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Putin warns of US navy threat

GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY

By John Helmer

4/21/2014

On Thursday President Vladimir Putin described NATO missile batteries aimed at Russia's Black Sea coastline as threatening the nuclear defences of southwestern Russia. It was the first time the president or Russian defence officials have put Crimea into Russian strategic survival doctrine. US Navy deployment in the Black Sea of ships armed with Aegis missiles is one of the concrete threats Putin was referring to. This has made the current Black Sea cruise of the *USS Donald Cook*, an Aegis-armed destroyer, of special importance. It is the reason a Russian military aircraft buzzed the *Cook* as it steamed towards Constanta port, in Romania.

It is also the reason why, as Putin was speaking in Moscow, the *Cook* pulled away from the Constanta dock, setting a course to the southeast from Constanta towards Georgia and Turkey, and not a northward course towards Odessa. In that Ukrainian port, public demonstrations against a port call by the *Cook* have been under way for several days.

US Navy deployments inside the Black Sea are now consecutive, one vessel arriving as another leaves, since February 2, when the *USS Mount Whitney* passed through the Bosphorus, the Turkish straits, guarded by the frigate, the *USS Taylor*. The *Mount Whitney* is a floating headquarters for NATO strike forces aimed at Russia from Romania to Hungary and Poland. It had sailed into the Georgian port of Poti in September of 2008 as Russian air, ground and naval

forces surrounded the port. The BBC [reported](#) the mission as the delivery of humanitarian aid. In July of 2011 the *Mount Whitney* was off the Libyan coast to coordinate US and NATO operations to overthrow Muammar Qaddafi. The *Mount Whitney* is also a signals intelligence station for listening in on Russian command communications.

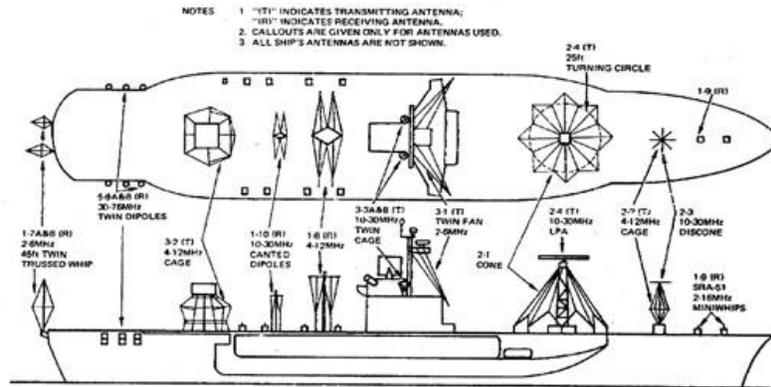


Figure 2.1. MOUNT WHITNEY antennas surveyed.

The story of the *Mount Whitney*'s cruise — off the port of Sochi and purportedly to assist Russian security for the Olympic Games — was told [here](#). According to European military observers, the American idea was to monitor how far Putin's attention was distracted by the Olympics, while the US worked to transform the situation in Kiev, overthrowing the government of President Victor Yanukovich, if it could.

Putin was distracted, the Europeans believe, and so he was taken by surprise by the February 21 coup in Kiev.

A Russian version of the sequence of events is that the *Mount Whitney* was a provocation to follow much of the same — a year-long campaign of propaganda and pressure aimed at a boycott of the Games, undermining the spectacle, damaging the positive advertising this gave Russian interests, as well as Putin personally. The Kremlin understood they were facing unrelenting regime-change tactics from Washington. They thought they had been effective in absorbing, containing or deflecting them. The Sochi Games came off without a hitch, they thought. The *Mount Whitney*, they calculated, was part-insult, part-feint, part-eavesdrop.

Did the *Mount Whitney* operation allow the Americans to predict in February what Putin has admitted to in April — that he was taken by surprise by the coup against Yanukovich, and by what happened next in Crimea? Did the Obama Administration believe their strike hand was free while Putin's eye was off the ball? "This had not been pre-planned or prepared," Putin [said](#) in his television presentation last week. "It was done on the spot, and we had to play it by ear based on the situation and the demands at hand." Was Washington as surprised by Putin's Crimean move as Putin had been by Obama's Kiev move?

Last Thursday Putin said cryptically: “As for me, you know that the decisions we take in a critical situation depend on our experience and values. You know that I worked for the Soviet Union’s KGB, or, more precisely, foreign intelligence, where we were trained in a specific manner that boils down to absolute loyalty to people and the country.”

This is a hint that until February 22 Putin hadn’t accepted the black scenarios he had received from the intelligence agencies. Perhaps he thought he could count on European support to manoeuvre around Obama’s scheming. Maybe he even believed Obama’s [telephone call](#) on February 21, promising to stick to the agreement signed that day between Yanukovich and the European Union (EU) foreign ministers.

According to Putin, “when Yanukovich signed the agreement on February 21, which was guaranteed by three European foreign ministers from Poland, France and Germany, he believed that this agreement would be honoured.” That’s Putin’s acknowledgement that he believed the same thing.

But once Yanukovich had been ousted over the following night and day, and the Kremlin accepted there was no going back for him, Putin adopted a long-prepared plan of action. In this plan, Crimea was a direct Russian security interest in a way the rest of eastern Ukraine is not. “We also followed certain logic: If we don’t do anything, Ukraine will be drawn into NATO sometime in the future. We’ll be told: ‘This doesn’t concern you,’ and NATO ships will dock in Sevastopol, the city of Russia’s naval glory.”

“But it isn’t even the emotional side of the issue. The point is that Crimea protrudes into the Black Sea, being in its centre, as it were. However, in military terms, it doesn’t have the importance it used to have in the 18th and 19th centuries – I’m referring to modern strike forces, including coastal ones. But if NATO troops walk in, they will immediately deploy these forces there. Such a move would be geopolitically sensitive for us because, in this case, Russia would be practically ousted from the Black Sea area. We’d be left with just a small coastline of 450 or 600km, and that’s it!”



Putin continued: “In this way, Russia may be really ousted from this region that is extremely important for us... This is a serious thing. So we shouldn’t fear anything but we must consider these circumstances and react accordingly. As I’ve just said, the same is happening with our talks on the deployment of US missile defence elements. This is not a defensive system, but part of the offensive potential deployed far away from home. Again we’re being told: ‘This is not against you.’

“However, at the expert level, everyone understands very well that if these systems are deployed closer to our borders, our ground-based strategic missiles will be within their striking range. Everyone is well aware of this, but we’re being told: ‘Please believe us, this is not against you.’ Our American partners have turned down our proposal to sign even some trifling legal paper that would say that these systems are not directed against us. Surprising as it is, but this is a fact. Naturally, we are bound to ask: ‘And why do you refuse to sign anything if you believe this is not directed against us?’ ”

For the first time Putin is talking in public, in detail, and at length in the language of military defence and geostrategic security. He is also talking directly at the US. “Look at what they did with Yugoslavia: they cut it into small pieces and are now manipulating everything that can be manipulated there, which is almost anything. Apparently, someone would like to do the same with us, and if you look at what’s happening, you’ll be able to answer your own question about who is doing what.”

This is the frame of mind in which the movement of the *USS Donald Cook* into the Black Sea, starting on April 10, and heading north, was interpreted in Moscow.

The US Defense Department’s [announcement](#) of the deployment claimed the purpose was “to reassure NATO allies and Black Sea partners of America’s commitment to strengthen and improve interoperability while working towards mutual goals in the region... It demonstrates our commitment to our ... allies to enhance security, readiness and capabilities.”

From the Russian point of view, it was a new, more menacing round of gunboat diplomacy. The *Whitney* had been an espionage operation, and its escort, the *Taylor* (pictured below), had embarrassed the Pentagon by running aground at Samsun, Turkey, knocking itself out of action, and getting its captain [dismissed](#).



Still damaged, the *Taylor* reportedly left Samsun on [March 7](#) for further repairs at Souda Bay, Crete.

The *USS Truxtun* followed in the Black Sea between March 7 and 21. Its mission, according to US Navy [announcements](#), was a training operation with the Romanian and Bulgarian navies “unrelated to Russia’s recent incursion into Ukraine. ‘[Truxtun’s operations](#) in the Black Sea were scheduled well in advance of her departure from the U.S.’” The *Truxtun*’s main armament is Tomahawk cruise missiles for attacking land targets, as well as surface ships, and ASROC missiles for use against submarines.



USS Truxtun leaves Souda Bay, Crete, on March 6, heading for the Black Sea

Thus armed, the *Truxtun* was not considered the level of threat represented by the *Cook*’s Aegis missiles. These have been described by the US [here](#). The Aegis missile system is an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) weapon — aimed at intercepting in flight and destroying long-range nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. It is thus understood in Moscow as a threat to the nuclear arms balance

between the Soviet Union, now Russia, and the US; and thus to the doctrine of nuclear deterrence accepted on both sides.

The US claim that it wants to instal such ABM systems on land in Romania and Poland, and on the water, to defend against Iran is not believed in Moscow, nor anywhere else. This is part of what Putin meant in his remarks. Putin was also raising the level of Russia's objection to the first stage of the American ABM plan – deploying the Aegis system on board warships, based at Rota in Spain, and moved as far forward towards Russia as the *USS Donald Cook* was sailing on Saturday, April 12.

On that day two Russian Sukhoi-24 attack aircraft, as well as a Black Sea fleet warship, were shadowing the *Cook*, when one of the planes made what the Pentagon later claimed to have been 12 low-altitude passes at the *Cook*. According to the US Navy account, the Russian aircraft flew within a thousand yards of the *Cook* and as low as 500 feet. At the time both Su-24 and destroyer were in international waters. From the *Cook* the Russian aircraft was visually confirmed to be [unarmed](#).



The Pentagon spokesman declared: “This provocative and unprofessional Russian action is inconsistent with international protocols and previous agreements on the professional interaction between our militaries.”

Note that the incident occurred on the Saturday, but no Pentagon-release report appeared until the following Monday, US time. The US reports, all based on the same Pentagon release, mix the days so that even in a single press report, the incident has been made to appear to have occurred on Monday, but also two days earlier. This Washington newspaper [version](#) makes the US F-15s (armed) above the *Cook* appear to be the Russian Su-24s (unarmed).

For the US and European press reporting the incident, the message was that the Russians were threatening a routine American naval operation in international waters. For the Russian side, the buzzing was intended as a warning that nothing an Aegis-armed missile battery does within range of Russia can be routine at any time. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, the Russian and Ukrainian media also reported, the *Cook* was intending to demonstrate this force capability by making a portcall at Odessa.

An explicit Russian warning along these lines [appeared](#) in Itar-TASS on April 9. “ ‘It isn't known yet if the ship will call into the port of Odessa to demonstrate the US support for the incumbent illegitimate authorities in Kiev, which owe so much to the Americans for arrival at power,’ the source said. He indicated that the Russian Defense Ministry officials sized up the

sending of a US warship equipped with a ballistic missile system to the Black Sea as Washington's willingness to bring the sea-based component at a closest possible distance to the Russian territory. 'Given the time-consuming character of installation of the land-surface-based elements of the system in the countries like Romania, the Americans have taken the line at an extreme intensification of visits of their warships fitted out with the antimissile system to the Black Sea. 'Beginning with February, US ships are found in the Black Sea practically on a regular basis,' the source said. 'As soon as one ship leaves, a new ship — or sometimes a detachment of ships — arrives. It's not ruled out the same practice will be applied to the destroyers carrying the Aegis antimissile missile system,' he said."

A more elaborate [version](#) of the same warning was broadcast by Russia Today Television (RT) on April 10, along with film footage of the *Cook* moving through the Bosphorus.

Two months earlier, RT had broadcast a [general warning](#) that forward deployment of the sea-based Aegis ABM system was potential cause for Russia to revoke its agreement to the strategic arms reduction treaty (START), signed on April 10, 2010, by Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama. That treaty can be read in full [here](#).

In retrospect of the four years since START was signed, Putin's remarks last week suggest there is now serious Russian doubt in US commitments to honour the treaty; particularly these two parts of the preamble: "to forge a new strategic relationship based on mutual trust, openness, predictability, and cooperation"; and to "recogniz[e] the existence of the interrelationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms, that this interrelationship will become more important as strategic nuclear arms are reduced, and that current strategic defensive arms do not undermine the viability and effectiveness of the strategic offensive arms of the Parties."

Aegis weapons on board the *Cook* in the northern sector of the Black Sea, Putin intends now to be understood, undermine the START agreement. If pressed by the US, they would amount to an "extraordinary event", as the treaty defines it in Article XIV. That provides each side's "right to withdraw from this Treaty if it decides that extraordinary events related to the subject matter of this Treaty have jeopardized its supreme interests."

If the Su-24 buzzing the *Cook* on April 12 had dropped leaflets with a reprint of Article XIV, the message could not have been clearer. It didn't, so Putin did: "Our American partners have turned down our proposal to sign even some trifling legal paper that would say that these systems are not directed against us. Surprising as it is, but this is a fact. Naturally, we are bound to ask: "And why do you refuse to sign anything if you believe this is not directed against us?"

"It would seem a trifle," Putin said in his television presentation, "a piece of paper that could be signed today and thrown away tomorrow – but they are reluctant to do even that. If they deploy these elements in Europe, we'll have to do something in response, as we've said so many times. But this means an escalation of the arms race! Why do this? It would be much better to look at this issue and determine if there are missile threats from some directions and decide how this system should be controlled or accessed. It would be sensible to do it together, but no, they don't

want that. Naturally, we'll continue these talks with patience and persistence, but in any event, we'll do everything to guarantee the security of the Russian people, and I'm sure we'll succeed."



The US destroyer survived the buzzing, and made port at Constanta on April 14 (image above). The welcoming ceremony [was led](#) by the Romanian President, Traian Basescu. In Basescu's statement, he said the *Cook* would be replaced by a US frigate "ensuring thus a continuous presence in the area and increase interoperability between the Romanian and the American fleet."

Constanta port sources say the warship left the port in the afternoon of April 17. They said they did not know what direction it was taking. Twenty-four hours later a US Navy source confirmed the vessel was under way in the Black Sea. Apparently, it did not head north to Odessa. Nor did it sail south to Bulgaria, or to the [Bosphorus](#). The US Navy does not disclose future ship portcalls.

As US Vice President Joe Biden is scheduled to land in Kiev on April 21, the *Cook* remains in the Black Sea, location undisclosed by the US Navy. For refueling it is obliged to make port again by Thursday, April 24.



Source: <http://gcaptain.com/> Distances in nautical miles (nm). The Cook can operate at speeds of more than 30 knots (30 nm per hour), with a maximum range before refueling of 4,400 nm at 20 k/h (9 days). Its range at 30 k/h is about 6 days.



The Alizé transits the Bosphorus on March 26, northbound

At the same time, Russian Navy and Defence Ministry reports appearing in the local press reveal the operation of a flotilla of French warships in the Black Sea. These include the *Dupuy de Lome*, a signals intelligence vessel; the *Alizé*, a tender for deep-sea rescue; and the anti-submarine frigate *Dupleix*.

The state Turkish news agency Anadolu has reported the first Russian Navy vessel in several weeks to move through the Turkish straits. On April 18 the Black Sea Fleet repair vessel *PM-56* was under way in the direction of the Black Sea, apparently returning to its Sevastopol base from the Syrian port of Tartous. The Turkish media have regularly reported the *PM-56*'s movements to and from Tartous, where it services units of the Russian fleet docking there.