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# Russian High Seas Brinkmanship Echoes Cold War

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Low-level fly-bys of the USS Donald Cook in the Baltic are part of a dangerous trend of escalation by Russia.



A Russian Sukhoi Su-24 attack aircraft makes a very low altitude pass by USS Donald Cook on 12 April 2016. Photo via US Navy.

The close passes by Russian aircraft on two consecutive

days this week were carried out far more aggressively than similar flights near the *Donald Cook* and the *USS Ross* in the Black Sea in 2014 and 2015. This and other recent behaviour by Russia is both dangerous and in breach of international agreements, and risks causing a serious incident.

### ***Recent actions***

Russia has been consistently testing the judgement and restraint of the US military. This trend has also seen aggressive and provocative manoeuvres against Western aircraft in Syria, in particular during a deployment by US F-15Cs and Es to Turkey in late 2015. There, the United States and Russia reached an agreement on separation and safety measures while their aircraft were operating in the same airspace. But this agreement was routinely ignored by Russian pilots, who took the opportunity to practise aggressive manoeuvring against US aircraft, including positioning for simulated attacks.

Other domains too have seen provocative actions against the US. American soldiers visiting NATO's eastern members, in particular the Baltic states, have been subjected to intimidatory approaches by Russian intelligence officers, and unofficial reports suggest they have also been subjected to cross-border electronic attack including jamming from Russian territory.

### ***History***

Low passes of US warships coming dangerously close, as in this week's case, were a feature of the Cold War. But low-level flying of this kind without endangering surface vessels or other aircraft demands a significant level of skill, and there is no room for error or miscalculation. In one instance in May 1968, a Soviet Tu-16 Badger buzzed the aircraft carrier *USS Essex* in a similar manner – and crashed into the sea. It was incidents like this which led Moscow to agree to US proposals on drawing up the 'Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas' which remains in force today, specifically to prevent this kind of irresponsible and dangerous behaviour.

Among the agreement's provisions against interfering with navigation there is a specific ban on coming close to vessels that are conducting landing or taking off of aircraft. In the case of the *Donald Cook*, the low passes by the Su-24 bombers and harassing behaviour by a Russian Ka-27 Helix helicopter did precisely that: flight operations with a Polish helicopter were suspended after the Russian aircraft made it unsafe to continue.

Russia appears to be acting in breach not only of bilateral agreements but also of common sense. It appears in this incident, as in previous ones, the Russian Su-24s did not respond to radio messages on safety frequencies. This is thought to have been a contributing factor to a similar Russian aircraft being shot down over Turkey last November.

### **Russian bluster**

As was to be expected, Russia has denied any wrongdoing. A Russian Ministry of Defence spokesman claimed the aircraft 'turned away after identifying the vessel'. This may have been a statement drafted before Russia realized the US Navy would release video of the aircraft not only not turning away, but coming back for another 10 passes. Or it could be that in keeping with other recent Russian claims, Moscow simply does not care whether it is believed or not. Earlier this year official Russian media carried an angry denial that their aircraft were carrying out air strikes in Syria using unguided bombs – and illustrated the story with a Ministry of Defence picture of another Su-24 doing exactly that.

Russian statements added the standard formula that their aircraft acted 'in accordance with international agreements'. But someone at Russia's biggest propaganda channel, RT, didn't get the memo. RT's story on the incident led by praising 'the aerobatics skills of Russian pilots over the US destroyer'. In fact, whether or not any 'aerobatics' took place, 'performance of aerobatics over ships' is specifically prohibited under the US-Russian safety agreement.

## *Open questions*

Inevitably, the videos and statements released by the US Navy give only a partial picture. The close fly-bys seen on video do not seem consistent with the ‘simulated attack profile’ which the US described the Russian aircraft as flying – but it has to be remembered that much of the Russian bombers’ activities would have been observed while the *Donald Cook* was tracking them long before they came into visual range.

Other crucial aspects of the incident which remain undisclosed include what was happening in the electronic environment; what indication the Russian aircraft's emissions, or lack of them, may have given of their actual intent. In particular, a lack of information on what other activities were taking place in the area at the time makes it hard to judge the picture as seen from Moscow – whether some kind of US or NATO activity there, either on or below the surface of the Baltic, was seen as a particular challenge by Russia which required a strong warning signal to be sent.

Some Russian statements have tied this act of dangerous non-verbal communication to the fact that the *Donald Cook* was conducting training with a Polish aircraft within reach of Russia's Kaliningrad Region. It seems Western nations need to be prepared for incidents like this to continue for as long as Russia wishes to dissuade the US and NATO from supporting allies like Poland and the Baltic states – or until a miscalculation turns Russian brinkmanship into an avoidable tragedy.

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