



Close Encounters: Russian Military Intrusions into UK Air- and Sea Space Since 2005

Russia Studies Centre
Policy Paper No. 7 (2015)

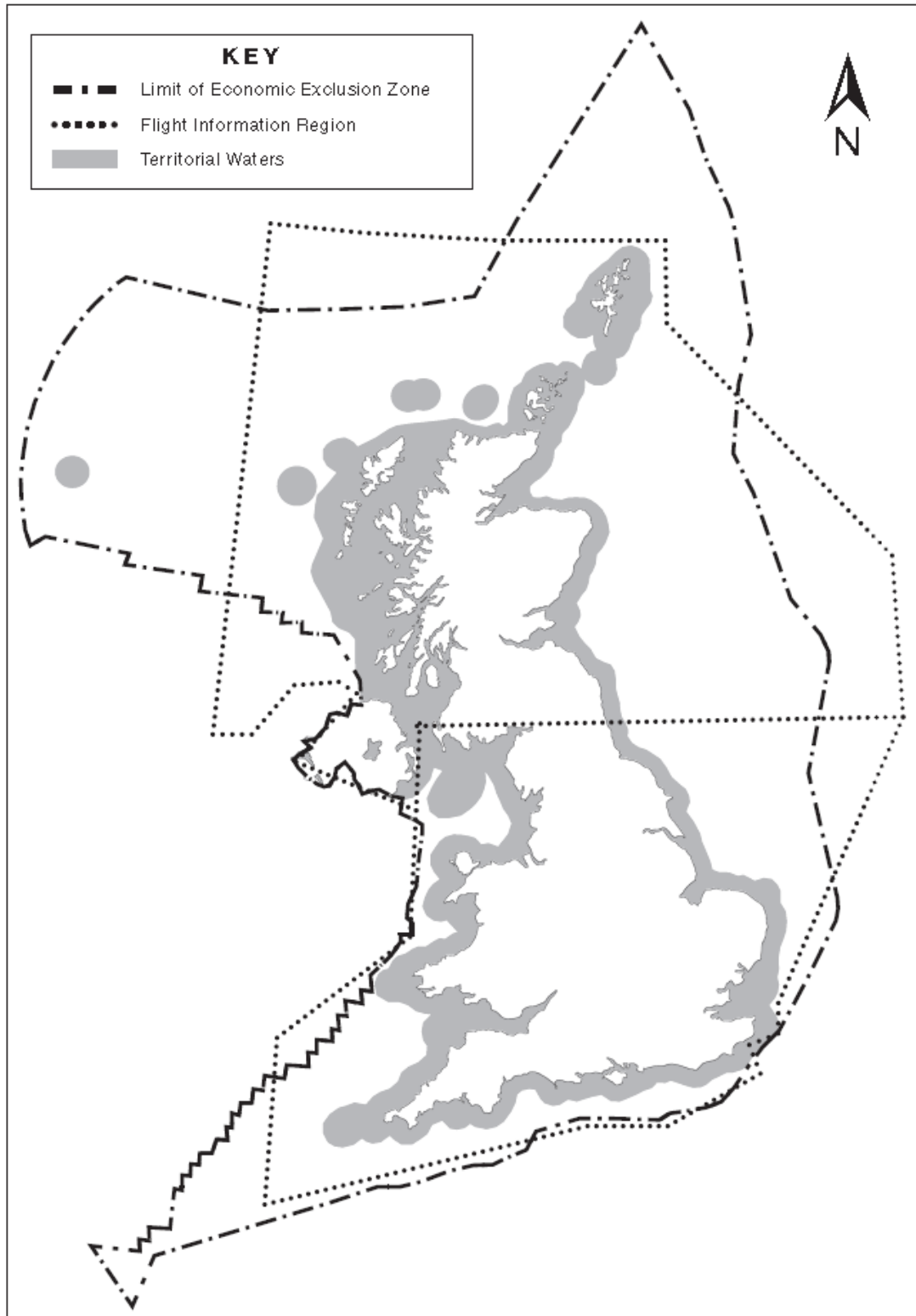
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The Henry Jackson Society
February 2015

Summary

- Since Russia's warmongering in Ukraine, beginning in early 2014, military tensions between the Kremlin and the West have increased. With regards the UK, Russia's military now routinely approach and intrude upon the UK's air- and sea space. According to official figures, from the Ministry of Defence, the Royal Air Force's Quick Reaction Alert was mobilised in response to Russian aircrafts on 8 days in 2014, and 6 days in 2015 (up to 31 July).
- This is nothing new. Between 2005 and 2015, according to the Ministry of Defence, there have been at least 94 airspace incidents overall. Of these, 23 were reported in the press. Taken together with reports of incidents at sea (of which there were 10 over the same decade, but for which the Ministry of Defence does not hold official figures), these media reports paint a disturbing picture of close encounters, emergency scrambles, and other dangerous actions that have taken place on an alarmingly regular basis.
- Analysis of the 33 media reports, in which Russia's military intruded upon the UK's air- or sea space, between 2005 and 2015, shows that: the majority of incidents involved air-, rather than sea, space forays; more than half of the incidents took place over the North Sea; the incidents are most common in October and January; and, most involved Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers.
- The UK Government takes the threat posed by Russia, and by the Kremlin's military activities in close proximity to UK air- and sea space, seriously. At the 2014 NATO Summit, the UK committed itself to being a Framework Nation for NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, and, in July 2015, to meeting NATO's defence-spending pledge of 2% of GDP.
- In the face of Russian aggression, and in order to safeguard Britain's security, the UK Government must: engage with its Russian counterparts, in the area of military-to-military communication; begin to collect figures on intrusions, by foreign vessels, into UK waters; and, commit, long-term, to spending 2% of GDP on defence - in line with its NATO obligation.

Figure 1: A Map Showing the UK's Territorial Waters, Flight Information Regions, and Economic Exclusion Zone.



Note: The UK's Economic Exclusion Zone and Territorial Waters are taken from: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/346014/UK_Exclusive_Economic_Zone.pdf and the Flight Information Regions are taken from: <http://www.flyingineurope.be/FIRs.pdf>

1. Introduction

Over the past year and a half, international attention has focused on the Kremlin's warmongering in Ukraine. In that same period, there has been a significant increase in military tensions between Russia and the West.¹ This is particularly the case for the UK.

Since the beginning of 2015, the Royal Air Force's (RAF) Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) has been mobilised on 6 days in response to Russian military aircrafts in the vicinity of UK airspace. So urgent is this issue that, in February, Prime Minister David Cameron felt that he had to reassure Britons about the threat of Russian attacks, after RAF planes were scrambled when two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers appeared off the coast of Cornwall. This, however, is nothing new. In fact, according to figures from the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Russia's military has approached UK air space on at least 94 occasions since 2005.

Over the same decade, Russia's navy has also intruded upon UK sea space. Unlike those in the air, however, official figures for incidents at sea are not held by the MoD. Nevertheless, the incidents do present a very real concern for UK security. In March 2015, Lord West of Spithead, who served as a First Sea Lord (2002-2006) and as Chairman of the National Security Forum (2007-2010), claimed that Russia had deployed spy ships, disguised as fishing trawlers, off the British coast, in order to gain intelligence on the UK's nuclear weapons and warships.²

The majority of these air- and sea space incidents took place within the two Flight Information Regions (FIRs) that cover the UK (the London FIR, which covers England and Wales, and the Scottish FIR, which covers Scotland and Northern Ireland) and within the UK's Exclusive Economic Zone,³ but none of them occurred within its territorial skies or waters.⁴ See Figure 1.

What is the nature of these Russian military forays? Where did they occur? And what happened? Specific details of individual airspace incidents are considered secret by the UK Government, and the Government does not even hold figures for sea-space incidents. Nevertheless, it has been possible to piece together information from media reports. Taken as a whole, they paint a disturbing picture of close encounters, emergency scrambles, and other dangerous actions that have taken place on an alarmingly regular basis.

This policy paper, which draws on official figures from the MoD, lists all occasions, between 1 January 2005 and 31 July 2015, on which Russia's military has approached or intruded upon UK air- and sea space.⁵ Based on open sources, it then documents and describes the individual incidents. The paper concludes with a series of policy recommendations for reducing the risk, to the UK, posed by Russia's military assertiveness.

¹ See: Frear, T., Kearns, I., and Łukasz Kulesa, 'Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014', European Leadership Network (November 2014), available at: <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2014/11/09/6375e3da/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf>.

² See: Brown, L. and David Williams, 'Putin has fleet of spy trawlers off British coast to intercept military communications, says former senior commander', *The Daily Mail*, 17 March 2015, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2999697/Putin-fleet-spy-trawlers-British-coast-intercept-military-communications-says-former-senior-commander.html#ixzz3mkOlljs4>

³ The UK's Exclusive Economic Zone is the expanse of water up to 200 nautical miles (230.2 miles) from its coast.

⁴ These are defined as any area within 12 nautical miles (13.8 miles) of the UK's shores.

⁵ Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, incidents prior to 1 January 2005 are not held by the Ministry of Defence.

2. Methodology

This paper records Russia's military approaches toward UK air- and sea space between 1 January 2005 and 31 July 2015. It is based on two sources of information: official figures from the MoD, and open-source materials.

The official figures outline the number of such airspace incidents each year, but specifics are considered secret by the UK Government. To overcome this, as well as to log figures for sea-space incidents, open-source materials – specifically, media reports – describing individual events were compiled, using the *LexisNexis* database.

Given the nature of news media, not all of the Kremlin's military incursions will have been reported. This is especially the case in 2005 and 2006, when relations between the UK and Russia were relatively productive and such military incidents may not have been considered 'newsworthy'. So too is it the case that certain incidents throughout the 2005 to 2015 period may not have been reported for reasons of national security.

A number of episodes, however, were consciously excluded from this paper. These include ones that either were not confirmed by the MoD, or were instances of military co-operation between the UK and Russia. Examples include:

- On 28 October 2013, Royal Navy frigate HMS Northumberland and Russian battlecruiser Pyotr Velikiy, a Kirov-class ship, holding co-ordinated flying exercises in the Atlantic Ocean, between the Shetland and Faroe Islands;⁶
- In December 2014, the MoD seeking assistance from Canada, France and the U.S. in locating a suspected Russian submarine which may have been tracking one of Britain's Vanguard-class boats, off the Scottish coast;⁷ and
- In January 2015, the MoD seeking US military assistance in tracking a suspected Russian submarine which had been spotted off the Scottish coast, near Faslane. The identity of the suspected submarine was never confirmed.⁸

Despite these methodological shortcomings and empirical exclusions, it has been possible to build a detailed picture of the locations and nature of Russia's military aggressions towards the UK.

⁶ 'Royal and Russian Navy exchange call signs on high seas', *Royal Navy*, 31 October 2013, available at: <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2013/october/31/131031-royal-and-russian-navy>.

⁷ 'MoD asks for American help in searching for Russian submarine near Scotland', *The Independent*, 8 January 2015, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/mod-asks-for-american-help-in-searching-for-russian-submarine-near-scotland-9966080.html>

⁸ 'MoD forced to ask US for help in tracking "Russian submarine"', *The Telegraph*, 9 January 2015, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11334836/MoD-forced-to-ask-US-for-help-in-tracking-Russian-submarine.html>.

3. An Analysis of Russian Military Forays into UK Air- and Sea Space since 2005

Official figures obtained from the MoD show that the RAF's QRA was launched on 94 days in response to Russian military aircrafts between 1 January 2005 and 31 July 2015. Table 1 shows how these incidents are broken down by year.

After only a handful of incidents in 2005 and 2006, there was a marked increase, in instances of Russia undertaking such actions in or around UK airspace, in 2007, with 19 instances. In the period 2008-2011, there were between 7 and 11 incidents per year. Beginning in 2012, however, the number began to stabilise, so that, in 2013 and 2014, there were 8 incidents, and, up to 31 July 2015, 6 incidents.

Table 1: Number of Days RAF's QRA Launched in Response to Russian Military Aircraft between 2005 and 2015, By Year

Year	Number of Days
2005	4
2006	1
2007	19
2008	11
2009	11
2010	7
2011	10
2012	9
2013	8
2014	8
2015	6
TOTAL	94

As noted previously, the UK Government does not hold figures for sea-space incidents, and considers precise details of individual airspace events to be secret. Thus, in an attempt to explore the nature of Russia's military intrusions upon the UK, relevant media reports were referred to. The analysis that follows is based on those media reports.

3.1 Year of Incidents

Of the 94 official airspace incidents, only 23 were reported in the press. In addition, 10 sea-space incidents were reported. Table 2 shows how they are broken down by year.

The frequency of these reports of airspace incidents overlaps with the frequency of official incidents: the highest number came in 2007 (six), followed by 2011 and 2015 (both with four), and 2008, 2010 and 2014 (all with three). There were no reported incidents in 2005 and 2006, in 2009, and in 2012.

When sea-space incidents are included, however, the picture is rather different: the highest of reported incidents came in 2014 (eight), followed by 2007 and 2015 (six). In 2009 and 2012, no incidents were reported.

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Table 2: Media Reports on Russia's Military Approaches or Encroachments on UK Air- and Sea Space between 2000 and 2015, By Year

Year	Air	Sea	Total
2005	0	0	0
2006	0	0	0
2007	6	0	6
2008	3	0	3
2009	0	0	0
2010	3	1	4
2011	4	1	5
2012	0	0	0
2013	0	1	1
2014	3	5	8
2015	4	2	6
TOTAL	23	10	33

3.2 Month of Incidents

As shown in Table 3, when broken down by month, the data suggests that Russia's military aggressions are relatively evenly spread throughout the year. The most number of incidents occurred in January and October (both, four), while the fewest took place in November (one). Six months each saw three incidents, and three months each experienced two incidents.

With regard airspace incidents, the highest number happened in October (four), while none occurred in November. As for incidents at sea, the most incidents occurred in April and December (both, two), and none took place in four months (March, July, September, and October).

Table 3: Russia's Military Approaches or Encroachments on UK Air- and Sea Space between 2005 and 2015, By Month

Month	Air	Sea	Total
January	3	1	4
February	2	1	3
March	2	0	2
April	1	2	3
May	2	1	3
June	1	1	2
July	3	0	3
August	1	1	2
September	3	0	3
October	4	0	4
November	0	1	1
December	1	2	3
TOTAL	23	10	33

In terms of seasons, the most incidents took place in winter (10), while the fewest occurred in summer (seven). Spring and autumn have both seen 8 incidents, each.

3.3 Location of Incidents

In order to explore the geographic distribution of the incursions, Table 4 shows, approximately, where they occurred. Unfortunately, the data available does not reflect their precise locations, only the broad area where the incident was reported to have happened. In other words, a Russian aircraft violating UK airspace near Suffolk would likely be classified as being over the ‘North Sea’. In addition, the data only gives the region where the approach or intrusion was first reported, rather than the geographic areas through which the military vehicle(s) passed. For example, if a Russian warship entered UK sea space from the Atlantic, and then passed through the English Channel and North Sea, the incident would likely be categorised as having taken place in the Atlantic Ocean.

According to this information, the North Sea was the location of over half of all the incidents (17 of 33), followed by the Atlantic Ocean (seven) and the English Channel (five).

Table 4: Russia’s Military Approaches or Encroachments on UK Air- and Sea Space between 2005 and 2015, By Location

Location	Air	Sea	Total
North Sea	13	4	17
Atlantic Ocean	6	1	7
English Channel	0	5	5
Unknown	4	0	4
TOTAL	23	10	33

3.4 Aircrafts and Vessels Involved in Incidents

Table 5, below, shows the aircrafts used by Russia in its aggressions toward the UK. The overwhelming majority are carried out by Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers (16 of 23), followed by Tupolev-160 Blackjack bombers (five) and Tupolev Tu-142 Bear F/J bombers (one).

Table 5: Russia’s Aircraft Involved in Approaches toward or Encroachments on UK Airspace between 2005 and 2015, by Number of Incidents

Aircraft	Number of Incidents
Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bomber	16
Tupolev-160 Blackjack bomber	5
Tupolev Tu-142 Bear F/J bomber	1
Unknown	1
TOTAL	23

As shown in Table 6, below, aircraft carriers (four of 10) are the most common naval vessel involved in Russia’s sea-based aggressions toward the UK. They are followed by destroyers (two), and a frigate and submarine (one, both).

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Table 6: Russia's Naval Vessels Involved in Approaches toward or Encroachments on UK Sea-Space between 2005 and 2015, by Number of Incidents

Aircraft	Number of Incidents
Admiral Kuznetsov (aircraft carrier)	4
Vice-Admiral Kulakov (Udaloy-class destroyer)	1
Severomorsk (Udaloy-class destroyer)	1
Yaroslav Mudry (Neustrashimy-class frigate)	1
Akula-class submarine	1
Unknown	2
TOTAL	10

3.5 Breakdown of Incidents

What follows is a breakdown of all specific incidents reported in the press, between 2005 and 2015.

- 1. Date:** 1 May 2007 – 3 May 2007
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Unknown
Details: Two Tupolev Tu-142 Bear F/J bombers flew towards British airspace, to spy on Royal Navy warships involved in the 'Neptune Warrior' training exercise. Two Tornado F3 defence aircraft were scrambled, to see the bombers off.⁹
- 2. Date:** 17 July 2007
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: Tornado fighters were deployed to meet two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers approaching Britain.¹⁰
- 3. Date:** 19 July 2007
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Unknown
Details: Two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers were intercepted in the Scottish FIR, by two RAF Tornados.¹¹
- 4. Date:** 19 July 2007
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean
Details: Two RAF Tornados were scrambled, after one Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack bomber flew on the fringes of UK airspace.¹²

⁹ 'Cold War reheated - RAF Tornados foil Russian spy in sky', *Evening Standard*, 9 May 2007, available at: <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/cold-war-reheated-raf-tornados-foil-russian-spy-in-sky-6381168.html>.

¹⁰ 'Buzzed by the bear - RAF tornados scramble to meet Russian intruders', *Daily Mail*, 20 July 2007, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-469893/Buzzed-bear-RAF-tornados-scramble-meet-Russian-intruders.html>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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- 5. Date:** 17 August 2007
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean
Details: Two RAF jets intercepted a Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bomber over the north Atlantic, approaching British airspace.¹³
- 6. Date:** 6 September 2007
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Unknown
Details: Four Tornado F3 defence aircraft intercepted eight Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers as they approached British airspace.¹⁴
- 7. Date:** 22 January 2008
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Unknown
Details: Two Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack bombers approached British airspace, en route to Russian military exercises in the Bay of Biscay. RAF fighters headed them off.¹⁵
- 8. Date:** 22 September 2008
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: One Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack bomber flew on the fringes of UK airspace, within 20 miles of Hull. The Blackjack was picked up on RAF radar, but the only two pairs of fighter jets used for air alerts were on other duties.¹⁶
- 9. Date:** 11 December 2008
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: RAF radar detected two Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack bombers threatening to enter UK airspace over the North East coast. RAF Tornados headed them off.¹⁷
- 10. Date:** 10 March 2010
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean

¹³ 'RAF Typhoons shadowed Russian bomber', *Associate Press*, 21 August 2007, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/aug/21/russia.military>.

¹⁴ 'UK jets scrambled to intercept Russian aircraft', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2007, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/sep/06/russia.military>.

¹⁵ 'RAF jets scrambled as Russian bombers join war manoeuvres off Atlantic coast', *Daily Mail*, 22 January 2008, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-509709/RAF-jets-scrambled-Russian-bombers-join-war-manoevres-Atlantic-coast.html>.

¹⁶ 'Russian nuclear bomber flies undetected to within 20 miles of Hull', *Daily Mail*, 30 September 2008, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1064713/Russian-nuclear-bomber-flies-undetected-20-miles-Hull.html>.

¹⁷ 'RAF Jets See Off Russian Bombers', *Sky News*, 13 December 2008, available at: <http://news.sky.com/story/655898/raf-jets-see-off-russian-bombers>.

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Details: Two Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack bombers were intercepted in the Scottish FIR, near Scotland, by two Tornado F3 fighters.¹⁸

11. Date: 27 August 2010

Type of Incident: Sea

Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean

Details: A Russian Akula-class Typhoon submarine stood off Faslane, trying to record the acoustic signature made by the Trident-carrying Vanguard-class submarines.¹⁹

12. Date: 18 October 2010

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: An unknown number of Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers were intercepted near British airspace, by an unknown number of RAF Tornados, and escorted back to international airspace.²⁰

13. Date: 19 October 2010

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: An unknown number of Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers were intercepted in British airspace, by an unknown number of RAF Tornados, and escorted back to international airspace.²¹

14. Date: Late January 2011

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: An unknown number of RAF aircraft intercepted two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers in British airspace, near Newcastle.²²

15. Date: 8 February 2011

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: Two Russian military aircraft were intercepted near British airspace, by an unknown number of RAF Tornados, and escorted back to international airspace.²³

16. Date: 8 March 2011

¹⁸ 'RAF jets scrambled 20 times in 12 months to intercept Russian aircraft', *The Guardian*, 24 March 2010, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/mar/24/raf-tornados-intercept-russian-aircraft>.

¹⁹ 'Russian subs stalk Trident in echo of Cold War', *The Telegraph*, 27 August 2010, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/7969017/Russian-subs-stalk-Trident-in-echo-of-Cold-War.html>.

²⁰ 'RAF jets scrambled twice in one week to intercept Russian nuclear bombers', *Daily Mail*, 27 October 2010, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1324147/RAF-jets-scrambled-twice-week-intercept-Russian-nuclear-bombers.html#ixzz3iP7d6Jda>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² 'RAF Leuchars Tornados scrambled to "repel" Russian aircraft', *The Courier*, 26 November 2012, available at: <http://www.thecourier.co.uk/news/local/file/raf-leuchars-tornados-scrambled-to-repel-russian-aircraft-1.38806>.

²³ *Ibid.*

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- Type of Incident:** Air
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: Two Tornado F3 fighter jets were scrambled, after one Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bomber came within seconds of entering British airspace, near St Andrews.²⁴
- 17. Date:** 7 June 2011
Type of Incident: Air
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: An unknown number of RAF Tornados intercepted two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers as they encroached on UK airspace.²⁵
- 18. Date:** 12 December 2011
Type of Incident: Sea
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: HMS York was sent to Scotland, from the English Channel (Portsmouth), after the aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov and other Russian warships and military vessels came within 30 miles of British shores.²⁶
- 19. Date:** 19 December 2013
Type of Incident: Sea
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: HMS Defender, deployed from the English Channel (Portsmouth), shadowed at least one Russian naval vessel, believed to have been a warship, off the coast of Scotland.²⁷
- 20. Date:** 7 January 2014
Type of Incident: Sea
Geographical Region: North Sea
Details: A Royal Navy vessel was deployed from the English Channel (Portsmouth), after ships - including the Admiral Kuznetsov - belonging to Russia's Northern Fleet anchored eight miles from Scotland's coast, in the Moray Firth.²⁸
- 21. Date:** 14 April 2014 - 18 April 2014
Type of Incident: Sea
Geographical Region: North Sea
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²⁴ 'Russians fly bomber within 12 miles of UK', *The Sunday Times*, 13 March 2011, available at:

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/uk_news/Defence/article577136.ecc.

²⁵ 'Dutch jets intercept Russian planes', *Dutchnews.nl*, 7 June 2011, available at:

http://www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2011/06/dutch_jets_intercept_russian_p/.

²⁶ 'HMS York scrambled to Scotland in security scare as Russian fleet comes within 30 miles of Britain for the first time in 20 years', *Daily Mail*, 14 December 2011, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2073901/HMS-York-scrambled-Scotland-Russian-fleet-security-scare.html>.

²⁷ 'HMS Defender's mission revealed as ship returns to Portsmouth after tracking Russian vessels', *The News*, 9 January 2014, available at:

<http://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/defence/hms-defender-s-mission-revealed-as-ship-returns-to-portsmouth-after-tracking-russian-vessels-1-5798005>.

²⁸ 'Russia's largest warship makes pit stop off Scotland', *The Press and Journal*, 8 January 2014, available at:

<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/uncategorized/42168/russias-largest-warship-makes-pit-stop-off-scotland/>.

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Details: HMS Dragon was deployed from the English Channel (Portsmouth), to track Vice Admiral Kulakov, a Russian Udaloy-class destroyer, as it approached British waters.²⁹

22. Date: May 2014

Type of Incident: Sea

Geographical Region: English Channel

Details: HMS Dragon escorted the Admiral Kuznetsov through the English Channel.³⁰

23. Date: 25 June 2014

Type of Incident: Sea

Geographical Region: English Channel

Details: HMS Severn tracked two Russian naval vessels through the English Channel.³¹

24. Date: 19 September 2014

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean

Details: RAF Typhoon jets were scrambled, after one Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bomber approached UK airspace.³²

25. Date: 29 October 2014

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: Two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers engaging in Russian military manoeuvres were tracked by RAF aircraft, over the North Sea.³³

26. Date: 31 October 2014

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: One Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bomber was intercepted, by RAF Typhoon fighters, as it approached UK airspace.³⁴

27. Date: 28 November 2014

Type of Incident: Sea

Geographical Region: English Channel

²⁹ 'Portsmouth warship sent to shadow Russian Navy destroyer near British waters', *The News*, 23 April 2014, available at:

<http://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/defence/portsmouth-warship-sent-to-shadow-russian-navy-destroyer-near-british-waters-1-6017646>.

³⁰ 'Royal Navy frigate forced to intercept two Russian military landing craft as they steamed up English Channel', *Daily Mail*, 26 June 2014, available at:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2670417/Royal-Navy-patrol-ship-forced-intercept-two-Russian-military-landing-craft-steamed-English-Channel.html>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² 'RAF Typhoons scramble to long-range Russian bombers', *The Telegraph*, 19 September 2014, available at:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11108857/RAF-Typhoons-scramble-to-long-range-Russian-bombers.html>.

³³ 'RAF intercepts Russian bomber approaching UK airspace', *The Guardian*, 1 November 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/nov/01/raf-russian-bomber-uk-airspace>.

³⁴ Ibid.

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Details: HMS Tyne escorted a squadron of Russian warships, led by the Admiral Kuznetsov, through the English Channel.³⁵

28. Date: 28 January 2015

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean

Details: RAF Typhoon jets were scrambled, after two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers encroached on UK airspace – coming within 25 miles of the shore. There is a suggestion that the Bears were flying without their transponders turned on, making them invisible to civilian aircraft.³⁶

29. Date: 17 February 2015

Type of Incident: Sea

Geographical Region: English Channel

Details: HMS Argyll shadowed the Yaroslav Mudryy, a frigate, in the English Channel.³⁷

30. Date: 18 February 2015

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: Atlantic Ocean

Details: RAF Typhoon fighters were scrambled, after two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers flew close to UK airspace, off the coast of Cornwall.³⁸

31. Date: 14 April 2015

Type of Incident: Air

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: RAF Typhoon fighters were scrambled, after Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers flew close to UK airspace, towards north-east Scotland.³⁹

32. Date: 14 April 2015

Type of Incident: Sea

Geographical Region: English Channel

Details: HMS Argyll escorted the Severomorsk, an Udaloy-class destroyer, and two support ships through the English Channel and onwards to the Atlantic, where they were to take part in Russian military exercises.⁴⁰

33. Date: 14 May 2015

Type of Incident: Air

³⁵ 'Royal Navy catches up with Russian warships to "keep an eye" on Putin's fleet sailing along the Channel', *Daily Mail*, 28 November 2014, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2853128/Navy-shadows-Russia-Channel-ships.html#ixzz3iQMGN5FE>.

³⁶ 'Russian military planes "disrupted UK aviation"', *BBC News*, 30 January 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31049952>.

³⁷ 'British warship monitors Russian naval vessel through Channel', *Reuters*, 17 February 2015, available at:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/17/britain-defence-russia-idUSL5N0VR2S320150217>.

³⁸ 'Cornwall: Live updates after RAF jets warn away 2 Russian bombers off Cornish coast', *The Mirror*, 19 February 2015, available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/cornwall-live-updates-after-raf-5188844>.

³⁹ 'RAF Typhoon jets and Navy escort Russian military visitors around Britain', *The Telegraph*, 14 April 2015, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11535751/RAF-Typhoon-jets-launched-to-intercept-Russian-military-planes.html>.

⁴⁰ 'Three Russian ships monitored in English Channel', *The Telegraph*, 14 April 2015, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11534832/Three-Russian-ships-monitored-in-English-Channel.html>.

Geographical Region: North Sea

Details: Two RAF Typhoon fighter jets were scrambled, to intercept two Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers approaching UK airspace.⁴¹

4. What Does This Tell Us?

Although the number of reported incidents analysed in this paper is small, it is nevertheless possible to make a series of observations about the nature of Russia's military intrusions upon UK air- and sea space.

- The majority of incidents involve airplanes (23 of 33) rather than naval vessels (10).
- More than half of the incidents took place over the North Sea (17 of 33), followed by the Atlantic Ocean (7) and the English Channel (5).
- Incidents are most common in October and January (both 4 of 33), followed by February, April, May, July, September and December (all 3).
- Most of the airspace incidents involved Tupolev Tu-95 Bear bombers (16 of 23 incidents), which are long-range strategic bombers.
- Almost half of the sea-space incidents involved the Admiral Kuznetsov (4 of 10), Russia's largest warship.
- On at least three occasions (once in 2008, and twice in 2015), the UK was unable to deal with the threat posed by Russia's military, and twice had to seek assistance from its transatlantic allies.

For nearly 15 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's strategic bombers were essentially grounded and its naval patrols were on hold. Only in 2007, when Russia was flush with oil wealth, did President Vladimir Putin order the Air Force and Navy to resume regular long-range combat patrols.

The routes flown by Russia's bombers, according to Moscow Defense Brief, an industry publication produced by the Moscow-based Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies think tank, are the same ones flown by the Soviet Air Force's long-range bombers before 1992. The routes westward, toward the UK, are typically flown out of the Engels Air Force Base, which is one of Russia's main bomber bases and is located in the Volga basin. Engels houses regiments of Tu-95 Bear bombers and Tu-160 Blackjack bombers.

With minor deviations, the standard flight paths take Russia's bombers out of Engels over Scandinavia, toward the UK, and then into the North Atlantic.⁴² It is little surprise, therefore, that

⁴¹ 'Typhoons scrambled from RAF Lossiemouth to intercept Russian Bear jets heading for UK airspace', *Daily Mail*, 14 May 2015, available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3081829/RAF-scrambles-jets-two-Russian-military-aircraft-seen-flying-British-airspace.html#ixzz3iQICazCL>.

⁴² 'Bears and Blackjacks Are Back. What Next?', *Moscow Defense Brief*, 3(47) 2015, available at: <http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/4-2010/item4/article1/>

most of Russia's intrusions upon UK airspace took place over the North Sea, followed by the Atlantic Ocean.

Russia has conducted a series of major maritime military exercises over recent years, involving its Baltic and Northern Fleets. The geographical extent of these exercises ranges from the Arctic and Baltic Sea through to the Atlantic. So too has Russia's navy been active in the Mediterranean, largely linked to its support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.

Units from the Baltic Fleet, which is headquartered in Kaliningrad, Russia's exclave on the Baltic Sea, necessarily pass through the North Sea en route to the open ocean. Units from the Northern Fleet, which is headquartered at Severomorsk, a town near Murmansk in the Russian Arctic, meanwhile, have traditionally followed a route from the Barents Sea, through the Norwegian Sea, North Sea, English Channel, and on to the Atlantic Ocean. It is, therefore, perhaps to be expected that most of Russia's military activities in UK sea space occurred in the English Channel and North Sea.

Not all of Russia's intrusions are due to reasons of geography, however. Rather, some can be synchronised with major events in its relations with the UK. For instance: the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, in November 2006, was followed by a dramatic increase in airspace incidents, from 4 in 2005 to 19 in 2007; an airspace incident in January 2008 took place at the same time as heightened tensions between Russia and the UK, over the fate of the British Council's operations in Russia (the Council was subsequently forced to close two of its three offices); and, two Tu-95 Bears buzzed the Cornish coast the day after Ben Emmerson QC, speaking at the Litvinenko enquiry in early 2015, characterised Russia as a "mafia state".⁴³

In this sense, the incursions serve as a typical sabre-rattling sign of Kremlin displeasure.

More broadly, the timing of some of Russia's forays can be tied to its military calendar. According to the military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer, a key date for Russia, which maintains a conscription army, is 1 April.⁴⁴ This is the date that marks the start of Russia's spring conscript call-up; it is the date when new conscripts arrive and the previous year's conscripts leave. The new troops take at least six months to become "battle ready", and it is from September onwards that Russia's conventional military is at its operational peak, for a period around six months. It is in this six-month window that Russia's biggest and most important military exercises take place, particularly in the autumn months. By contrast, late spring through summer is the time to plan and prepare.

The upsurge in Russia's military activity from autumn through to spring clearly overlaps with its forays into UK air- and sea space. The highest number of incidents occurred in winter, followed by spring and autumn.

An additional reason why fewer incidents occurred in summer relates to wind patterns. For much of the year, the prevailing wind direction in the UK is south-westerly. From late spring through

⁴³ 'Litvinenko "poisoned by Russian mafia state," family's lawyer claims', *BBC News*, 27 January 2015, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31008694>.

⁴⁴ 'Russia's Window of Opportunity in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 25 March 2014, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/25/russias-window-of-opportunity-in-ukraine/>

summer, however, this changes to north-easterly. This means that it is much harder work for Russia's bombers to reach UK airspace in summer, requiring more fuel which, in turn, means the flights are more expensive.

5. What Does This Mean?

Russia's military aggressions towards the UK are alarming, but they should not be seen in isolation. Rather, they are part of a wider, recent pattern of military assertiveness by the Kremlin – this is visible in Russia's military intervention in Syria (beginning in September 2015); its wars in Ukraine (since 2014) and Georgia (in 2008); its resumption of the Cold War-era practice of long-range air and navy patrols (in 2007); the upgrading of its armed forces (since 2008); and, its conducting of military operations against the West, including NATO members.

Are Russia's incursions into UK air- and sea space mere propaganda shadow play, or is there something more sinister afoot? Certainly, these aggressions do serve a propaganda purpose. By demonstrating that its military can come so close to UK shores, with little (if any) consequence, Russia is able to showcase its apparent strength and Britain's relative weakness. As ex-Army chiefs have observed, certain decisions made by the UK Government – in particular, the one to axe the Nimrod maritime patrol surveillance fleet, as part of the 2010 Security and Defence Spending Review – have left the country vulnerable to Russia's intelligence-gathering exercises and have reduced its ability to defend itself.⁴⁵ Alarmingly, twice in the last 12 months, the UK was unable to deal with the threat posed by Russian submarines positioned off the Scottish coast and had to seek assistance from Canada, France and the United States.

Yet, the Kremlin's actions also serve a military purpose. Through its intrusions, Russia has been able to gain valuable information about the chain of command, and preparedness of elements, within the UK defence system; the RAF's and Royal Navy's reactions times; the capabilities of the Air Force pilots and Royal Navy captains; and the levels of co-operation between NATO members. Russia's submarines, which lurk off naval bases in Scotland, seek even more sensitive information – the 'acoustic signature' made by the Vanguard submarines that carry Trident nuclear missiles. If Russia were able to obtain a recording of the 'signature', it would have serious implications for the UK's nuclear deterrent – Russia would be able to track Vanguards and potentially sink them before they could launch their missiles. Such intelligence-gathering is supplemented by the work of Russia's human intelligence agents – or, spies.

Russia's manoeuvres, which were commonplace during the Cold War, also serve to distract and dismay. It is difficult to believe that the Kremlin intends to attack a NATO member, so why rehearse such a scenario? As with other aspects of its behaviour, the signals from Moscow are confusing – intentionally so.

Such actions, and the threat that they represent, are now, quite openly, taken seriously by the UK Government. Between 2000 and 2013, though, Britain tolerated this type of behaviour, preferring

⁴⁵ Wall, P., 'Don't play politics with defence', *The Telegraph*, 10 March 2015, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/11460005/Dont-play-politics-with-defence.html>.

to prioritise the economic side of its relations with Russia (even as the political aspects soured, particularly from 2007 onwards). This changed in 2014. As a result, when two Russian aircraft approached UK airspace in January 2015 – reportedly without their transponders turned on, causing a number of civilian flights arriving in Britain to be diverted – Alexander Yakovenko, Russia’s Ambassador to the UK, was summoned to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to account for his country’s actions.

Beyond this diplomatic dressing-down, it is evident that the UK no longer sees Russia as a strategic partner, but rather as a competitor. In February 2015, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon described the country as posing a “real and present danger” to European security,⁴⁶ and, the following month, Philip Hammond, the Foreign Secretary, warned that Russia’s “increasingly aggressive stance” was a “significant” concern for the UK.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the UK has been key to maintaining unity across the Western alliance. In line with the agreements that it made at the 2014 NATO Summit, the UK is now a Framework Nation for NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). Meanwhile, in July 2015, Chancellor George Osborne committed the UK to a defence-spending pledge of 2% of GDP until 2020 – in stark contrast to the defence cuts that had characterised the previous five years.

6. Policy Recommendations

For the UK, Russia is fast becoming a problem second only to that of terrorism from Islamic State. Like Islamic State, it is one that the UK cannot deal with on its own.

The new Strategic Defence and Security Review, which will dictate the armed forces’ capabilities and posture for the next five years, is due to take place in November 2015 and must surely recognise two things: first, the threat posed by Russian military intrusions upon UK air- and sea space; and second, that, on at least two occasions, the UK had to ask allies for help as it was unable to cope with the Russian threat.

Therefore, there are a number of specific policy recommendations that arise from this paper:

- **The UK must commit, long-term, to spending 2% of its GDP on defence.** Between 2010 and mid-2015, the UK reduced its defence spending by around 8% in real terms, as part of an effort to cut the budget deficit. Given the threats facing the country, Chancellor George Osborne announced, in July 2015, that he would commit to NATO’s defence-spending recommendation of 2% of GDP until 2020. While welcome, the Chancellor’s pledge must be extended into the long-term.

⁴⁶ ‘Putin a threat to Baltic states, Western officials say’, *Reuters*, 19 February 2015, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/02/19/uk-britain-russia-baltics-idUKKBN0LN0FT20150219>.

⁴⁷ ‘Russia is “single greatest threat to the UK” but Britain UNABLE to deal with the danger’, *The Express*, 22 April 2015, available at: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/563011/Vladimir-Putin-British-threat-bear-bombers-UK-airspace-Cold-War-Philip-Hammond>.

- **The UK must make all reasonable efforts to engage with Russia, in the area of military-to-military communication.** In January 2015, two Tu-95 Bear bombers approached UK airspace, reportedly without their transponders turned on, and a number of civilian flights arriving in Britain had to be diverted. Should this happen again, there is no guarantee that there would be the same, non-fatal, outcome. In order to safeguard civilian air passengers, the UK should make sure that all reliable channels for military-to-military communication with Russia are open.
- **The MoD must begin to collect figures on intrusions, by foreign vessels, into UK waters.** The Strategic Defence and Security Review, due in November, will assess the UK defence posture. In order to effectively do this, it is necessary to know - as far as possible - the threats faced by the UK. Currently, the MoD collects figures statistics for the number of days, per year, that the RAF's QRA is mobilised in reaction to foreign military aircrafts in the vicinity of UK airspace. It does not, however, collect commensurate figures for Royal Navy vessels mobilised in response to foreign military vessels in UK waters. This must change.
- **The UK must do all it can to maintain Western, and NATO, unity.** The West has the means to respond to the Kremlin's aggression; but the question is whether it has the will to use them. This was tested when the European Union's sanctions against Russia came up for renewal, and by the willingness of NATO members to meet their commitments. Despite concerns about the fragility of both institutions, they have stood strong. The UK must do all it can to ensure that this continues. In the face of Russian antagonism, unity is the West's best response.

Russia's military adventurism, including its intrusions upon UK air- and sea space, is one of few things that allows the Kremlin to look strong at home as well as abroad. This chest-beating just might lead to an accident that causes a downward spiral of events, and, of course, it is in neither the UK's nor Russia's interests that this should happen.

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The Russia Studies Centre is a research and advocacy unit, operating within The Henry Jackson Society, dedicated to analysing contemporary political developments and promoting human rights and political liberty in the Russian Federation.



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