

As an Ex-US Intelligence Officer, I Believe an American Sub Did Violate Russian Waters

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In the early evening of February 12, 2022, a Russian Pacific Fleet naval exercise turned very real. The purpose of the exercise was, [according to the Russian Ministry of Defense](#), to practice the “search and elimination of a hypothetical enemy’s submarines in the areas of their possible deployment.” The exercise involved a mix of surface ships, submarines, and aircraft. According to the Russian MoD, an Il-38 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, operating in the vicinity of Urup, an uninhabited island in the eastern Kuril chain, spotted what looked like a Virginia-class nuclear-powered attack submarine belonging to the US Navy (the USS Missouri, a Virginia-class submarine, [had recently conducted a port visit](#) in nearby Japan).

The crew of the Il-38 reported the contact information to a nearby Russian submarine, which began tracking the unknown vessel. The Russian submarine in turn handed over responsibility for responding to what appeared to be a violation of Russian territorial waters (the suspected submarine was located several miles inside Russia’s territorial limit) to a Russian destroyer, the Marshal Shaposhnikov, which immediately instructed the suspected US submarine to surface.

Over the course of the next three hours, the Marshal Shaposhnikov played a game of hide and seek with the suspected US submarine, eventually deploying what the Russian MoD called “*approved measures in accordance with the documents governing the Russian Federation border protection*” (more than likely some form of underwater explosive) which eventually caused the suspected US submarine to “*rapidly depart the area*” after “*employing countermeasures*” to help mask its location.

The Russian MoD [summoned the US Naval Attache](#) in Moscow to issue a formal complaint; for its part, [the US Navy denies](#) any of its submarines were in Russian waters.

While one cannot rule out that the Russian MoD was tracking a non-US submarine, a whale, or inflating the event (the US and Russia are, after all, engaged in a high-stakes war of words over Ukraine), the fact of the matter is that the details provided by the Russian MoD, when examined alongside the known history of classified US submarine operations, make

the likelihood that the Russians had, in fact, chased off a Virginia-class submarine quite high. My own experience backs this theory up.

When the On-Site Inspection Agency (OSIA) was formed, back in the spring of 1988, to implement the provisions of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, the Department of Defense gathered some of the best and brightest from its stable of Cold Warriors. OSIA was headed by **Brigadier General Roland Lajoie**, a veteran Soviet Foreign Affairs Officer with multiple tours as a defense attaché in Moscow and the former commander of the US Military Liaison Mission (USMLM) in Potsdam, East Germany, responsible for monitoring the activities of the Soviet Group of Forces, Germany (a dangerous job – on March 24, 1985, **Major Arthur Nicholson**, assigned to the USMLM while Lajoie was in command, was shot and killed by a Soviet sentry while attempting to gain entry into a restricted area; Lajoie himself was injured when a Soviet truck rammed his vehicle while he observed a Soviet training exercise.) Lajoie assembled a cadre of military experts in Soviet affairs who shared his resume.

I was one of the officers brought in to help form OSIA. As a junior lieutenant, I lacked the first-hand experience of the Cold War veterans I was now serving with. In a time of peace, where medals for valor were rare, one learned how to glean an individual's experience level by reading the ribbons on his or her chest – an occupation medal meant service in Berlin (USMLM), while a joint service decoration usually implied embassy duty as an attaché. Some of these soldiers wore the Soldier's Medal – the highest award for heroism during peacetime. One of these awards was issued to an officer for rescuing classified documents from the US Embassy in Moscow when it caught fire in 1977. He did so to prevent the documents from falling into the hands of Soviet KGB officers who had entered the embassy disguised as firefighters.

There was a class of military professionals, however, who stood apart – the naval officers and petty officers whose uniforms were adorned with the Presidential Unit Citation, or PUC. The PUC is awarded to units of the uniformed services of the United States, and those of allied countries, for extraordinary heroism in action against “*an armed enemy.*” The unit must display such “*gallantry, determination, and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions*” so as to set it apart from and above other units participating in the same campaign. It is the unit equivalent of the Navy Cross – the second highest award for individual heroism in combat.

The PUC is not a peacetime decoration, and yet none of those who wore this ribbon had any corresponding military campaign ribbons indicating service during wartime. What I later found out was that they had all served on US Navy attack submarines that had been involved in some of the most secret Cold War operations targeting the former Soviet Union. These operations were of an intelligence nature, involving the penetration of Soviet territorial waters to tap communications cables, photograph Soviet ships and port facilities, and to track Soviet submarines. If caught, the submarine could have been sunk by the Soviet navy. This is why, in a time of ostensible peace, the sailors who crewed these submarines were decorated for their actions as if they had been in combat, because, effectively, for them there was no distinction.

It was the memory of these naval professionals that I first thought of when I read the news reports about the Russian navy chasing away a suspected US nuclear attack submarine that had penetrated Russian territorial waters near the eastern Kuril Islands, in the northern

Pacific Ocean.

Heroic actions deserving of the award of a PUC in peacetime were not limited to the Cold War-era. Indeed, [in 2013, a PUC was awarded to the crew of the USS Jimmy Carter](#), a modified Seawolf-class nuclear attack submarine specially configured for intelligence collection operations. In 2017, the USS Jimmy Carter returned from another deployment flying the Jolly Roger flag, indicating that it had carried out a successful operation.

There is no doubt in my mind that on February 12, 2022, a US Virginia-class nuclear attack submarine, more than likely the USS Missouri, was engaged in an intelligence collection mission involving the tracking of Russian anti-submarine warfare operations. If the USS Missouri followed in the footsteps of its Cold War brethren, this mission most likely involved penetrating Russian territorial waters to gain access to a particular intelligence target. During this mission, the USS Missouri was detected and, after failing to covertly break contact, was compelled to deploy countermeasures and flee in a manner which would have allowed the Russian navy to confirm its identity using sonar identification techniques.

It is not shocking that this incident took place – based upon the record of the USS Jimmy Carter, the US Navy has continued to conduct dangerous intelligence-driven missions in the Pacific Ocean using nuclear attack submarines. What is worrisome, however, is that these operations have continued at a time when US-Russia tensions are high, and diplomatic efforts are underway to lessen the potential for broader conflict. The ramifications that would accrue if the Russians, as they had every right, opted to engage and destroy what they reasonably could have assumed was a hostile penetration of their territorial waters, are unthinkable.

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