

Russian Defense Minister Decorates Pilots for Downing U.S. Drone



An Unmanned MQ-9 aircraft, also known as a "Reaper" drone.

LONDON (Dispatches) - Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has presented awards to the pilots of two Su-27 fighter planes that intercepted a U.S. drone, his ministry said on Friday.

The drone crashed into the Black Sea on Tuesday after being intercepted by Russian jets, in the first known direct military encounter between Russia and the United States since Russia, Ukraine war a year ago.

Announcing the awards, the ministry repeated Russia's version of events - disputed by Washington - that the Russian planes did not make physical contact with the drone.

"As a result of sharp maneuvering around 9:30 a.m. (Moscow time), the MQ-9 unmanned aerial vehicle went into uncontrolled flight with a loss of altitude and collided with the water surface," it

said. It said the drone had been flying with its transponders turned off and violating airspace restrictions that Russia had made public in connection with what it calls its special military operation in Ukraine.

The U.S. military had alleged the Russian fighter planes approached its MQ-9 Reaper drone during a reconnaissance mission over the Black Sea in international airspace. It said the fighters harassed the drone and sprayed fuel on it in an encounter lasting 30-40 minutes before one clipped the drone's propeller, causing it to crash into the sea.

U.S. writer and analyst Daniel Patrick Welch has said that the downing of a U.S. spy drone off the coast of Crimea over the Black Sea has marked a serious incident between the United States and Rus-

sian Federation.

From the outset, Welch says, it is important to place the events in a historical context. "The US is completely unashamed by the depth and audacity of the evil plans it is revealed to have organized. No matter what you catch them doing, there is zero chance they will take the high road, admit responsibility, and adjust their course."

What are some relevant and recent examples? "Backing Right Sector heroes they agreed were terrorists a short while ago? Never happened. Nordstream bombers? Naaaah," he says.

This incident, he claims, is not much different. But he sees an almost comedic repetition in how the U.S. expects responses to be different. "Now, getting its drones as close to Crimea as they can without getting caught [oops!] is just another setup for a sketch on the mock news of Saturday Night Live. The U.S.-sponsored headline is that "Russia is warned to operate military aircraft with caution." Now switch to Russia's real-world response, namely, that after the recent drone incident (where a US drone 60 miles from Crimea was taken out by a Russian plane), Russia vows to retaliate against "all US provocations."

Russia denied that its forces had made any effort to down the drone, and instead suggested that the U.S. aircraft had possibly crashed due to "sharp maneuvering."

According to Moscow, the incident happened as the UAV was flying "over the waters of the Black Sea in the area of the Crimean peninsula...towards the Russian state border."

U.S. Agrees to Sell 220 Tomahawk Missiles to Australia



The crew of the Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Annapolis (SSN 760) successfully launches Tomahawk cruise missiles off the coast of southern California in 2018.

BRISBANE (CNN) — The U.S. State Department has approved Australia's request to buy up to 220 long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles, making it only the second U.S. ally to obtain the U.S.-made weapon after the United Kingdom.

According to a statement from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, the deal will cost as much as 1.3 billion Australian dollars (\$895 million), includ-

ing maintenance and logistical support.

"The proposed sale will improve Australia's capability to interoperate with U.S. maritime forces and other allied forces as well as its ability to contribute to missions of mutual interest," the statement added.

The deal's approval comes the same week the U.S., Australia and the United Kingdom provided more details of AUKUS, their three-way pact to share tech-

nology and resources to build a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines.

Under that deal, the U.S. will sell at least three Virginia-class submarines to Australia. Additionally, Australia and the United Kingdom will build their own fleets of new nuclear-powered subs to boost the allies' capabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

First deployed in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Tomahawk missiles fly at extremely low altitudes at high subsonic speeds and are controlled by several mission-tailored guidance systems. According to the U.S. Navy, they can be launched from submarines made by the U.S. and the UK, as well as from U.S. Navy ships.

So far only the UK has bought Tomahawks from the U.S., but recently Japan announced its intention to buy hundreds of the missiles, which cover a distance of more than 1,000 kilometers (621 miles), to boost its defense capabilities.

The Tomahawks could be used by the Royal Australian Navy's Hobart-class destroyers and are also compatible with the Virginia-class submarines that Australia plans to buy from the U.S. as part of the AUKUS deal.

The AUKUS deal is expected to cost up to \$245 billion (368 billion Australian dollars) over 30 years.

South Korea, Japan Hail Spring Thaw Amid Missiles, Weight of History

SEOUL (Reuters) -The leaders of Japan and South Korea promised to turn the page on years of animosity at a meeting on Thursday, putting aside their difficult shared history and pledging to work together to counter regional security challenges.

The summit between South Korea's Yoon Suk Yeol and Japan's Fumio Kishida in Tokyo - the first visit to Japan by a South Korean president in 12 years - highlighted how the two U.S. allies have been brought closer by North Korea's frequent missile launches and growing concern over China's more muscular role on the international stage.

The urgency of the regional security situation - and the threat posed by North Korea - were underscored hours before Yoon's arrival, when North Korea fired an intercontinental ballistic missile that landed in the sea between the Korean peninsula and Japan.

Washington hailed the summit, calling Japan and South Korea "indispensable allies".

Seoul-Tokyo tensions have long undercut U.S.-led efforts to present a



Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol attend a meeting at the prime minister's official residence in Tokyo, Japan, March 16, 2023.

united front against China and North Korea.

The two countries agreed to drop an almost four-year trade dispute on some high-tech materials used for chips, something that dogged their relationship even as the political importance of semiconductors, and securing their

supply, has increased.

They also agreed to revive regular bilateral visits and to restart a security dialogue suspended since 2018. Yoon also declared a "complete normalisation" of an intelligence-sharing pact, known as GSOMIA, which Seoul threatened to pull out of in 2019.

North Korea Launches ICBM to Warn U.S., South Korea Over Drills



This photo provided by the North Korean government shows what it says is an intercontinental ballistic missile in a launching drill at the Sunan international airport in Pyongyang, North Korea, Thursday, March 16, 2023.

SEOUL (Reuters) - North Korea said that Thursday's launch was its largest Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), fired during a drill to demonstrate a "tough response posture" to ongoing U.S.-South Korea military drills, state media reported.

On Friday, the North's state media released information and photos of the launch involving the country's Hwasong-17 ICBM that had taken place a day earlier.

The missile was launched from the capital Pyongyang's airport, traveling up to a maximum altitude of 6,045 kilometers (3,756 miles) and a distance of 1,000 kilometers (621 miles) for just over 69 minutes, before falling into the open sea between the country and Japan, the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported.

The pictures showed leader Kim Jong Un watching the launch with his daughter, and included pictures from space apparently shot by a camera mounted on the missile.

"The launching drill of the stra-

tegic weapon serves as an occasion to give a stronger warning to the enemies intentionally escalating the tension in the Korean peninsula while persistently resorting to irresponsible and reckless military threats," the KCNA reported.

The report was referring to a flurry of war games that the US and South Korea have been staging since the beginning of the year, despite the North's stern warnings.

The allies launched the most recent of the military drills, dubbed "Freedom Shield 23," on Monday. The 11-day drills are being held on a scale not seen since 2017, featuring field exercises, including amphibious landings.

Pyongyang views the war games as potential rehearsals for invasion of its territory.

According to the KCNA, Kim "stressed the need to strike fear into the enemies, really deter war, and reliably guarantee the peaceful life of our people and their struggle for socialist construction by irreversibly bolstering up the nuclear war deterrent."

Slovakia, After Poland, Agrees to Give Ukraine Jets



FILE - A view of a MiG-29 aircraft at Sliac Air Base, in Sliac, Slovakia, Feb. 29, 2008. Slovakia's government has approved a plan to give Ukraine its fleet of Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets. Prime Minister Eduard Heger announced the unanimous decision of his government on Friday, March 17, 2023.

PRAGUE (AP) — Slovakia's government on Friday approved a plan to give Ukraine its fleet of 13 Soviet-era MiG-29 fighter jets, becoming the second NATO member country to heed the Ukrainian government's pleas for warplanes.

Prime Minister Eduard Heger said during a news conference announcing the decision that his government was "on the right side of history."

Poland announced Thursday that it would give Ukraine around a dozen MiG-29s, starting with four expected to be delivered in the coming days. Both Poland and Slovakia had indicated previously they were ready to grant Ukraine's requests for military aircraft, but only as part of a wider international coalition.

Heger said his government's move "is closely coordinated with the Polish side, Ukraine

and other allies."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the promised planes were another example of NATO members "raising the level of their direct involvement in the conflict."

Slovakia will receive 200 million euros (\$213 million) from the European Union as compensation and unspecified arms from the United States worth 700 million euros (\$745 million) in exchange for giving its MiG-29 fleet to Ukraine, Defense Minister Jaroslav Nad said.

In response to Poland's announcement on Thursday, the White House said Warsaw's move would have no bearing on President Joe Biden, who has resisted calls to provide U.S. F-16s to Ukraine, and that it was up to other nations to explain their own positions.

News in Brief

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Chinese President Xi Jinping plans to visit Moscow next week, a major boost for Russian President Vladimir Putin amid sharpening East-West tensions over the war in Ukraine. Western leaders have tried to isolate Putin over the conflict, now in its 13th month. Xi's trip, announced Friday, is a diplomatic shot in the arm to the Russian leader at a time when his troops are bogged down in a battle of attrition, focused now on Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Minnesota regulators said Thursday they're monitoring the cleanup of a leak of 400,000 gallons of radioactive water from Xcel Energy's Monticello nuclear power plant, and the company said there's no danger to the public. "Xcel Energy took swift action to contain the leak to the plant site, which poses no health and safety risk to the local community or the environment," the Minneapolis-based utility said in a statement. While Xcel reported the leak of water containing tritium to state and federal authorities in late November, the spill had not been made public before Thursday. State officials said they waited to get more information before going public with it.

BERLIN, March 17 (Reuters) - Germany's education minister will visit Taiwan next week with a view to improving cooperation between Berlin and Taipei on semiconductors, a ministry spokesperson said on Friday, adding that the issue of sovereignty will not be the focus of the trip. China views democratically-governed Taiwan as its own territory and has increased military, political and economic pressure to assert those claims. The politically sensitive visit will take place at a time when Berlin is reviewing its previously close ties with China.

DAKAR (Reuters) - Police have fired tear gas at stone-hurling protesters in Senegal's capital ahead of a court case involving a prominent opposition politician that has triggered anger among youth. Demonstrators in Dakar burned tyres and set fire to buses and a large supermarket, the latest outbreak of violence that has shaken Senegal's reputation as a bastion of stable democracy ahead of next year's presidential election. Thursday's clashes began when supporters of presidential hopeful Ousmane Sonko were blocked from accompanying his motorcade to a courthouse where he faces trial for libel. The trial was postponed until March 30 after Sonko's lawyers said he was seeking medical treatment for inhaling a substance that impaired his breathing and eyesight.

BOGOTÁ (Al-Jazeera) -The death toll from an explosion at a series of connected coal mines in central Colombia has risen to 21, President Gustavo Petro says, after large-scale rescue efforts to free 10 miners who were trapped underground had failed. "Despite all the efforts of the rescue teams, unfortunately 21 people lost their lives in this tragic accident in Sutatausa," a town 74km (46 miles) north of the capital, Bogota, Petro said in a tweet on Thursday morning.

ISTANBUL (AP) — President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey said Friday that his government would move forward with ratifying Finland's NATO application, paving the way for the country to join the military bloc ahead of Sweden. The breakthrough came as Finnish President Sauli Niinisto was in Ankara to meet with Erdogan. Both Finland and Sweden applied to become NATO members 10 months ago in the wake of Russia-Ukraine war.