

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## The U.S. Must Pressure Spain Not to Allow Russian Warships to Use Spanish Ports Again

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In October 2016, after mounting international pressure, Spain withdrew its military support for the Russian navy.<sup>1</sup> Between 2011 and 2016, Spain granted at least 62 Russian navy vessels—including destroyers, frigates, amphibious assault ships, even an attack submarine—regular use of Spanish ports to resupply and refuel. At least 25 Russian navy vessels visited Spain to refuel and resupply between Russia’s invasion of Crimea in March 2014 and October 2016.<sup>2</sup> The last Russian navy visit occurred on October 16, 2016, when two Russian corvettes (*Zeleny Dol* and *Serpukhov*) and one tug boat (*SB-36*) resupplied in Ceuta, Spain.<sup>3</sup>

Spain had supported Russia in the past, as the local communities hosting Russian vessels benefited financially.

Now, it has been reported that Spain will once again welcome the Russian navy into its ports, perhaps as early as November 9.<sup>4</sup> When most North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members are increasing economic sanctions against Russia, expelling Russian diplomats, and bolstering security in Eastern Europe against the Russian threat aggression, now is not the time for a NATO member to welcome the Russian navy into port. As it did in October 2016, the U.S. should work with like-mind-

ed European partners, especially the U.K., to pressure Spain not to re-start its military assistance to Russia.

### Spain and 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 cities located in mainland Africa. They are also part of the Schengen Agreement and the eurozone.

Some of the visits by the Russian navy had 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 of the sanctions by hosting at Ceuta the Russian destroyer *Vice Admiral Kulakov*, and two Russian navy tankers, the *Dubna* and the *Sergey Osipov*.

Also important to note:

- Four of the five most recent Russian ships to visit Spain in 2016, the frigate *Ladny*, the corvettes *Zeleny Dol* and *Serpukhov*, and the tug *SB-36* arrived from their home port located on Russian-occupied Crimea.
- Four of the five most recent Russian ships to visit Spain, the frigates *Yaroslav Mudry* and *Ladny*, and the corvettes *Zeleny Dol* and *Serpukhov*, have participated in Russia’s military operations to prop up Syrian dictator Bashir al-Assad.
- In June 2016, the Russian frigate *Yaroslav Mudry* (which visited Spain in August 2016) harassed

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U.S. Navy ships conducting anti-ISIS operations in the eastern Mediterranean. At one point, the *Yaroslav Mudry* came within 150 yards of the Dwight D. Eisenhower carrier strike group while the carrier was conducting flight operations.<sup>5</sup>

### 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 military cooperation from the U.K. assists the U.S. in keeping its submarine assets integrated into the European theater.

All maritime vessels entering or leaving the Mediterranean from the Atlantic Ocean must pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. Gibraltar is home to one of the U.K.'s Permanent Joint Operating Bases and serves as an important forward operating base for the British military, which offers a supply location for U.K. and U.K.-allied aircraft and ships destined for Africa and the Middle East.

The deepwater port of Gibraltar provides a secure docking area as well as vast amounts of safe anchor-

age for nuclear-powered submarines. The topography of Gibraltar makes intelligence gathering a core function. Russian submarines resupplying 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 all the more indefensible in relation to its reluctance to allow NATO vessels to make direct visits between Gibraltar and Spanish ports.<sup>6</sup> Amazingly, at times Spain would rather have a Russian ship, rather than a NATO ship, visit a Spanish port.

### Pressure from All Sides

When it was proven that Spain was resupplying Russian warships that were involved in the illegal occupation of Crimea and Moscow's support for Assad, Madrid abruptly ended its support. Two years later, the strategic situation has not changed. Russia continues to occupy Crimea, and Moscow continues to support Assad in Syria. Any support of the Russian navy weakens NATO and is unbecoming of a NATO member. In order to send a clear message to Madrid that restarting its support to the Russian navy would be unacceptable, the Trump Administration must:

- **Work with Congress.** The Administration must work with Congress to send a clear and coordinated message that any further Spanish support to the Russian navy would be unbecoming of a NATO ally.

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1 "Russia Cancels Spanish Fuel Stop for Syria-Bound Warships," *The Guardian*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/26/russia-cancels-spanish-fuel-stop-for-syria-bound-warships> (accessed November 5, 2018).

2 Luke Coffey, "As Aleppo Burns, Spain Resupplies the Russian Navy," *HuffPost*, October 21, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/as-aleppo-burns-spain-resupplies-the-russian-navy\\_us\\_5808b794e4b00483d3b5d06a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/as-aleppo-burns-spain-resupplies-the-russian-navy_us_5808b794e4b00483d3b5d06a) (accessed November 5, 2018).

3 "Tres buques de la Armada rusa realizarán escala en el Puerto de Ceuta durante los próximos días" (Three ships of the Russian Navy will make a stopover in the Port of Ceuta during the next days), *El Pueblo de Ceuta*, October 15, 2016, <http://elpueblodeceuta.es/not/11498/tres-buques-de-la-armada-rusa-realizaran-escala-en-el-puerto-de-ceuta-durante-los-proximos-dias/> (accessed November 5, 2018).

4 "La Autoridad Portuaria trabaja en la llegada a Ceuta de tres barcos rusos" (The Port Authority works on the arrival in Ceuta of three Russian ships), *El Faro de Ceuta*, October 28, 2018, <https://elfarodeceuta.es/autoridad-portuaria-trabaja-llegada-ceuta-tres-barcos-rusos/> (accessed November 5, 2018).

5 Sam LaGrone, "Russian Frigate Again Harasses U.S. Carrier Strike Group During Flight Operations," *USNI News*, June 30, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/06/30/truman-strike-group-flight-operations> (accessed November 5, 2018).

6 Although Spain is a member of NATO, the Spanish government places restrictions on U.S. and other NATO military assets visiting Gibraltar. U.S. Navy ships that visit Gibraltar are not allowed to call into a Spanish port without first stopping somewhere else. The same is true for aircraft. For example, a U.S. military aircraft flying between Rota and Gibraltar must first detour either to Faro in Portugal, or to Tangier in Morocco. This provision was formalized in NATO when Spain ensured that the NATO Standardized Agreement 1100, which sets out the procedures for visits to NATO and non-NATO ports by naval ships of NATO nations, contains a reservation that prevents visits by NATO ships to or from Gibraltar directly to or from Spanish ports. Any request by military aircraft from NATO members that arrives or departs the Gibraltar airfield and overflies or lands in Spain is routinely denied by Spanish authorities. For more information, see Luke Coffey, "Self-Determination and National Security: Why the U.S. Should Back British Sovereignty over Gibraltar," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounders* No. 2879, February 13, 2014, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/report/self-determination-and-national-security-why-the-us-should-back-british>.

- **Show leadership from the White House.** President Donald Trump and his National Security Adviser, John Bolton, should make public their disappointment with Spain's actions. They should also warn other European countries that have provided support to the Russian navy in the past, such as Greece, Malta, and Cyprus, not to restart their support.
- **Include pressure from Foggy Bottom and the Pentagon.** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of Defense James Mattis should use every opportunity, including NATO ministerial meetings, to raise this issue with their Spanish counterparts.
- **Coordinate a response with European allies.** The Administration should coordinate with like-minded NATO members, especially the U.K., to pressure Spain.

### **Completely Unacceptable**

Considering the current state of relations between the West and Russia, it would be the height of irresponsibility for Madrid to once again allow Russian warships to use Spanish ports for refueling and resupply. This is especially true for those ships participating in the illegal occupation of Crimea or continued support for Assad. 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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