BBC this week, “There is no precedent for a vote in Parliament for defending British people,” Labour’s position is that a shooting war can be started with Russia without so much as a press conference.

UK imperialism has form when it comes to staging naval provocations. An important event in the lead-up to the Ukraine war was its sending HMS *Defender* into waters around Russian-claimed Crimea, to the point of forcing warning shots from a Russian patrol boat and jet.

British naval expertise and equipment have also been provided directly to Ukraine since the war began, with the Sun reporting in 2022 that the SBS trained troops in the country’s elite 73rd Naval Special Purpose Centre. The British government reported in August 2023 that a further 900 Ukrainian marines had received training from the Royal Navy’s 42 Commando and 47 Commando Raiding Group.

This January, 42 Commando carried out “boarding drills on the auxiliary ship SD Northern River at Devonport naval base and reconnaissance activities along the coastlines around Plymouth,” according to Forces News, as part of Exercise Hyperion Storm.

The exercise was aimed at confirming the UK’s readiness to lead NATO’s Special Operations Capability from July, under its high-readiness, rapidly deployable Allied Reaction Force of roughly 4,000 soldiers.

Speaking ahead of a summit of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, encompassing Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden, Starmer told reporters, “We have to accept that there’s a war on two fronts—there’s the Iranian conflict and the continuing Ukrainian conflict.”



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