

Russian fleet south of Sardinia: why the convoy escorted by the Golovko frigate worries NATO

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A Russian naval task group comprising logistical units, special-purpose merchant vessels and the modern guided-missile frigate ***Admiral Golovko*** has been transiting in recent hours through **international waters south of Sardinia**. The operation, continuously monitored by open-source intelligence (OSINT) tracking systems and **NATO** surveillance assets, marks a **significant return by the Russian Navy** to the heart of the Mediterranean after months of reduced presence.

The composition of the convoy and the role of the *Admiral Golovko*

At the center of defense analysts' attention is the rendezvous maneuver between the **military tanker Yelnya** — a logistical support vessel of the Russian Navy — and a **convoy of merchant vessels** heading toward the eastern Mediterranean. According to assessments by

maritime intelligence experts, the vessels are positioning themselves to conduct **an open-sea refueling operation (so-called *bunkering*)**, a standard procedure for extending the fleet's operational endurance without having to call at allied ports.

Providing military cover for the entire flotilla is the frigate ***Admiral Golovko***, which recently entered the Mediterranean through the Strait of Gibraltar after a lengthy Atlantic transit. Belonging to the *Admiral Gorshkov* class and assigned to the Northern Fleet, the *Golovko* is one of the most advanced surface combatants in the Russian arsenal, particularly known for its ability to carry and launch **Zircon (3M22) hypersonic cruise missiles**, designed to evade modern air and naval defense systems.

The precedent of the GPS blackout in the North Sea

The convoy's passage near Italian waters is generating particular interest not only because of the military weight of its escort, but also because of the profile of the merchant vessels involved. Several vessels in the group are in fact linked to the incident that occurred last **November 9 in the North Sea**, off the Dutch coast.

On that occasion, the transit of the Russian vessels coincided with **intense electronic warfare activity**: for approximately **19 minutes**, the GPS signal in the area was jammed or altered, disrupting the navigation systems of **around eighty commercial airliners** flying in Dutch airspace. International observers classified the incident as a typical act of **"hybrid warfare"** carried out through naval assets that were only nominally civilian or logistical, but equipped with sophisticated systems for disrupting satellite communications.

From a technical standpoint, this interference exploits two distinct mechanisms: ***jamming***, which involves transmitting powerful radio noise to **blind receivers** and cause the sudden loss of signal, and the far more insidious ***spoofing***, which **sends false satellite coordinates to deceive onboard computers**.Although modern airliners are equipped with inertial systems and ground-based radio navigation aids to continue flying safely, such interference entails **serious operational risks**: it can trigger **false terrain-collision warnings** in the cockpit, generate **"ghost" tracks on radar**, and force air traffic controllers to manage traffic manually, increasing workload and the margin for error during critical approach and landing phases.

The Strategic Context in the Mediterranean

The transit south of Sardinia comes at a delicate time for the balance of power in the Mediterranean basin. In recent months, owing to logistical difficulties and Moscow's shifting military priorities, the **Russian naval presence in the area had thinned considerably**, at times nearly disappearing altogether.

The reappearance of a task force escorted by a frontline unit such as the *Admiral Golovko* is interpreted by analysts as a **demonstration of long-range maritime power-projection capabilities**, intended to reaffirm the Kremlin's strategic presence along the **main commercial and energy routes** that pass through the Strait of Sicily and connect the Atlantic with the Middle East and the Black Sea.

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