



Ministry of Defence

Air Command Secretariat
Spitfire Block
Headquarters Air Command
Royal Air Force
High Wycombe
Buckinghamshire
HP14 4UE

Our Ref: 2014/00630

[REDACTED]

1 May 2014

Dear [REDACTED]

Thank you for your email of 20 April 2014 regarding Russian aircraft approaching the UK. You requested the following information:

I wish to make a FOI request regarding Russian aircraft either skirting or entering British airspace often located close to Scotland. The media has occasionally reported incidents involving Tu-160 and Tu-95 aircraft flying under the Russian Air Force flag. In regards to this I wish to ask if it is possible to know how often these incidents have occurred in the past 18 months as the media do not always report them.

If possible, I would like to know how many times these have occurred even if aircraft were not scrambled from bases in the UK. Any details which accompany each incident would be more than appreciated as well. If it is of any use, these incidents are more than likely to have been dealt with by squadrons based at RAF Leuchars as part of the Quick Reaction Alert system.

I am treating your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000. We have now completed a search of our paper and electronic records for the information you requested and I can confirm that information within the scope of your request is held.

We do hold recorded information on the number of occasions Russian military aircraft have approached UK airspace in the last 18 months and further details which accompany each incident. Section 26(1)a of the FOI Act provides that we should withhold information which would be likely to prejudice the defence of the British Islands or any Colony. Section 26(1)b of the Act provides that we should withhold information which would be likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of relevant forces. The Act requires that we have to carry out a public interest test (PIT) in this respect to show that the reasons for withholding the information outweigh the reasons for releasing the information.

Public Interest (PI) factors in favour of disclosing the information requested:

- The public interest in ensuring that the UK is protected from airborne threats and that the resources invested in aircraft detection and Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) is properly employed.
- To provide a detailed measure of the level of activity in the air policing area for which we have responsibility.
- To promote an understanding of the RAF's ability to respond efficiently, effectively and appropriately to potential threats in UK airspace.

Public Interest (PI) factors against disclosing the information requested:

- If precise or comprehensive information on the identity of aircraft were released, any potential aggressor or terrorist organisation wishing to use aircraft as a means to attack the UK could extrapolate this information if they were probing our defences. It would consequently provide details of which probing flights triggered a QRA reaction.
- This in turn could give the criteria that provoke Quick Reaction Alerts and indicate the effectiveness of our QRA capability.

Because deterrence is a principal function of QRA and QRA is in turn an integral part of the air defence of the UK, the disclosure of information that might compromise the QRA deterrent capability, which is an ongoing armed operational capability, would also be a disclosure prejudicial to the defence of the UK. A limited disclosure providing information on the total number of days on which the QRA aircraft were launched within the requested period would provide a reasonable level of overall understanding of the level of QRA activity and Russian military aircraft activity near the UK. As a limited amount of information has been released for some incidents as examples of how the RAF is able to respond to this kind of incident, the public interest in further disclosure of incident details is therefore limited. There remains a very strong public interest in preserving the RAF's ability to defend the UK through the effectiveness of its air defences and to maintain its full deterrence value.

I conclude that the balance of the public interest for providing full details of the number, location and nature of incidents involving Russian military aircraft approaching UK airspace is firmly in favour of maintaining the exemption under S.26(1)(a)&(b) and thus of withholding the information.

Under Section 16 of the Act (advice and assistance) you may find it helpful to note that no Russian military aircraft have entered UK sovereign airspace without permission in the last 18 months. However, Russian military aircraft are fully entitled to fly in international airspace.

I am able to provide statistics for the number of days Quick Reaction Alert aircraft were launched in response to Russian military aircraft since 2012, which are given below:

Year	Days QRA Launched in response to Russian military aircraft
2012	9
2013	8
2014*	2

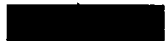
* 1 January to 30 April only

If you are not satisfied with this response or wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you should contact me in the first instance. If informal resolution is not possible and you are still dissatisfied then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the **Information Rights Compliance**, 1st Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

Yours sincerely

[Original Signed]



Secretariat 3a1
Air Command