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U.S. Should Condemn Spain's Military Support to the Russian Navy

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As Russia continues its occupation of Crimea and sections of eastern Ukraine, some European countries continue to provide Russia with military support. Most notable among these is Spain, which allows the Russian Navy regular use of Spanish ports. In total, at least 20 Russian Navy vessels have visited Spain to refuel and resupply since Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in March 2014. The most recent visit occurred on August 28, 2015, when a Russian attack submarine resupplied in Ceuta, Spain. This behavior is unbecoming of 21st-century NATO allies. In the same way that there was public outcry in 2014 against France for selling two amphibious-class warships to Russia—France subsequently cancelled the contracts—the U.S. should work with like-minded European partners to apply pressure on Spain to end its military assistance to Russia.

Spain Welcomes the Russian Navy

Spain possesses two sovereign enclaves called Ceuta and Melilla that border Morocco. They are both sizable cities, with populations of 73,000 and 79,000, respectively. They are legally part of Spain, and they are the only two European Union (EU) cities located in mainland Africa. They are also part of the Schengen Agreement and the eurozone.

In 2011, Moscow started to regularly use the port facilities at Ceuta. Since then at least 57 ships of the Russian Navy have called into the Spanish port (as of August 31, 2015),¹ including destroyers, frigates, amphibious assault ships, and even an attack submarine.

Some of the visits by the Russian Navy have curious timing. For example, during the same week in April 2014 that the EU announced a new round of sanctions against Russia, Spain made a mockery out of the sanctions by hosting at Ceuta the Russian destroyer *Vice Admiral Kulakov*, and two Russian navy tankers, the *Dubna* and the *Sergey Osipov*.

The most recent visit was made by the Russian submarine *Novorossiysk* en route to its base in the Black Sea. The *Novorossiysk*, commissioned in August 2014, is one of Russia's newest submarines and one of the quietest diesel-powered submarines in the world.

Proximity to Gibraltar: A Cause for Concern

Russia's access to Ceuta is of particular concern considering Ceuta's close proximity to the British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar. From America's first overseas military intervention in 1801 against the Barbary States to the most recent military interventions in the Middle East and North Africa, the U.S. has often relied on Gibraltar's military facilities.

This is especially true for the U.S. Navy's nuclear-powered submarines. Gibraltar is the best place in the Mediterranean Sea to repair and resupply U.S. submarines. Strong U.S.–U.K. military cooperation assists the U.S. in keeping its submarine assets

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integrated into the European theater. Yet the real threat of Russian submarine activity in the region endangers all of those operations. As the former commander of U.S. forces in Europe, Admiral James Stavridis, once pointed out, “These [submarine] capabilities are increasingly important as the Russian Federation Navy increases the pace, scope, and sophistication of its submarine fleet.”²

All maritime vessels entering or leaving the Mediterranean from the Atlantic Ocean must pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. Gibraltar is one of the U.K.’s Permanent Joint Operating Bases and serves as an important forward operating base for the British military, which affords a supply location for aircraft and ships destined for Africa and the Middle East for the U.K. and her allies. The deepwater Port of Gibraltar provides a secure docking area as well as vast amounts of safe anchorage for nuclear-powered submarines. The topography of Gibraltar makes intelligence gathering a core function. Having Russian submarines resupply mere miles away presents a potential intelligence and security problem for the U.S. and its allies.

Spain’s policy of allowing the Russian Navy to use Ceuta is hypocritical in relation to its reluctance to allow NATO to make direct visits between Gibraltar and Spanish ports. Therefore, under certain circumstances, Spain would rather have a Russian ship visit a Spanish port than a NATO ship.

Disunited for Ukraine

Although Russia’s aggression in Eastern Europe is the biggest threat to the continent since the end of the Cold War, there has been division on how to respond. Some countries, such as Germany and Italy, have strong economic ties to Russia. Some Western European countries do not want to station NATO troops in Eastern Europe. The Syriza-led government in Greece, for example, has cozied up to Moscow.

Russia’s main naval base in the Mediterranean Sea is currently located at Tartus, Syria. As the security situation in Syria worsens, Moscow is keeping an eye open for alternatives. Even though Europe and NATO have spent the past 18 months confronting Russian aggression through a series of economic sanctions and modest military deployments, Spain is not alone in providing succor to the Russian Navy.

Since Russia seized Crimea, the Russian warship *Vice Admiral Kulakov* visited Malta in July 2014³ and the *Yaroslav Mudry* visited in February 2015.⁴ Although Malta is not a member of NATO, it is a member of the EU. As recently as June 2015, the Russian Navy landing ship *Korolev 130* visited Piraeus, Greece.⁵ This visit was particularly worrying because Greece is not only a member of NATO and the EU, but also home to a NATO and U.S. naval base on the island of Crete.

Pressure from All Sides

Spanish support of the Russian Navy weakens NATO’s opposition to Russian aggression against Ukraine and projects an image of a divided alliance. The situation requires:

- **Action from Congress.** Congress needs to make it clear that Spanish support to the Russian Navy is unbecoming of a NATO ally.
- **Leadership from the White House.** President Barack Obama should make public his disappointment with Spain’s actions. He should also call for Greece and Malta to cease their support of the Russian Navy while the crisis in Ukraine continues.
- **Pressure from Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon.** Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter should use every opportunity, including NATO ministerial meetings, to raise this issue with their Spanish counterparts.

1. For a full list of all Russian ships that have visited Ceuta since 2011, see Luke Coffey, “Russian Navy’s Use of Ceuta as a Provisioning Base, 2011 to August 2015,” The Heritage Foundation, http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2015/pdf/RussianNavyCeutaVisits.pdf.

2. Admiral James G. Stavridis, testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate, March 1, 2012, http://aco.nato.int/resources/site631/saceur/documents/stavridis_sasc.pdf (accessed September 9, 2015).

3. Matthew Vella, “Russian Military Destroyer Enters Malta Docks,” *Malta Today*, July 10, 2014, http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/41036/russian_military_destroyer_enters_malta_docks (accessed September 9, 2015).

4. Sky News, “Russian Frigate Tracked 20 Miles from UK Coast,” February 17, 2015, <http://news.sky.com/story/1429021/russian-frigate-tracked-20-miles-from-uk-coast> (accessed September 9, 2015).

5. Shipspotting.com, “RFS KOROLEV 130,” June 5, 2015, <http://www.shipspotting.com/gallery/photo.php?lid=2260368> (accessed September 9, 2015).

- **A coordinated effort with European allies.**
The Administration should coordinate with like-minded allies in NATO to apply pressure to force a change in policy in Madrid.

Completely Unacceptable

It is irresponsible for Madrid to allow Russian warships—especially some of Russia’s most advanced submarines—to use Spanish ports, especially ports located a short distance from such an important naval base as Gibraltar.

It is unacceptable that a major NATO member would offer support to the Russian Navy at a time when Moscow is actively attempting to dismember Ukraine and is undermining the security of the Baltic States. The U.S. government should make it clear at the highest levels that it views any support of the Russian Navy as completely unacceptable in light of Russian aggression.

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