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US-Russia tensions flare in Baltic Sea

By Jordan Shilton

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The Pentagon announced Saturday that it was filing a formal complaint with the Russian Defense Ministry and US Secretary of State John Kerry threatened retaliatory action after two incidents involving US and Russian forces in the Baltic Sea.

The Pentagon alleged that a Russian SU-27 fighter jet flew within 50 feet of a US reconnaissance plane in international airspace on April 14, and that a Russian jet and helicopter “buzzed” the Navy destroyer USS Donald Cook as it was conducting military exercises with Poland in the Baltic two days earlier.

The two incidents demonstrate once again that Washington’s aggressive military build-up throughout Eastern Europe, in close collaboration with its NATO allies, has brought the entire region to the brink of war between nuclear powers. The Obama administration seized on the Ukraine crisis provoked by a Western-sponsored coup in Kiev in 2014 to massively expand its military presence in Eastern Europe, so as to encircle and isolate Russia in a region stretching from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea.

While the intensification of US military operations on Russian borders represents an act of aggression, the latest incident also demonstrates the bankruptcy of Moscow’s response. The Kremlin oligarchy, which came to power by plundering state resources in the wake of the

dissolution of the Soviet Union, is resorting to a military build-up and the encouragement of reactionary Russian nationalism. Conditions are so tense that a miscalculation by either side or even an accident could serve as the trigger for a conflict that could quickly escalate to include the use of nuclear weapons.

Secretary of State Kerry admitted as much this past week, when he responded to the USS Donald Cook incident by bluntly declaring that the US would have been within its rights to shoot the Russian jet down. Washington's top diplomat labeled the alleged behavior of the jet as "reckless" and "provocative," while the Pentagon called Thursday's interception of the spy plane as an "erratic and aggressive" act.

Moscow denied the allegations, claiming in a statement that in the case of the spy plane, the Russian Air Force had "detected over the Baltic ocean an unidentified aerial target rapidly approaching the Russian border." Spokesman Igor Konashenkov stated that the actions of the Russian aircraft were "in accordance with international standards for the use of air space."

Confrontations between NATO and Russian aircraft over the Baltic are becoming routine. According to a January report from United Press International, NATO jets scrambled at least 160 times in 2015 to intercept Russian jets in the Baltic. This figure was a 14 percent rise from 2014.

The pace of such incidents is likely to rise dramatically in the immediate period ahead. The Obama administration has announced a quadrupling of defense spending for Europe for 2017 to \$3.4 billion. The increase will finance the sending of an additional three brigades. A further 16,500 soldiers will be in permanent rotation throughout Eastern Europe, from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—to whom Obama in September 2014 issued a guarantee of US support in the event of conflict with Russia—to Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the Black Sea states of Romania and Bulgaria.

In this, Washington is aligning itself with virulently right-wing, anti-Russian regimes whose reckless policies could provide the spark that ignites the ongoing standoff.

In comments to the Globsec security forum on the weekend, Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski proclaimed Russia to be a greater threat to world peace than the Islamic State. He urged NATO to permanently deploy troops to Poland to protect its eastern border, vowing that he would make an appeal to that end at the NATO summit scheduled to take place in Warsaw in July. "By all evidence, Russia's activity is a sort of existential threat because this activity can destroy countries," Waszczykowski asserted.

Romania, another NATO member, is pushing for the Warsaw summit to adopt a plan for a permanent NATO naval presence in the Black Sea. Romania's defense minister, Mihnea Motoc, said earlier this month on a visit to Georgia that he would be in favor of an enhanced partnership between NATO members Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey and would-be members Georgia and Ukraine to establish a Black Sea fleet. Motoc said in an interview that the proposed fleet would be open "to NATO members who don't border the Black Sea, yet are constantly present in Black Sea ports and take part in exercises—first of all, to the United States."

At the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014, the alliance committed to have all members spend 2 percent of gross domestic product on their militaries, and agreed the creation of a rapid response force for eastern Europe that has since been expanded to enable tens of thousands of troops to be deployed anywhere within the alliance's territory in a matter of days.

The lead article in Sunday's edition of the *New York Times* underscored the fact that potential conflicts for which such forces are being prepared would likely involve the deployment of nuclear weapons. In what it described as a revival of the Cold War, the *Times* described Washington, Russia and China as being engaged in an arms race to develop a new class of small-scale nuclear weapons with capabilities to bypass traditional missile defense shields.

There is an objective significance to the fact that the *Times*, America's "newspaper of record," has published a front-page article bringing to light a development that has long been the subject of in-depth analysis by US think tanks. A report by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments published earlier this year was entitled *Rethinking Armageddon: scenario planning in the second nuclear age*, reflecting the fact that policymaking circles are considering the practicalities of how to fight and win a military conflict with nuclear weapons.

Since President Obama's 2010 promise not to pursue new nuclear weapons programs, Washington has announced an additional \$1 trillion in funding for the modernization of the US nuclear arsenal. The *Times* article provides information on the types of weaponry being developed, including a new weapon called a hypersonic glide vehicle. Such weapons, which the US will begin flight-testing next year, could "render missile defenses all but useless," the *Times* noted.

At the conclusion of the biennial nuclear summit in Washington at the end of last month, to which Russia refused to send representatives, Obama expressed concern about "ramping up new and more deadly and more effective systems that end up leading to a whole new escalation of the arms race."

A second *Times* article published over the weekend on the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad makes all too clear that the plans for the deployment of nuclear weapons have moved well beyond the realm of speculation. The Russian territory, located on the southeast corner of the Baltic Sea between Lithuania and Poland, was described in testimony to Congress by NATO Commander Gen. Phillip Breedlove in February as a "very militarized piece of property" that was "capable of repelling attacks by air, land or sea."

The six years since Obama's empty pledge to reduce nuclear weapons have seen a vast intensification of US-led aggressive military operations aimed at consolidating American hegemony and weakening Russia and China in key geostrategic regions. As part of the ongoing bombardment of Iraq and Syria, carried out under the pretext of combating terrorism, Washington recently sent nuclear-capable B52 bombers to its Middle East bases, bringing them well within range of Iran and Russia itself.