

Defence Secretary No9 speech - 09 April 2026

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The Defence Secretary held a media briefing at No9 today to give an operational update on Russian activity in the Atlantic.

Today, I am revealing details of a recent military operation undertaken by Russia. And in doing so, I'm doing this to expose the continuing Russian activity that threatens the UK and to highlight our constant readiness to respond.

In the last few weeks, while the eyes of many, were trained on the Middle East, the UK - in partnership with Norway and other Allies - have responded to increased Russian activity in the Atlantic, north of the UK.

This operation involved a Russian Akula Class Submarine and a concurrent deployment of two Specialised Submarines from GUGI, that's Russia's Main Directorate for Deep-Sea Research. Last November, I outlined how GUGI units - including the Spy ship YANTAR - are vessels directed by President Putin to conduct hybrid warfare activities against the UK and its Allies, specifically around Critical Undersea Infrastructure.

And for the first time today we are releasing the images of the GUGI base and of these vessels.

They are designed to survey underwater infrastructure during peacetime, and sabotage it in conflict. In response to the Russian submarines, I can confirm that I deployed our Armed Forces to track and deter any malign activity by these vessels.

A Royal Navy warship and Royal Air Force P8 aircraft, alongside Allies', ensured the Russian submarines were monitored 24/7. The Akula Submarine subsequently retreated home having been closely tracked throughout and we continued to monitor the two GUGI submarines, in and around wider UK waters.

Our Armed Forces left them with no doubt that they were being monitored that their movements were not covert as President Putin planned and that their attempted secret operations had been exposed.

Those GUGI submarines have now left UK waters and headed back north, and this operation - which lasted more than a month - has now concluded.

Our aircraft flew over 450 hours. Our frigate covered several thousand nautical miles. 500 British personnel were involved in the response.

I am making this statement to call out this Russian activity. And to President Putin, I say this: we see you, we see your activity over our cables and pipelines. And you should know that any attempt to damage them will not be tolerated, and will have serious consequences.

This also reminds us why the seabed matters, especially for Britain. We are an island nation. Connection is everything, for our economy and our security and beneath our waters lies a vast network of cables and pipelines on which our way of life depends.

Half of the gas that heats our homes. 99 per cent of international telecoms and data traffic. Trillions of pounds of global trade each day.

And for all the reasons the seabed matters so much to us, are the reasons that make it the prime target for our adversaries.

The UK's undersea network is highly resilient. But the threats are increasing. And so, we are stepping up our action to defend it.

We're providing an extra £100 million for our vital P8 submarine hunting aircraft. We've launched the Atlantic Bastion programme, to combine the latest autonomous technologies with the very best warships and aircraft to create a British-built hybrid naval force.

And we're making the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War, putting an end to the hollowing out and underfunding under the previous government.

Our Strategic Defence Review confirms the UK faces and I quote 'growing Russian aggression in all domains'.

And the High North is no less vital to our UK security today, than it was when the current conflict erupted in the Middle East

Putin's covert operation failed because this Government is delivering our first duty, protecting Britain

Our resolve to track, expose and confront the Russian threat remains absolute. And that's why, this year, we are deploying our carrier group where it is most needed - the High North - and why we're leading NATO's new mission, Arctic Sentry.

I also want to thank our Norwegian allies with whom we have cooperated closely throughout.

Our shared commitment to confront Russian aggression in the North Atlantic is at the heart of our Lunna House Agreement and together, we are now building a combined fleet of new submarine hunting frigates and new uncrewed systems.

Let me finish where I began with praise for the professionalism of our outstanding Armed Forces. They are truly the best of Britain.

And when a crisis erupts noisily and dangerously as it has done in the Middle East, I understand people questioning why all UK military assets and personnel have not been deployed to deal with it. But that is not in Britain's national interest. The greatest threats are often unseen and silent. And as demands on defence rise, we must deploy our resources to best effect.

Those resources will rise in the coming years because of our government's record defence investment.

And so, as we act to defend our interests and our Allies in the Middle East, we also step up to meet the increasing threats in the High North.

To strengthen NATO, to stand with Ukraine. and above all, we will always act on the first duty of any government. To protect our UK homeland and keep the British people safe.

Secure at home, and strong abroad.

Thank you.

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