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Look Out, America: A Russian Su-27 Barrel-Rolled Over a U.S. Aircraft

David Axe
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The Russian plane “performed erratic and aggressive maneuvers” over the RC-135.

On April 14, a Russian Su-27 Flanker fighter jet flew a reckless maneuver in dangerously close proximity to a U.S. Air Force RC-135 spy plane flying in international waters over the Baltic Sea.

The Russian plane “performed erratic and aggressive maneuvers” as close as fifty feet to the lumbering, four-engine RC-135, Danny Hernandez, a spokesman for U.S. European Command, told CNN.

“The Russian Su-27 began the barrel roll from the left side of the U.S. RC-135 and went over the top of it to end on the right side of the aircraft,” CNN reported.

The aggressive display by the Russian jet—reminiscent of the opening scene of the 1986 action movie *Top Gun*, in which Tom Cruise plays a U.S. Navy fighter pilot who flies inverted over a Russian plane—came just three days after a pair of Russian Su-24 bombers buzzed the destroyer USS *Donald Cook* while the American vessel was sailing in the Baltic.

The April 14 incident, which Hernandez condemned as “unsafe and unprofessional,” is hardly the first close encounter between a Russian Su-27 and an American RC-135.

The twin-engine Flanker is Moscow’s main long-range dogfighter. As of late 2014, the Russian air force staged seven Su-27s from Kaliningrad, the Russian Federation’s enclave on the Baltic Sea.

The Pentagon routinely flies RC-135s in international air space near Kaliningrad in order to gather intelligence on Russian military movements in the region. Kaliningrad lies between Lithuania and Poland—both NATO members—and is geographically separate from the rest of Russia. If Moscow were to attack the Baltic states, Kaliningrad would be the likely jumping-off point.

In April 2015, a Su-27 nearly collided with an RC-135 snooping near Kaliningrad. And in August 2014, Russian fighters—presumably Su-27s—acted so aggressively around one RC-135 that the American crew actually fled. . . accidentally crossed into Swedish air space

Nor are the Russians the only ones to pull risky aerial stunts. The same month that Moscow’s jets chased the U.S. spy plane into Sweden, a Chinese Flanker did a barrel roll [9] over a U.S. Navy P-8 surveillance plane 135 miles east of Hainan Island, the site of a major Chinese naval facility.

Thirteen years earlier, Chinese jet fighters buzzed a U.S. Navy EP-3 spy plane near Hainan. A J-8 fighter accidentally struck the American aircraft. The J-8 pilot died; the American crew had no choice but to land their damaged plane at a Chinese airfield. Beijing released the crew after eleven days—and the spy plane after *four months*.

But then, the Americans have also been known to fly very close to enemy planes in order to intimidate them—and not just in the movies. In March 2013, an Iranian air force F-4 fighter attempted to intercept a U.S. Air Force MQ-1 Predator drone flying in international airspace near Iran.

But the Predator wasn't alone. At least one Air Force F-22 stealth fighter was flying nearby, keeping an eye on the drone. An F-22 pilot came to the MQ-1's rescue, Gen. Mark Welsh, then the Air Force's chief of staff, explained later.

"He [the Raptor pilot] flew under their aircraft [the F-4s] to check out their weapons load without them knowing that he was there, and then pulled up on their left wing and then called them and said, 'You really ought to go home,'" Welsh recalled.