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Russian forces fire warning shots at UK destroyer HMS Defender over territorial encroachment in Black Sea

A Russian patrol ship fired a warning shot yesterday at the British destroyer HMS Defender off the coast of Crimea. This was followed by the dropping of high-explosive OFAB-250s fragmentation bombs in the path of the UK vessel.

According to Russia's defence ministry, HMS Defender made a 3-kilometre incursion into Russia's territorial waters off Cape Fiolent in the south of Crimea. Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea, was annexed by Russia in March 2014, following a US-backed far-right coup in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine.

The incident began with a major military and political provocation by the UK. HMS Defender had just left Odessa in southern Ukraine and was carrying out exercises with a Royal Netherlands Navy Frigate, HNLMS Evertsen. The *Financial Times* reported Wednesday, "British and Ukrainian officials met on board the destroyer on Tuesday to agree a defence deal in which the UK will help boost Kyiv's naval capabilities. The co-operation will include training of Ukrainian navy personnel, the creation of new naval bases, and the purchase of two Sandown class minehunters."



The Type 45 destroyer HMS Defender leaves the naval base in Portsmouth harbour for exercises in Scotland, prior to deployment to the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Indo-Pacific region as part of the UK's Carrier Strike Group 21. May 1, 2021 (credit: WSWS media)

A statement from Russian ministry's TV channel Zvezda said of the incident, “The Black Sea Fleet together with the FSB (security service) stopped a violation of the Russian border by a British destroyer, Defender.

“Today, at 11:52, the Defender crossed the state border of Russia in the northwestern part of the Black Sea. It entered the territorial waters for three kilometres, in the area of Cape Fiolent...

“At 12:06 and 12:08, a Russian border patrol ship fired a warning shot. At 12:19, the Su-24M aircraft of the Black Sea Fleet performed a warning bombing, dropping 4 OFAB-250 bombs on the course of the destroyer.”

“At 12:23 the British destroyer left the borders of the territorial sea of Russia.”

Clearly caught by surprise at Russia’s swift and aggressive response, the MoD stated, “The Royal Navy ship is conducting innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters in accordance with international law. We believe the Russians were undertaking a gunnery exercise in the Black Sea and provided the maritime community with prior-warning of their activity. No shots were directed at HMS Defender and we do not recognise the claim that bombs were dropped in her path.”

This denial was refuted by BBC Defence Correspondent Jonathan Beale, *speaking from aboard HMS Defender*, who made a statement uploaded onto the BBC's news site as a sound file, and in comments included in an accompanying news update.

Beale wrote, "Two Russian coastguard ships that were shadowing the Royal Navy warship [HMS Defender], tried to force it to alter course. At one stage one of the Russian vessels closed in to about 100m (328ft).

"Increasingly hostile warnings were issued over the radio—including one that said 'if you don't change course I'll fire'..."

While speaking on a recording just 99 seconds long, the roaring jet engines of a Russian air force jet can be heard at 23 seconds in, for more than 10 seconds—forcing Beale to exclaim "that is another Russian aircraft buzzing the warship, yeah, in the Black Sea. There have been at times more than 20 aircraft above the warship. And there have been warning from Russia coastguard vessels and indeed we have heard shots fired. We believe they were out of range".

A section of Beale's report that was taken down within minutes of being published on the BBC site reveals how tense the situation was: "At one stage they [sailors onboard HMS Defender] did put on anti-flash masks to protect their faces, just in case there was going to be an exchange of fire... They didn't think that would happen and it did not happen. But the Russian jets have taken an interest in this and they had warned the ship not to go into Crimean territorial waters, claiming that they are Russian waters."

That events took this course was no accident given the provocative mission being carried out by the UK in the region. As Beale notes in his report, "The crew were already at action stations as they approached the southern tip of Russian occupied Crimea. Weapons systems on board the Royal Navy destroyer had already been loaded. This would be a deliberate move to make a point to Russia."

The incident with HMS Defender must be seen in the context of a ramping up of militarism by British imperialism and its NATO partners, with Moscow and China in their crosshairs.

A Type 45 destroyer primarily designed for anti-aircraft and anti-missile warfare, HMS Defender is one of the several warships—alongside warplanes, submarines, UK and US soldiers and sailors—that are forming a “ring of steel” around one of the UK’s two new aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth, which is on its maiden operational deployment.



The HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier with seven helicopters visible onboard at Portsmouth harbour. May 1, 2021 (credit: WSWS media)

Carrier Strike Group 21 (CSG21) left the UK last month on a six-month trip to the Indo Pacific region. CSG21 was described by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) on Tuesday, just 24 hours before the Black Sea incident, as “the largest concentration of maritime and air power to leave the UK in a generation...”

On Tuesday, revealed the MoD, warplanes, including UK and US F35B jets, “carried out operational sorties for the first time from HMS Queen Elizabeth in support of Operation Shader and US Operation Inherent Resolve”.

The bellicose statement continued, “For the task group, which has spent previous weeks in the Mediterranean working with NATO allies and partners, it marks a change of emphasis. From exercises and international engagements, the Carrier Strike Group is now delivering its full might of naval and air power...”

Operation Inherent Resolve and Operation Shader are code names for military interventions by the US and Britain, set up in 2014 ostensibly to target Islamic State, which mainly consist of constant air strikes and hostile surveillance missions in a host of countries including Iraq, Syria, Libya, Tunisia and Lebanon.

The MoD statement quoted Captain James Blackmore, Commander of the Carrier Air Wing, who pointed to the significance of Royal Navy-led bombing operations: “this time” UK warplanes were “flying from an aircraft carrier at sea, which marks the Royal Navy’s return to maritime strike operations for the first time since the Libya campaign a decade ago.”

The provocation in the Black Sea, as with all CSG21 operations, could not proceed without the say-so of the United States. Last week, HMS Defender conducted exercises in the Black Sea alongside a US destroyer ship and a Dutch frigate. Blackmore pointed to the integral role of US forces in Tuesday's military strikes: “This is also notable as the first combat mission flown by US aircraft from a foreign carrier since HMS Victorious in the South Pacific in 1943. The level of integration between Royal Navy, Royal Air Force and US Marine Corps is truly seamless, and testament to how close we’ve become since we first embarked together last October.”

The *FT*’s report of the Black Sea exchange quoted Mark Galeotti, a senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute: “Moscow ‘was trying to show it’s not going to be pushed around’ by ‘provocative’ actions such as HMS Defender’s voyage. ‘The Brits are often in this role as a proxy — they [the Russians] don’t want to be too aggressive against the Americans [...] so there is a sense you do it against the Brits because it’s not quite as dangerous,’ he said.”

The MoD announced in May that CSG21 “will participate in NATO exercises such as Exercise Steadfast Defender and provide support to NATO Operation Sea Guardian and maritime security operations in the Black Sea.”

Shortly before the Carrier Strike Group left the UK, MoD sources revealed that HMS Defender would “peel off” in the Mediterranean from the main force and head through the Bosphorus “to carry out her own set of missions in the Black Sea”.

On June 10, the Royal Navy said that over several weeks HMS Defender had “completed intensive training and worked on Operation Sea Guardian, NATO’s mission in the Mediterranean to deter and counter terrorism.” HMS Defender would be “heading to the Black Sea after a stop in Istanbul.” The Royal Navy said, 'Defender is now in Istanbul with Dutch frigate HNLMS Evertsen... and will be hosting representatives from the

Turkish government, business world, armed forces and defence sector during her stay there.'

NATO's anti-Russian operations will be intensified in the days ahead, with its annual Sea Breeze military exercises taking place in the Black Sea region from June 28 to July 10.

Announcing the operation, the US Embassy in Ukraine said, "This year's iteration involves the largest number of participating nations in the exercise's history, including 32 countries from six continents, 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft, and 18 special operation and dive teams." It would "focus on multiple warfare areas including amphibious warfare, land manoeuvre warfare, diving operations, maritime interdiction operations, air defense, special operations integration, anti-submarine warfare, and search and rescue operations."

Wednesday's incident in the Black Sea is a stark indication of how the conflict between Ukraine and Russia and the interests of competing imperialist powers have transformed the entire region into a powder keg that could ignite a worldwide conflagration. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba tweeted that Russia firing on the UK warship was "A clear proof of Ukraine's position: Russia's aggressive and provocative actions in the Black and Azov seas, its occupation & militarization of Crimea pose a lasting threat to Ukraine and allies. We need a new quality of cooperation between Ukraine & NATO allies in the Black Sea."

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