

So, Were Shots Fired?

Similarities and Differences between
the Situation in the South China Sea
and the Incident off the Russian Cape Fiolent

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The incident with the British destroyer HMS Defender near Cape Fiolent on June 23, 2021 once again demonstrated how fragile international relations are. According to the Russian authorities, the ship's entry 3 km into Russia's territorial waters was a flagrant violation of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. The violation of the state border was stopped after warning shots had been fired by a Coast Guard ship, and bombs were dropped from a Su-24M front-line bomber along the course of the destroyer.

After the incident, the British military attaché was summoned to the Russian Ministry of Defense, and the British Ambassador to Russia Deborah Bronnert was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where less-than-pleasant conversations were conducted with each of them. In particular, the British authorities were asked to carry out a thorough investigation of the actions of the HMS *Defender's* crew.

In turn, the United Kingdom's Department of Defence took a rather peculiar position. According to Minister Ben Wallace, the naval warship carried out a planned passage through the Black Sea from Odessa in the direction of Georgia "along the internationally recognized traffic separation corridor," using the territorial waters of Ukraine. He also noted that Russian ships followed the movement of the HMS *Defender* and warned its commander about the exercises being conducted by the Russian Navy nearby. According to BBC journalist Jonathan Beale, who was on board the HMS *Defender*, no shots were fired at the British ship, no bombs were dropped, all the shooting took place outside the range of effective destruction; therefore, the *Defender* did not change its course.

Russian military experts are actively discussing the incident with the British destroyer in social networks, and the tone of their statements ranges from recognition of the professionalism of the British sailors who "went to the limit of what is permitted" to calls to "sink them all." The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in between. The professionalism and endurance of the British seamen really cannot be denied. Her Majesty's fleet has a long history, which features an attack on Sevastopol and Petropavlovsk during the Crimean War, as well as the escort of polar supply convoys to assist the UK's Soviet allies during the difficult years of World War II, and an attempt to rescue the crew of the *Kursk* nuclear submarine.

However, the true reasons for the HMS *Defender's* defile are undoubtedly purely political. British Prime Minister Boris

Johnson did not fail to note that he did not recognize the “Russian annexation” of Crimea and Sevastopol, and the ship could freely and reasonably use international waters. It is reasonable to assume that he himself took part in making the decision on the controversial passage, although formally the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces is the current monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. It is also interesting that the British ship completed its mission alone, while two other ships located in the area, the HNLMS *Evertsen*, a Dutch frigate, and the USS *Laboon*, an American destroyer, preferred to remain in guaranteed neutral waters. Perhaps the American officers remembered the events of February 1988 as part of their training, when the cruiser USS *Yorktown* and the destroyer USS *Caron* were pushed out of the Soviet territorial waters off the southern coast of Crimea: they were bumped by Soviet frigates patrolling the waters: the *Bezzavetny* and the *SKR-6*. Then the Americans acted in accordance with the instructions of the Pentagon, which indicated that they should demonstrate a non-provocative exercise of the right of innocent passage.

Something similar was demonstrated by the HMS *Defender*, which, unlike its predecessors, left this time safe and sound.

It is worth remembering the situation in November 2020 in the Peter the Great Gulf (Sea of Japan) not far from Vladivostok. Then the American destroyer *McCain* plunged 2 km into the territorial waters of the Russian Federation and left them after a warning from the commander of a large anti-submarine destroyer, the *Admiral Vinogradov*, about the possible use of a ramming maneuver to drive the intruder from the state border. The American warship carried out the so-called Freedom of Navigation operation, or FONOP. At the same time, Washington noted that, guided by the provisions of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, it does not recognize the Peter the Great Gulf as being fully under Russian control, in accordance with the legal regime of the historic Gulf, established by the decision of the

USSR Council of Ministers in 1957. In June of that year, ships of the Pacific Fleet conducted large-scale exercises in the central part of the Pacific Ocean, not so far from the Hawaiian Islands, in no way connected with this. But that's another story...

The events near Russia's Cape Fiolent force us to look for analogies in other parts of the world, and the first of them is the South China Sea, where the interests of China, the ASEAN countries and, of course, the United States collide. The Chinese are gradually expanding their patrolling and economic development zone there, not always taking into account the interests of the states of Southeast Asia. For example, in March 2021, about 200 fishing schooners and boats of the Maritime Police (PRC Coast Guard) effectively blocked the use of the sea by the Philippines in the Whitson Reef area, which, according to Manila, is within the country's exclusive economic zone. The number of such incidents is growing, and their geography is becoming more diverse; it also includes areas that are the subject of disputes between China and Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. The situation is complicated by the fact that, according to the new law on the PRC Maritime Police, its forces can use weapons against intruders in waters that "are an inalienable part of China," that is, in virtually all sea areas claimed by Beijing.

Moreover, the 2019 "National Defense Strategy for a New Era" effectively frees Beijing's hands to use military force in the interests of protecting state sovereignty and territorial integrity in the event of an encroachment on them.

Recently, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia, even if they react extremely painfully to China's actions in the area of the Spratly archipelago and the waters of the South China Sea, have been publishing only notes of protest and critical statements in the media. These states are actually forced to choose between defending their rights to use and develop islands and sea areas (which, in their opinion, are within their exclusive economic zones), and benefits

from trade, as well as economic and investment cooperation with the PRC. Material interests, in the spirit of the ideas of K. Marx and F. Engels, are invariably considered more pressing.

An exception to the rule is, perhaps, Vietnam, which vigilantly stands for the defense of its borders in the Paracel Islands region. True, for more than ten years now, a project for the exploration and production of hydrocarbons on the shelf has been carried out in cooperation with Russian companies (as of May 2021, Rosneft was transferring its assets to Zarubezhneft), which significantly strengthens the spirit of the Vietnamese military and restrains China's onslaught.

At the same time, we cannot say that China reigns supreme in the South China Sea. Of course, the PLA Naval Forces regularly conduct exercises there, with the participation of aircraft carriers. However, the Americans are doing the same. The group led by the aircraft carrier *Shandong* did not have time to leave the area in May 2021 when the *Ronald Reagan* entered it in June 2021. The foreign ministries of both countries are churning out messages about "the inadmissibility of violating international law" / "the sovereignty of the PRC" (take your pick). However, so far there are no incidents involving the use of force or a threat of its use. Ships and airplanes of the two countries make maneuvers with extreme precision and accompany each other, avoiding dangerous approach and, moreover, the use of weapons, even warning shots. The situation is similar in the Taiwan Strait, which is much more sensitive for Beijing.

Summing up, the sea and air spaces remain an arena of the most frequent contact, if not openly opposing, then certainly not mutually sympathetic. The outcome of such situations largely depends on the endurance and professionalism of the ship commanders and aircraft pilots. However, the same human factor can provoke a clash with completely unpredictable consequences.

A repeat of the Cold War is often talked about in the West; but it is essential to remember that during that era, only the nerves of steel displayed by the military and the awareness of their global responsibility demonstrated by world leaders saved the planet from a nuclear catastrophe.