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NATO Rejects Russia's Proposal to Enhance Security in Europe

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NATO has rejected another initiative launched by Russia to enhance security in Europe. The proposal would have required all military planes in the Baltic region to fly with their transponders operational, emitting an identifying signal in response to other radio signals.

There has been a surge in airspace violations and instances where aircraft are scrambled to intercept foreign jets amid a sharp rise in tensions in the region.

NATO surveillance aircraft occasionally operate without transponders, especially on missions near the Russian border.

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, NATO officials said the proposals «would do little to improve» air safety.

NATO says it is agitated about the situation in the Baltic and other regions. It has many times attacked Russia blaming it for dangerous military activities. Statements by NATO leaders, along with media accounts, foster the impression that Russia is responsible for ships and aircraft

penetrating the airspace and territorial waters of allied states. US spy aircraft activities near the Russia's airspace are a serious problem, but such stories don't hit news headlines.

On September 13, an Orion maritime patrol aircraft of German Navy flew without transponders switched on near Kaliningrad. The Russian Defense Ministry reported about the incident, which was completely ignored by Western media.

According to the *WSJ*, some Western officials said they want a broader agreement with Russia on increasing transparency and notification of their military exercises. It does not sound sincere. An effort to prevent military incidents could be an important step on the way to promote a security dialogue.

The Russia-NATO Council has been convened two times this year without any results. Nobody prevented the alliance from seizing the opportunity to put forward its own initiatives and tackle the issues of immediate concern. At the July meeting of the Council Moscow came up with the plan meant to reduce tension in the Baltic region. In addition to turning transponders on, Russia proposed an exchange of military experts on air safety.

Back then, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said he welcomed the fact that Russia showed «interest on the issue». But nothing has been done by NATO to continue the discussions. The Russia's initiative hung in the air to be rejected under far-fetched pretext. It's a wrong moment to dilly-dally. The new allied force for the Baltic region will be in place by May 2017.

It will make the issue of preventing incidents and avoiding dangerous military activities much more acute. The same thing applies to the Black Sea where the US and Bulgaria agreed on joint air patrols in a NATO-led mission.

True, nobody likes foreign ships and aircraft operate near its airspace or territorial waters and the Russia-NATO relationship has seen better times. Military aircraft operating without their transponders switched on increase the danger of incidents and pose a threat for commercial air traffic. It dictates the need for urgent measures taken to prevent the worst.

The invitation for military flight safety experts to visit Russia was an important step ahead. The Kremlin sent the invitations to NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, as well as to Sweden and Finland. It looks like this initiative is going to be rejected too.

On September 22, Estonian Defense Ministry spokesman Andres Sang said sending experts to Russia was impossible because of the 2014 decision by NATO to freeze civilian and military cooperation with Moscow. A strange explanation! The Russia-NATO Council meeting after the bloc's Warsaw summit in July was convened upon the initiative of the alliance, not Russia. The 2014 decision did not prevent the event. Mr. Stoltenberg has said many times he wants a dialogue with Russia to be alive.

Sang added that the invite from Moscow was likely meant «to play [NATO] members against each other». Isn't prevention of incidents a common goal of all NATO members? Are Finland and Sweden – the Baltic states outside the alliance - not interested in air safety?

All the reasons for refusing dialogue hold no water. The gist of the problem is NATO's reluctance to seriously discuss the issues of European security while publicly stressing its desire to continue contacts.

Russia has each and every right to operate in the areas close to its shore without actually violating the borders of other countries. After all, unlike the United States, it is a Baltic state. America has problems in the Asia Pacific operating close to the borders of the regional states and far from its own. China has asked the US to respect its air defense identification zone in the East China Sea and provide timely information about flights entering that area. Washington has flatly refused to even discuss such a possibility. It routinely operates reconnaissance flights close to China's territorial airspace. As a result, a number of dangerous incidents have taken place.

Formally, the US has a legal right to send its spy aircraft to patrol near China and monitor the military installations. The same way, Russia has a legal right to operate military ships and planes in areas close to NATO countries. The operations could be much less provocative if relevant agreements were in place. Russia has done its best to tackle the problem. Now the ball is in NATO's court with the United States primarily responsible for the consequences.

The most surprising thing is that the INCSEA (the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents On and Over the High Seas) agreements Russia has concluded with 11 out of 28 NATO members are never mentioned in the context of Russia-NATO tensions, including the explosive situation in the Baltic Sea.

The first agreement of this kind was reached between the Soviet Union and the United States in 1972. The document offers measures to avoid collisions, protocols for maintaining safe distances from surveillance ships, prohibiting interference in formations or simulating attacks on the other party's ships or aircraft.

It has a provision stipulating the use of international signals when ships maneuver in the vicinity of each other. According to the INCSEA, an advance notice of three to five days should precede any projected actions, which could represent a danger to navigation or to aircraft in flight. The agreement prevented the worst during the 1973 Yom Kippur war and had until recently been considered to be an effective tool to prevent incidents like the ones taking place in the Baltic Sea now. The parties hold annual discussions which have not been affected by the events in Ukraine and the exacerbation of tensions between Russia and NATO. The most recent one was held in Moscow on 8 June of this year.

The never mentioned US-Soviet Union Prevention of Dangerous Military Activities Agreement of 1989 is also in force.

Undeservedly slid under radar, these agreements constitute a legal basis for reviving a Russia-US and Russia-NATO dialogue by addressing the issue that needs urgently be resolved. The contacts within the framework of INCSEA are especially important as they are held regularly – the only channel of communications of this kind – and address sea and air space above it where incidents are likely to occur. The agenda could be gradually broadened to include other issues. For instance, Moscow has proposed to hold a Russia-NATO conference on European security in September.

There has been no response from NATO so far and the initiative has not been highlighted by media of NATO countries.

The INCSEA pattern could also be changed to make the military immediately meet and discuss the incidents that have just happened instead of waiting for the pre-arranged date the delegations are set to meet each other. One does not have to depend on the Russia-NATO Council meetings or OSCE events to talk on incidents and their prevention. The INCSEA is a good platform for the military to discuss the issues in detail. It may become a venue for security discussions in a broader sense. Under the circumstances, this opportunity should not be missed.

The problem is not the absence of proper forums, but the unwillingness of the United States and its NATO allies to be involved in serious discussions to improve the security situation in Europe. The recent events fully confirm this conclusion.