

## UK-led Black Sea provocations: ‘Global Britain’ in action

By Rachel Douglas

28 July—A second round of the Russian-American strategic stability dialogue, agreed upon by Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin at their summit of 16 June, is taking place today. Yet, at a time when cooperation among the great powers is more needed than ever in the face of the pandemic and spreading famine and economic hardship, there is an ongoing push from within both Washington and London for ever more acts of hostile confrontation with Russia and China. These include military experiments, any one of which could explode into an armed clash.

Britain’s Royal Navy conducted such a provocation on 23 June, when the destroyer HMS *Defender* sailed a distance of 3 km into the 19-km territorial waters around the Crimean Peninsula in the Black Sea. Crimea belonged to Ukraine after the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, but seceded and re-joined Russia in 2014 after the Western-backed coup in Kiev. The peninsula had been attached to Russia from 1783 until its administrative assignment to Ukraine, within the Soviet Union, in 1954. Russia’s jurisdiction over Crimea is not internationally recognised, but *Defender*’s close approach to Crimea as it traversed the Black Sea from the Ukrainian port of Odessa to Batumi in Georgia was unnecessary.

Ukraine and Georgia each has an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO, constantly threatening to bring the western military alliance closer to Russia’s southern border.

Russian coast guard ships fired warning shots and a Su-24M bomber made a “warning bombing run”, dropping explosives in *Defender*’s path, the Russian Ministry of Defence stated. The British Ministry of Defence initially denied such shooting had occurred, portraying the mission as “innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters”. But the Russians subsequently broadcast confirmatory audio-video recordings from their coast guard vessel, and the BBC, which had a reporter embedded on *Defender*, also reported that there had been Russian radio warnings to *Defender*’s crew, preparations onboard for a possible confrontation, and around 20 aircraft swooping overhead.

Within hours, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Maria Zakharova denounced *Defender*’s “dangerous actions in the Black Sea”. Russian arms control negotiator Konstantin Gavrillov, attending a European security forum, said, “I have to warn the ex-ruler of the waves’, that next time such a decision is taken, bombs will be dropped not ahead of the target, but on the target”; that warning was soon reiterated by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov.

Russian Ambassador in London Andrei Kelin, speaking on Russian TV, pointed out that the incident could have led to a far more serious clash: “The nightmare is that they are trying to reinforce the political position with a military provocation, which, indeed, can lead us to a serious military incident”.



Putin, during his annual televised Q&A session held 30 June, put the event in a broad strategic context, noting that it had evidently been a joint Anglo-American operation. “The provocation”, he said, “was an integrated one, staged not only by the British, but also by the Americans, because the British warship ventured into our territorial waters in the afternoon, while early in the morning ... a US strategic reconnaissance plane took off from a NATO airfield in Greece.... It was obvious that the destroyer intruded in pursuit of military aims, trying to find out with the help of a reconnaissance plane what our armed forces’ countermeasures to this sort of provocation might be”.

### Pre-planned action

It soon emerged that the incident had indeed resulted from detailed planning, details of which came to light 27 June with the BBC’s report of the strange discovery of a stray pile of classified Defence Ministry documents at a bus stop in Kent. Supposedly these were found by a private citizen, who then took them to the BBC. The report described them as records of planning discussions the previous week of an “innocent passage” of *Defender* from Odessa to Batumi, using a “Traffic Separation Scheme” close to the southwest tip of Crimea. Defence officials’ expectations were that the beginning of such “operational activity” would “highly likely” bring “more frequent and assertive” reactions by the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

Quite apart from these documents and their odd, alleged appearance at a bus stop, the Royal Navy has been gearing up for Black Sea showdowns with Russia for a long time.

In 2015, the year after the coup and Crimea’s resulting secession, and with civil war raging in eastern Ukraine’s Donbass between Kiev and militias who resisted the coup, the UK initiated Operation ORBITAL, an upgraded British Armed Forces presence in Ukraine. British troops, the program’s publicity material reports, have trained 18,800 Ukrainian troops in skills like logistics, “anti-armour” and

“counter-sniping”. (The US military conducts parallel activity, its officers repeatedly turning training and consorting with Kiev’s fascist-insignia-bearing battalions.) Gen. Sir Gordon Messenger, retired in 2019 as vice-chief of the UK Defence Staff, currently is “High-level Strategic Advisor of the Reform Committee of the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces of Ukraine”.

The Royal Navy is assigned a special role. In August 2020 Defence Secretary Ben Wallace announced that the UK would lead a multinational Maritime Training Initiative (MTI) “to boost Ukraine’s ability to combat “threats in the Black Sea”. The MTI, he said, “will enable even closer collaboration with the NATO Alliance and Armed Forces around the world, and allows us to build on Ukraine’s new NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner status”.

On 22 June, on the deck of HMS *Defender* in Odessa, an Anglo-Ukrainian deal was signed for the sale of eight Barzan-class fast-attack missile boats to the Ukrainian Navy.

These programs fulfill the demands voiced back in 2018 by strategists at the Atlantic Council, the Washington-based, UK government-funded think tank that is home to some of the most belligerent advocates of putting Russia and China “in their place” militarily. In the wake of a November 2018 provocation by three small Ukrainian Navy ships in the Kerch Strait between Crimea and the Russian mainland, at the mouth of the Sea of Azov, Atlantic Council people called for giving Ukraine “a viable launch platform and targeting system” for use in the area, upgrading NATO’s own presence in the Black Sea to “test Moscow’s resolve”, and “increasing lethal military assistance to Ukraine”.<sup>1</sup>

Another of the political drivers of these military actions is the Henry Jackson Society (HJS), a key UK think tank of the “neoconservative” war-mongering faction. In a paper published in the *UK Defence Journal* 23 June, the day of the Black Sea incident, HJS fellow Robert Clark asserted that NATO is not addressing “Russian aggression” properly. Objecting to Russian restrictions on Black Sea waters around Crimea and the Sea of Azov, Clark wrote that “Britain is doing the right thing increasing maritime patrols in this increasingly important region” and welcomed the then-upcoming forays by HMS *Defender* and the Dutch frigate HNLMS *Evertsen* as a good start in supporting “NATO ally Ukraine”.

According to the Russian Ministry of Defence, on 24 June the *Evertsen* did abruptly change course and approach the Kerch Strait, whereupon Russian Su-30 fighters and Su-24 bombers were scrambled to escort the Dutch ship away.

In an early-July interview, Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov amplified Russian warnings, saying that Washington and London had understood the potential for a dangerous outcome on 23 June, but “still, they attempted to test our resolve to respond by force if necessary, and tried to hijack our coast guard system and the system of control over our waters.”

Level-headed UK experts also responded to the *Defender* incident. Former Ambassador Craig Murray, the outspoken opponent of overseas wars, wrote 23 June that “British warships are not infesting the Black Sea out of a peaceful intent, and there is no cause for them to be entering disputed waters close to anybody’s coast.” Foreign policy analyst Mary Dejevsky, in her 24 June column for the *Independent*, stressed that *Defender* could easily have “taken a more southerly route, which would have left it in

international waters. Instead, it hugged the coast of Crimea”.

### Escalation in Black Sea, and Pacific

In the wake of the *Defender*’s Black Sea transit, NATO held its regular Sea Breeze exercise with Ukraine in the Black Sea 28 June-10 July, practicing “amphibious warfare, land manoeuvre warfare, diving operations, maritime interdiction operations, air defence, special operations integration, anti-submarine warfare, and search and rescue operations”. The US Navy’s Sixth Fleet and forces from 31 other NATO member and non-member countries took part.

NATO’s Black Sea and surrounding escalation did not end with the formal conclusion of Sea Breeze. In a 9 July US Navy press conference held by phone from Brussels, the briefers said the American participating ships would not immediately depart the Black Sea, but would next join a Bulgarian-led exercise called Breeze. Another exercise in Bulgaria, Thracian Star, featured “close air support in a contested environment” and concluded 23 July. Ukrainian armed forces are conducting the Three Swords 2021 land exercise, 17-30 July, together with NATO members Lithuania and Poland. Starting 26 July, 700 US troops are manoeuvring in Georgia in Agile Spirit.

Russia’s own summer military schedule takes into account this current UK/USA/NATO emphasis on the Black Sea. It has included air defence exercises in Crimea for aircraft assigned to the Black Sea Fleet and large naval-air exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean (relevant also to Syria), as well as strategic practices for the Russian Aerospace Defence Forces long-range aviation units and others.

HMS *Defender* and HNLMS *Evertsen* are both attached to the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* Carrier Strike Group (CSG). The Henry Jackson Society’s Clark, in his 23 June article, gushed: “As the UK-led Carrier Strike Group deployment fulfils the vision of a Global Britain as the eminent European naval power, it is to this strategic corner of southern Europe [the Black Sea] which the UK’s and NATO’s attentions must turn, in order to counter an increasingly assertive and emboldened Russia.” “Global Britain” refers to a widening scope for British military power, extending even “east of Suez”.

The CSG didn’t stay long in the Black Sea, however. As of 26 July, the *UK Defence Journal* reported, HMS *Queen Elizabeth* had docked in Singapore and HMS *Defender* entered the South China Sea. Alluding to the Black Sea provocation, the *Journal*’s coverage raises suspicions as to whether something similar is being prepped against China. It pointed out that in 2018 the assault ship HMS *Albion* was challenged by a Chinese frigate and two helicopters during “freedom of navigation” exercises in the South China Sea.

The situation around the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait is more tense than in 2018, after three years of intensifying anti-China postures on the part of the USA. In the UK, too, some in the military are thinking in terms of direct combat against China as well as Russia. The *Times* of London reported 19 July on indications from Brigadier Mark Totten, that the 4,000-strong “future commando force” of Royal Marines, which he will command, can take over some tasks normally assigned to the Special Air Service and Special Boat Service so that they have more time to focus on Russia and China. “There’s a big geopolitical shift there [in Asia] so why wouldn’t we embed the commando force up there to be ready to react?” the *Times* quoted Totten. “Royal Marines will also be deployed east of Suez and could go to the Indo-Pacific ready for any conflicts that may arise.”

1. “Escalation around Ukraine threatens Trump-Putin diplomacy”, AAS, 28 Nov. 2018.