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RAF Spy Plane Monitors Russian Forces Over Black Sea, Enhancing UK Intelligence Support

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A Royal Air Force (RAF) RC-135W Rivet Joint surveillance aircraft has recently conducted a reconnaissance mission over the Black Sea, collecting signals intelligence on Russian military activity along Ukraine's southern coastline. The operation is part of the United Kingdom's (UK) ongoing commitment to support Ukraine and the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization (NATO) through real-time intelligence-sharing and strategic monitoring.

The RC-135W Rivet Joint, operated by No. 51 Squadron, is the UK's primary signals intelligence (SIGINT) platform. Equipped with a suite of advanced sensors, the aircraft is capable of intercepting communications, radar emissions, and various electronic signatures. This allows UK and allied commanders to maintain crucial situational awareness of Russian troop movements and air-defence deployments, particularly in and around Crimea.

During the most recent mission, the aircraft reportedly observed Russian naval activity and monitored integrated air-defence systems. While the flight was conducted in international airspace, such operations are not without risk. Russian fighter aircraft, including the Su-27 and Su-30, have previously intercepted NATO reconnaissance planes, sometimes releasing flares or provocatively shadowing aircraft.

These patrols are part of an ongoing intelligence effort. The UK has maintained a regular presence of RC-135W flights in the Black Sea and Baltic regions, both before and after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Often flown with high visibility, the missions serve a dual role of intelligence collection and strategic deterrence. The UK currently operates three Rivet Joint aircraft in its fleet.

Earlier this year, one of these surveillance flights was escorted by RAF Typhoon fighter jets, highlighting an integrated NATO approach to operations near contested airspace. Defence analysts have noted an increase in the tempo of such missions, reflecting heightened

geopolitical tensions and the increasing demand for real-time intelligence among allies.

Each flight is staffed by highly trained Weapons System Officers (WSOs) and Operators (WSOps), who manage the aircraft's complex sensor suite to scan the electromagnetic spectrum and derive actionable intelligence. This data is used to inform both strategic defence planning and tactical operations on the ground.

Though unarmed, these aircraft occasionally draw military responses. A notable 2022 incident involved a Russian Su-27 firing a missile near a UK surveillance plane over the Black Sea. Moscow later cited a technical malfunction, but the event underscored the risks associated with intelligence flights in contested regions.

Despite the hazards, the UK remains committed to these operations as part of its broader defence posture. The continued use of the Rivet Joint platform signals the UK's unwavering role in supporting NATO allies and confronting hostile military activity through effective surveillance and intelligence-sharing.