

Russia, U.K. spar over Black Sea incident

This comes after Moscow allegedly fired warning shots at a British destroyer off the coast of Crimea

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Russia accused Britain on Thursday of spreading lies over a warship confrontation in the Black Sea and warned London that it would respond resolutely to any further provocative actions by the British Navy off the coast of Russia-annexed Crimea.

Russia summoned the British Ambassador in Moscow for a formal diplomatic scolding after the warship breached what the Kremlin says are its territorial waters but which Britain and most of the world say belong to Ukraine.

Britain said Russia was sowing inaccuracies and disputed Russia's account, saying no warning shots had been fired and that no bombs had been dropped in the path of the Royal Navy destroyer Defender.

Russia's Foreign Ministry summoned Ambassador Deborah Bronnert to deliver a "tough demarche" – diplo-



Flashpoint: British Royal Navy's *HMS Defender* arriving at the Black Sea port of Odessa, Ukraine, on June 18. ■ REUTERS

matic jargon for a telling off – and spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused London of “barefaced lies”.

“We believe it was a deliberate and premeditated provocation,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said of the incident, in which Moscow said it fired warning shots and dropped bombs in the path of the British destroyer.

“In the event of a repeat of unacceptable provocative

action – if those actions go too far, no options can be ruled out in terms of legally defending Russia's borders,” Mr. Peskov told reporters.

The Black Sea, which Russia uses to project its power in the Mediterranean, has for centuries been a flashpoint between Russia and its competitors such as Turkey, France, U.S. and the U.K.

Russia seized and annexed the Crimea peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 and

considers areas around its coast to be Russian waters. Western countries deem the Crimea to be part of Ukraine and reject Russia's claim to the seas around it.

Ukrainian waters: Boris

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the warship was acting in accordance with the law and had been in international waters.

“The important point is that we don't recognise the Russian annexation of Crimea,” he told reporters. “These are Ukrainian waters and it was entirely right to use them to go from A to B.”

He also disagreed with the suggestion that relations with Russia were at an historically low. “I can remember times in my own lifetime when things have been far worse,” he said.

Britain has also disputed the Russian version of events, with Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab saying: “No shots were fired at HMS

Defender.” “The Royal Navy ship was conducting innocent passage through Ukrainian territorial waters,” he told reporters on a visit to Singapore: “We were doing so in accordance with international law and the Russian characterisation is predictably inaccurate.”

Under international law of the sea, innocent passage permits a vessel to pass through another state's territorial waters so long as this does not affect its security.

During its 2008 war with Georgia, Russia bristled at U.S. warships operating in the Black Sea, and in April the U.S. cancelled the deployment of two warships to the area.

BBC released footage from the ship showing a Russian coast guard warning that he would shoot if the British ship did not change course. “If you don't change the course, I'll fire,” a Russian voice said in English to the British ship.