

UK's PM Hits Back at Russian 'Bear' in Warship Row

By [AFP](#)

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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. **United Nations Photo / Flickr (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)**

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Thursday defended the route taken by a Royal Navy destroyer through Black Sea waters claimed by Russia after it purportedly came under warning fire.

Speaking at army barracks the day after the incident involving HMS Defender, Johnson said "it was entirely right that we should vindicate the law and pursue freedom of navigation in the way that we did."

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According to Moscow, the incident took place off the coast of Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014, also claiming the peninsula's coastal waters.

The warship was sailing "the shortest route between two points" from Ukraine to Georgia, he said, while restating Britain's refusal to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea.

"It was illegal, these are Ukrainian waters, and it was entirely right to use them to go from A to B."

The carrier strike group of which HMS Defender is part would continue its maneuvers in partnership with UK allies, "sticking up for our values, sticking up for what we believe in," Johnson added.

"That includes democracy, human rights, equalities, but also the rule of law and freedom of navigation," he said, castigating the Russian "bear."

Russia's government said a border patrol ship fired warning shots and an Su-24 aircraft dropped four bombs along the destroyer's path before it left the waters claimed by Russia.

But the UK's defense ministry swiftly denied that any warning shots were fired, saying it believed Russia was "undertaking a gunnery exercise" and had provided prior warning to shipping in the area.

Germany and France meanwhile are trying to persuade EU partners to relaunch regular meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a step slammed as "dangerous" by Ukraine.

Britain is no longer part of the EU and Johnson's official spokesman said the proposal was up to the countries concerned.

"We obviously support engagement with Russia to deliver tough messages and encourage changes in their behavior," he told reporters.

"We remain open to a different relationship, but for that to happen, the Russian government must choose a different path."

Wednesday's incident in the Black Sea further strained tensions between London and Moscow, which have increasingly been at loggerheads over spying, hacking and alleged political interference.

The defense editor of Britain's Daily Mail newspaper was on board HMS Defender at the time.

He wrote on Thursday: "The Royal Navy was entirely justified in sailing along an internationally recognized shipping route.

"But we definitely poked the Russian bear and she poked back. The next time a British warship enters Crimean waters the tension will be even higher."

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