

Putin's Shadow Fleet Threat

News:

On 12 August 2026, aboard the missile cruiser Varyag during naval exercises in Russia's Far East, President Vladimir Putin issued a stark warning: if European states proceed with plans to seize Russian merchant vessels, Moscow will respond "in kind" and not necessarily in the waters where Russian ships are targeted, but "anywhere" it deems appropriate, including the Pacific.

Comment:

The warning followed the detention of at least nine shadow fleet vessels across Europe since the beginning of 2026, including four by France and the Smyrtos by British forces in the English Channel on 14 June. Putin described the Western actions as "piracy and robbery".

Russia built up the shadow fleet after the G7/EU sanctions and oil price cap disrupted its traditional access to Western shipping, insurance and financial services. It did so through a large network of ageing tankers owned through opaque offshore companies and registered under foreign, frequently changing or sometimes fraudulent flags, allowing Russian oil to be transported outside the Western-controlled shipping and insurance system. In the process, however, the use of multiple flags, flag-hopping, false registration and inadequate oversight left many vessels without a clearly valid nationality or effective flag-state protection. That created the legal vulnerability that Britain and other European states are now exploiting. The Smyrtos had changed its name and flag twice since being sanctioned in July 2025 and was displaying a Cameroonian flag, but Cameroon had removed it from its registry, leaving the vessel effectively without valid nationality thus allowing Britain a legal doorway under UNCLOS Article 110, which permits a warship to board a vessel on the high seas where there are reasonable grounds to suspect it is without nationality. Britain maintains that it had such grounds, boarded the vessel, established its stateless status and then applied domestic sanctions legislation.

Yet the same legal framework that enabled the Smyrtos seizure also exposes Western hypocrisy. Under UNCLOS Article 92, ships on the high seas are subject to the exclusive jurisdiction of their flag state. If a shadow-fleet vessel carries genuine Russian registration—as many now do, following Moscow's efforts to regularise its merchant fleet—then a British or French warship has no unilateral right to board it merely because the vessel carries sanctioned oil. The principle of freedom of navigation and flag-state jurisdiction would give Russia a substantial legal argument against such interdiction. European governments have attempted to circumvent this by targeting vessels with dubious flags or inadequate insurance, but the legal basis remains contested. Even in territorial waters, UNCLOS Article 17 guarantees foreign merchant vessels a right of innocent passage; the convention does not explicitly state that carrying Russian oil in violation of a unilateral European sanctions regime automatically renders that passage non-innocent.

The selectivity with which these legal provisions are invoked reveals international law not as a neutral code but as an instrument of Western power. The same states that now invoke UNCLOS to justify boarding Russian tankers have shown little regard for maritime law when it conflicts with the interests of their allies. The Zionist entity, for instance, has repeatedly violated Lebanese and Syrian territorial waters, imposed illegal naval blockades on Gaza and used naval forces to intercept humanitarian vessels. Yet no European navy has intervened, nor has any Western government proposed sanctions. The International Criminal Court's arrest warrants for both Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, announced in March 2023 and November 2024 respectively, illustrate the same double standard. Putin has been subjected to an international arrest warrant, asset freezes and travel bans across Europe; Netanyahu, despite overseeing genocidal slaughter in Gaza, continues to be received in Western capitals as a respected statesman. European leaders have publicly affirmed their commitment to the ICC's jurisdiction regarding Ukraine, but they have conspicuously failed to execute the warrant against Netanyahu or even to comment on his travel to allied nations. The enforcement of international law is thus contingent upon the political convenience of the enforcers, namely the United States and its NATO underlings.

The Russian leadership has realized too late that the West was two-faced when it praised Russia's leadership for embracing capitalism in the dying days of the Soviet Union's collapse. In the years that followed, and as Putin sought to stabilize the Russian Federation, Europe engaged in partnerships with Russia, and many Russians felt that they were becoming a part of a global family with European values. However, expansion of a belligerent NATO eastwards against earlier assurances given by the US caused increasing alarm. However, even, up to the special military operation in Ukraine, Russia did not realize the full extent of the West's desire to dismantle it, notwithstanding its embrace of capitalism. This perception that the liberal West's values and institutions could be benign, and that Russia could be an equal partner, resembles the foolishness of many Arab intellectual leaders and the political classes and parties that looked to the West after the betrayal and destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate. The difference is that in the Muslim world, corrupt agent rulers are imposing this foolishness by force against the natural inclinations and aspirations of the Muslim Ummah for Islam, while the Russian leadership has become cognizant of the enmity against it. Now that Russia has become trapped in its war with Ukraine, it has engaged in a life and death struggle, while the Arab rulers are struggling to support their Western masters against their own people and against the only ideology worthy of leadership in this world: Islam.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Abdul Hamid Martin**