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Russian air incursions rattle Baltics

By Richard Milne in Oslo, Sam Jones in London and Kathrin Hille in Moscow

The Baltic countries are registering a dramatic increase in Russian military provocations, rattling nerves in a region which fears it could be the next frontier after Ukraine in Moscow's quest at asserting its regional power.

Nato fighters policing Baltic airspace were scrambled 68 times along Lithuania's borders this year, by far the highest count in more than 10 years. Latvia registered 150 "close incidents", cases where Russian aircraft were found approaching and observed for risky behaviour. Estonia said its sovereign airspace had been violated by Russian aircraft five times this year, nearing the total count of seven over the previous eight years.

Finland has had five violations of its airspace this year against an annual average of one to two in the previous decade, while Sweden last week suffered what Carl Bildt called the "most serious airspace incursion" in his eight years as foreign minister.

"A lot of people here and across northern Europe are worried about what it means for the future. It's not benign, it's rather unpleasant," said James Rogers, lecturer at the Baltic Defence College. He added that the incursions were "Russia trying to remind everyone it is still a significant air power".

Although the Baltic states have borne the brunt of Russian adventurism in the skies, there has been a much broader surge in incidents, and other Nato members including Canada, the US, the Netherlands, Romania and the UK have experienced airspace infringements as well.

According to one western official, so far this year there have been well over a hundred quick reaction alerts – the scrambling of fighter jets – because of Russian activity in the vicinity of alliance airspace, a threefold increase over the number for the whole of 2013.

"[We] can attribute some of these flights to an increase in Russian military exercises and activity along Nato's eastern borders but in many cases the Russian military is being provocative by probing airspace they are not authorised to enter," said one

senior Nato military officer, who confirmed there was significant concern over the increased number of incidents. “As in Ukraine, Russian aggressiveness in the air adds to the tension between the international community and the Kremlin.”

Many of the reported incidents do not involve a violation of another state’s sovereign airspace – which extends 12 nautical miles from the shore of Nato member states – but an entry into air defence identification zones, areas in which a country requires the identification and control of foreign aircraft beyond its sovereign airspace.

In a typical instance, Russian aircraft will turn off transmitters that emit a transponder identification code and will deviate from standard flight plans, or else not file them at all. Such measures render planes invisible to civilian air traffic control systems.

Russia’s sorties involve a range of aircraft, from smaller Sukhoi Su-27 Flanker fighters and surveillance planes to Tupolev Tu-22 supersonic bombers and even giant Tupolev Tu-95 long-range nuclear bombers.

According to the Pentagon, in the past two months alone Russian nuclear bombers have made at least 16 incursions into US and Canadian air defence identification zones. The most recent incursions – last Wednesday and Thursday – coincided with a visit of Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko to Ottawa and Washington.

Apart from such political signals, a broad-based military expansion is behind the surge in incidents. Foreign military experts say Russian president Vladimir Putin’s introduction of “snap” test exercises and the scaling up of the annual exercise cycle reflect the priority his administration has assigned to defence and to regaining Great Power status.

A multiyear military spending binge has endowed the Russian Air Force with new capabilities and resources, meaning it flies more and further.

Nowhere is Russia’s growing swagger triggering more concerns than in the Baltic states, which have a history of Soviet occupation, heated political arguments with Russia and sizeable Russian populations. Mr Putin’s new argument that ethnic Russians abroad are part of a “Russian World” and as such worthy of Moscow’s protection has reignited such fears.

“What is happening now in Ukraine is part of a global project,” warns Andrei Piontkovsky, a Russian political commentator highly critical of Mr Putin, adding that the president could target the Baltics next.

Defence officials in the Baltic sea region fret that the incidents, taken in conjunction with other recent Russian acts in the region such as the apparent abduction of an Estonian intelligence officer and the seizure of a Lithuanian fishing vessel in international waters, add up to a more assertive stance from Moscow towards the Baltics.

The most provocative acts – the Swedish incursion and the capture of the Estonian officer – came days after President Barack Obama affirmed in Tallinn that the US and

Nato would protect the Baltics from any potential attack.

“It is making people nervous. So people are questioning whether the allies would come to their aid,” said Mr Rogers. “It’s important that the big western powers meet like with like and show that Russian sabre-rattling will not intimidate anyone.”

A week of tense encounters

September 17: Two Russian Su-24 Fencer jets violated Swedish sovereignty after flying over the island of Oland in the Baltic sea in what Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt called the most serious violation by Russia of Stockholm’s airspace in eight years. Russia’s ambassador to Sweden was summoned to be officially reprimanded by the foreign ministry.

September 17-18: Two US F-22 fighter jets were scrambled to intercept six Russian military aircraft – two MiG-31 fighters, two Il-78 refuelling planes and two Tu-95 bombers – off the coast of Alaska. The following day two Canadian CF-18 fighters were scrambled to intercept two Russian Tu-95 bombers over the Beaufort Sea. The incidents coincided with a visit by Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko to Ottawa and Washington.

September 19: Two British Typhoon fighter jets from the RAF 6th squadron scrambled from their base at Lossiemouth in Scotland to intercept two Russian Tu-95 bombers as they approached the Nato air defence zone north of the UK.

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