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The UK-Russian confrontation in the Black Sea: An ominous warning

On Wednesday, a British warship entered waters claimed by Russia near Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea. A Russian border patrol boat fired several warning shots and a Russian fighter jet bombed the path of the British destroyer HMS Defender, Moscow said. The Kremlin has since released footage of the incident. The British government denies that the Russian side fired shots and dropped a bomb, and insists that not much should be made of the incident.



F-35 aircraft takes off from the U.K.'s aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth in the Mediterranean Sea on Sunday, June 20, 2021. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

However, the Kremlin summoned British Ambassador Deborah Bronnert to the Foreign Ministry and issued a note of protest to the British military attaché. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warned that should such an event occur again, "we can bomb... on target."

Wednesday's confrontation in the Black Sea highlights the enormous danger of war and is a serious warning. Similar incidents have led to the outbreak of wars in the past.

The crisis in the Black Sea is the result of a decades-long US-led imperialist encirclement of Russia following the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The imperialist interventions and military build-up on Russia's borders dramatically escalated in 2014, when the US and EU backed a far-right coup in Kiev that toppled the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich. The coup triggered an ongoing civil war in the Donbass in East Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea.

In February, the Ukrainian government announced plans to "recover Crimea" and the Donbass, provoking a major military crisis in the region. In May, NATO staged the massive Defender 2021 exercise in the Balkans and Black Sea region, which involved non-NATO members Ukraine and Georgia.

Under these conditions, the actions of the British ship HMS Defender had the character of a provocation. The ship was in the Black Sea ahead of the Sea Breeze naval exercise set to take place from June 28 through July 10. Co-hosted by the US and Ukrainian navy, it will involve a staggering 32 countries, 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft and 18 special operations. The Kremlin has called upon the US to cancel the exercise, warning of an inadvertent military confrontation.

Onboard the HMS Defender on Wednesday were senior Ukrainian and British government officials, including Ukraine's Deputy Minister of Defense and the British Minister for Defence Procurement. They signed a major bilateral naval agreement that day which provides for substantial military aid by Britain for the Ukrainian navy and the creation of new naval bases in the Black Sea.

Highlighting the seriousness of the crisis, Conservative British MP Tobias Ellwood said on British radio, "We should recognize this is a dangerous game. Su-24 Russian jets

buzzing ships, there's huge scope for an accident to occur, misinterpretation leading to an actual kinetic engagement, and it could be a bit of time before someone grabs that red phone and calms things down." Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko stated, "This situation is explosive, even if all parties remain prudent. Unintentional incidents, which can result in a real conflict, are not ruled out."

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions have grown significantly. Claiming that there is "no money" for the most basic needs of workers and refusing to undertake any serious measures to stop the pandemic, capitalist governments have increased global military spending in 2020 to a stunning \$2 trillion.

US imperialism, in particular, has responded to the pandemic by seeking to divert growing class tensions outward. The Biden administration has proposed a record military budget of \$753 billion for this year, including \$24.7 billion for the modernization of nuclear warheads. The UK is increasing its stock of nuclear warheads by 40 percent.

While there are indications that the Biden administration is trying to ease tensions with Moscow in order to focus on war preparations against China, there are sharp conflicts over foreign policy within the US ruling class. There are also growing tensions between the imperialist powers and within NATO. A proposal for a EU summit with Russia by Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Emmanuel Macron has provoked major conflicts within the EU.

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