

Preparations for War: NATO Intelligence Activity Around Russia's Borders

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[In addition to the militarization of Eastern Europe](#), NATO partakes in active intelligence operations – be it by land, sea and air.

There are numerous reports of various intelligence (spy) aircraft going and even entering Russian airspace, and the Russian Aerospace Forces intercepting them.

Officially, NATO has 14 Boeing E-3A Airborne Warning & Control System (AWACS) aircraft with their radar domes, stationed at NATO Air Base (NAB) Geilenkirchen, Germany.

The fleet is involved in the reassurance measures following the Russia-Ukraine crisis, and in the tailored assurance measures for Turkey against the background of the Syrian crisis.

Under normal circumstances, the aircraft operates for about eight hours, at 30,000 feet (9,150 meters) and covers a surveillance area of more than 120,000 square miles (310,798 square kilometers).

[As for February 11th, 2016](#), “the AWACS aircraft completed the 1,000th mission in support of NATO reassurance measures. These measures are a series of land, sea and air activities in, on and around the territory of NATO Allies in Central and Eastern Europe, designed to reassure their populations and deter potential aggression. They are taken in response to Russia’s aggressive actions to NATO’s east.”

NATO’s E-3 AWACS fleet is predicted to retire around 2035. At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, Allies declared that “by 2035, the Alliance needs to have a follow-on capability to the E-3 AWACS. Based on high level military requirements, we have decided to collectively start the process of defining options for future NATO surveillance and control capabilities.” This effort has since been carried forward as the Alliance Future Surveillance and Control (AFSC) initiative.

Most spy plane flights are by US aircraft, and not NATO one.

In 2018, the Russian army detected about 3,000 foreign aircraft, including a thousand aircraft and spy drone, near Russia’s maritime and land borders.

In addition, the US frequently attempts to enter Russian airspace with its spy planes. Following are some of the more recent examples:

- [On May 21st](#), a RQ-4B-40 Global Hawk took off from Sigonella, Italy, it flew over the separation line in the Donbass;
- [On May 20th](#), a US RC-135V conducted a reconnaissance mission along the Black Sea coast of Russia;
- [On May 16th](#), a RQ-4b-30 Global Hawk flew out from Sigonella and over the separation line in the Donbass;
- [On May 15th](#), a RQ-4B-40 Global Hawk flew out of Sigonella and along the Russian border of the Kaliningrad area, within Estonian airspace;
- [On May 3rd](#), the Russian aerial observation center reported the overflight by American spy planes of Russia's southern and western borders – a United States Air Force Boeing RC-135V (large spy plane, deployed at the US military base in the United Kingdom), was observed above the Baltic Sea, along Russia's border;
- On April 30th, a United States Air Force P-8A aircraft took off from the Sigonella base on Sicily Island in Italy before heading to the city of Novorossiysk. Following that, a reconnaissance aircraft flew for three hours over the southern borders of the Crimea;
- An American RQ-4B-40 UAV took off from the Sicilian base to fly over the Donbass region of Ukraine;
- On April 24th, a US Air Force Boeing RC-135V made its way into the Black Sea this morning, coasting along the Russian maritime border in the Krasnodar region before making its way around the Crimean Peninsula, [online aircraft monitoring resource PlaneRadar reported, citing the plane's transponder data](#);

Similar flights are a constant, most of them focused on the Donbass, the Baltics and the Black sea. That is no surprise, since the Baltics are a hotbed of NATO military build-up and so is the Kaliningrad area. The same goes for Crimea and the Donbass (with the Donbass not by Russian forces, while they're still blamed for it).

[On January 24th](#), even a NATO partner nation – Sweden – sent a spy plane, which was intercepted by a Russian Su-27 Flanker fighter jet.

[On March 7th](#), a Russian Su-27 Flanker fighter jet approached and shadowed a US RC-135 spy plane over the Baltic Sea.

“After the withdrawal of the foreign aircraft from the Russian state border, the Russian fighter safely returned to the airfield,” the Defense Ministry [wrote](#). Of course, Russia was condemned for its “aggressive” conduct.

Separately, [Poseidon P-8 anti-submarine aircraft](#), with intelligence capabilities frequently patrol the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, checking Russian submarine activity. It most recently happened on May 21st, it usually flies out of Sigonella, Italy every few days.

On average Russia spots upwards of 20 foreign spy planes along its airspace, while it intercepts only some of them.

In April 2018, US provided \$3 million in funding, Latvia would be provided with RQ-20A Puma UAVs from AeroVironment to help enhance their monitoring and reconnaissance capabilities.

US forces deployed in Lithuania would remain there, as per a report from [April 4th, 2019](#).

As part of the agreement, Lithuania's Defense Ministry will provide all necessary support for the deployment of U.S. forces.

"U.S. foreign military programs should complement Lithuanian national funds to build anti-tank, air defense and intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance capabilities," the Pentagon statement said. "The programs also will help Lithuania gain maritime domain awareness and look to replace Soviet/Russian-made equipment and platforms."

NATO maritime surveillance activity along the Russian border is also not falling far behind.

On April 30th, [the HMS Echo](#) surveillance ship arrived in Georgia for the 2nd time within 5 months.

Commanding Officer, Commander Matthew Warren, said he was looking forward to working with the Georgian Coastguard once more, towards their "common aim of peace and stability within the Black Sea."

[The previous time the HMS Echo](#) visited the Black Sea was in December 2018, to reinforce UK and NATO's support for Ukraine, which was suffering following the incident in which Ukrainian warships were seized by the Russian coastguard in November south of the Kerch Strait.

[On April 18th](#), Sweden – a NATO partner nation, infamous for its detection of "Russian submarines," launched a 74-metre-long, 14-metre-wide spy ship, officially named the HMS Artemis.

"The Swedish Armed Forces and the Navy, together with the National Defence Radio Establishment, will receive a qualified and modern signals intelligence vessel that will increase their capacities," Swedish Defence Materiel Administration (FMV) Director General Göran Mårtensson said.

"Compared with the HMS Orion, which was launched in 1984, its replacement has a great technical edge and also an improved working and living environment on board, increased operational reliability and improved electromagnetic compatibility properties, that is how the equipment in the vessel affects other surrounding electronic equipment and how sensitive the equipment is for external electronic interference", FMV's project manager Peter Andersson said.

Separately, NATO member countries attempt to use civilians for intelligence work. A Norwegian national – Frode Berg, 62, was arrested in 2017 by the Russian Security Service – the FSB.

He was accused of involvement in an elaborate spying operation, dating back to 2015, to obtain information about Russia's nuclear submarine fleet in the far north.

In spring 2018, Berg himself added a new layer of intrigue when he admitted, through his lawyer, that he had actually been working with Norwegian military intelligence. He was unaware of the scope and purpose of the operation, he was simply a courier.

According to scarce details, he was mailing envelopes with cash and spying instructions to a woman called Natalia in Moscow, in return for information about Russia's nuclear submarines in the Kola Peninsula.

Lt. Col. Tormod Heier, a former military intelligence officer, suggests that Berg's arrest is the result of sloppy tradecraft.

"Norway's intelligence service is a world leader when it comes to technical intelligence, but we are relatively inexperienced in human intelligence," Heier said. "[Berg's] case looks very amateurish to me. It looks like we were caught while trying something outside our core competence."

[Norway further hosts a US radar](#), located on the tiny Arctic island of Vardo. The shrinking island has one successful business – its electric company, which supplies a US Globus 3 radar overseeing the Kola Peninsula, a Russian territory filled with high-security naval bases and restricted military zones.

"This place is very, very important for America and for the Western world so that they can keep an eye on what the Russians are doing," said Lasse Haugom, a former mayor of Vardo and a veteran of Norway's military intelligence service.

"Russia wants to look into our secrets, and the United States and Norway want to look into their business," Mr. Haugom added. "That is the way the game is played."

The Russian ambassador in Oslo, Norway's capital, warned Norway that it should "not be naïve" about Russia's readiness to respond.

"Norway has to understand that after becoming an outpost of NATO, it will have to face head-on Russia and Russian military might," the ambassador, Teimuraz Ramishvili, told Norway's state broadcaster, NRK. "Therefore, there will be no peaceful Arctic anymore."

The US is actively partaking in combating alleged Russian interference by [advanced cyber reconnaissance](#).

Since, the US fears to become a victim to an attack similar to the 2007 one in Estonia, which was blamed on Russia.

[In September 2018](#), it was announced that the UK would invest £250m to establish a joint cyber task force between the Ministry of Defence and GCHQ.

Developing cyber security skills strategy should be the government's first priority, the committee said. "It is a pressing matter of national security that it does so," it added.

In July 2018, a government spokeswoman said: “We have a £1.9 billion National Cyber Security Strategy, opened the world-leading National Cyber Security Centre and continue to build on our cyber security knowledge, skills and capability.”

Despite those massive investments, accusations that [Russian hackers and security service personnel still allegedly continue to successfully carry out cyber-attacks is puzzling.](#)

The NATO Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD), in conjunction with the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service (DDIS) hosted the 20th annual NATO Warning Intelligence Working Group and Symposium, in Amsterdam between March 26 – 28th.

“In recent years, NATO has stepped up its efforts in Intelligence by creating an Assistant Secretary General position and a NATO Intelligence Division to better understand the security threats. NATO continues to optimise NATO intelligence to facilitate timely and relevant support to Allied decision-making and operations, including through improved warning and intelligence sharing, particularly on terrorism, hybrid, and cyber.”

The NATO Communications and Information Agency, which is responsible for the Joint Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (JISR), which is the synchronization and integration of Operations and Intelligence capabilities and activities, geared to providing timely information to support decisions in NATO member and partner states. It has two offices in Norway, one in Poland and none in the Baltic states.

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