

Pentagon Claims “Russian Aggression” Against NATO

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The Obama administration and the Pentagon are stoking up military tensions with Russia in the wake of the October 26 Ukrainian parliamentary elections, claiming that flights by small numbers of warplanes over international waters Wednesday constituted “political saber-rattling” and even “Russian aggression.”

The latter characterization was made by the top general in the US Army, Chief of Staff Raymond Odierno, in an interview Wednesday with CNN. Given that the flights never crossed the airspace of any country, Odierno’s claim is deliberately inflammatory. Under Article Five of the NATO charter, “Russian aggression” would provide a legal pretext for a US military strike against the nuclear-armed power.

According to a press release issued by NATO headquarters in Belgium, there were a total of four flights by Russian warplanes in European waters Tuesday and Wednesday. “These sizeable Russian flights represent an unusual level of air activity over European airspace,” the NATO statement said, although it acknowledged that the flights were over international waters and did not violate any country’s airspace.

On Tuesday, seven Russian planes left their base at Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave wedged between Poland and Lithuania (the former Königsberg, capital of German East Prussia until the end of World War II). They flew north along the coast of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia into the Gulf of Finland, landing at a base in Russia. German, Danish, Swedish and Finnish warplanes shadowed the Russian flight at various stages.

Finland and Sweden are not NATO members, but they have been working more closely with NATO since the US- and German-backed coup in Ukraine earlier this year. Last month Sweden claimed that two Russian warplanes had violated its airspace, and earlier this month the Swedish navy spent a week searching unsuccessfully for a suspected Russian submarine in the country’s territorial waters in the Baltic Sea.

On Wednesday, seven Russian planes, perhaps the same seven, left the base in north Russia and flew back along the Baltic coast to Kaliningrad. They were monitored by Portuguese NATO warplanes based in Estonia and Lithuania.

Also Wednesday, four Russian planes, two bombers and two fighters, flew from southern Russia into the Black Sea in the direction of Turkey, where they were monitored by Turkish fighters until they turned back.

Again on Wednesday, eight Russian planes, four bombers and four refueling planes, flew from northern Russia into the Norwegian Sea, passing along the coast of Norway into the

North Sea and then the Atlantic. Two of the bombers continued west and south, around the British Isles as far south as Portugal, before turning back and returning to Russia by the same route. NATO warplanes from Norway, Britain and Portugal monitored the Russian planes at various stages.

A further reported incident turned out to be a case of mistaken identification, as British Royal Air Force planes escorted a Russian-built plane into Stansted airport outside London on Wednesday. The plane was a civilian freighter from Latvia that had no connection to any Russian military maneuvers.

The *Wall Street Journal*, one of the leading spokesmen for American militarism, gave outsized coverage to the Russian actions, citing the comment of “a senior Obama administration official,” to the effect that, “There is a troubling trend of out-of-area events being increasingly used by Russia along its periphery for political saber-rattling, with probing incursions by air and sea by the Russian military becoming more commonplace and flagrant.”

The *Journal* also cited the remark of Odierno about “Russian aggression,” and carried an interview with the incoming NATO secretary-general, former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg, who beat the drums for the continued buildup of NATO military forces in eastern Europe, close to Russia’s borders.

Stoltenberg discussed the massive buildup of NATO, including the creation of the Spearhead Force, the provocatively named NATO unit set up in response to the eruption of tensions with Russia over the coup in Ukraine.

The NATO official said,

“The plan we agreed on is the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense since the end of the Cold War. We have more planes in the air—five times as many as we had a year ago. We have more ships in the Baltic and the Black Seas, and we have a substantial increase in boots on the ground, exercises, and troops on a rotational basis in our eastern allied countries.”

Stoltenberg explained that in addition to rapid-response troops, the Spearhead Force is

“partly about command-and-control elements which are going to be in our eastern allied countries: the Baltic countries, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria. Those command-and-control components are important because that will also increase our ability to reinforce. And in addition, prepositioning of equipment and supplies will even more increase the possibility to reinforce.”

While the Obama administration, NATO and the servile US media portray Russia as the aggressor, the military flights as described on Tuesday and Wednesday were neither provocative nor illegal under international law. There was no effort by the Russian warplanes to challenge NATO defenses or cause alarm.

This is in sharp contrast to the US practice throughout the Cold War, when the Pentagon regularly engaged in what were called DE SOTO operations, a codename applied to aerial probes against the borders of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact countries in eastern

Europe, China, North Vietnam and North Korea.

DE SOTO operations usually involved American bombers simulating an attack on one of the targeted countries, provoking a response from air defense forces, while electronic warfare planes monitored and charted the location of radar installations and other facilities for future targeting. The most notorious of these actions was the simulated attack on Soviet Far East defenses in September 1983, leading to the shooting down of KAL Flight 007 by a Soviet air defense fighter, which mistook the off-course passenger jet for a US warplane.

The claims of unusual Russian military flights were part of a week of increasing US pressure on Russia. On Monday, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel spoke by phone with the newly appointed defense minister of Ukraine, Gen. Col. Stepan Poltorak.

According to a Pentagon spokesman, “Secretary Hagel discussed with Minister Poltorak the types of security assistance that the United States is providing to address Ukrainian defense requirements.” A US-Ukraine Joint Commission recently held its first meeting in Kyiv, the official noted, building on present military-to-military contacts.

On Tuesday came reports in the American media that Russian-based hackers had breached some computer networks at the White House earlier this month, triggering an investigation by the FBI, the National Security Agency and the Secret Service. No Obama administration official went on record over the alleged incident, preferring to feed anonymous anti-Russian comments to the *Washington Post* and many other press outlets.

The *Post* noted that an earlier alleged Russian hacking incident in 2008 “helped galvanize the effort to create US Cyber Command, a military organization dedicated to defending the country’s critical computer systems,” adding that, “When directed by the president or defense secretary, Cyber Command can undertake offensive operations.”

On Wednesday, Hagel addressed the Washington Ideas Festival, sponsored by the *Atlantic* magazine, outlining a perspective that the magazine described as “Get used to endless war.”

Hagel told interviewer James Fallows, “I think we are living through one of these historic, defining time. We are seeing a new world order—post-World War II, post-Soviet Union implosion—being built.”

At one point Fallows asked Hagel, “When will the United States see some end to these wars, especially the now 13-year war in Iraq-Afghanistan?” Hagel’s response was, in effect, don’t hold your breath.

“What we’re seeing in the Middle East with ISIS-ISIL is going to require a steady, long-term effort,” he said. “Unfortunately, I see these things continuing to stay out there, Jim. I think we’re in for longer-term challenge here than maybe any of us would hope. But that’s the world that we live in, and we’ve got to be honest about that.”

He then went on to list “all the other dimensions—the rise of China, what Russia has been doing the last six months; pandemic disease, Ebola being an example,” as examples of issues that will require mobilization of the US military in some form.

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