

NATIONAL SECURITY

Russia, blaming U.S. sabotage, calls for U.N. probe of Nord Stream

Moscow cited independent journalist Seymour Hersh's account — vociferously denied by the White House — as evidence. Washington says the Kremlin is just trying to divert attention from its crimes in Ukraine.



By [Karen DeYoung](#)

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Russia called Tuesday for a special United Nations commission to investigate the explosions that blew up the Nord Stream undersea natural gas pipelines in September, based largely on an American journalist's controversial allegation that a U.S. covert operation was responsible for the attack.

The United States said the accusation was “completely false,” and it accused Russia of trying to distract attention from criticism around the first anniversary of its unprovoked Feb. 24 invasion of Ukraine and ongoing attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

The exchanges took place at the U.N. Security Council, which has become the world's only public forum for direct, and often antagonistic, contacts between Washington and Moscow. On the 15-member council, only China offered full support for Russia's call for a special U.N. inquiry.

“A simple statement of utterly false and complete fiction is obviously not enough to answer the many questions and concerns raised around the world,” said China's U.N. ambassador, Zhang Jun, referring to the U.S. dismissal of the Nord Stream sabotage charge. The request for an independent investigation “is entirely legitimate and reasonable,” he said.

The two Baltic Sea pipelines, designed to carry natural gas from Russia to Europe, were rendered inoperable by explosions that also caused environmentally damaging gas releases. World leaders quickly suggested Russia was responsible, a view still not entirely dismissed but that some Western intelligence assessments and officials have come to doubt.

Investigations by Sweden, Denmark and Germany are underway five months later. In a letter to the Security Council on Tuesday, those governments said they have established “that there has been extensive damage” to the pipelines “and that the damage was caused by powerful explosions due to sabotage.”

“These investigations have not yet been concluded,” the letter said, and “at this point, it is not possible to say when they will be concluded.” Russian authorities “have been informed regarding the ongoing investigations,” the letter said.

But Russia’s U.N. ambassador, Vasily Nebenzya, who called the emergency meeting, said the perpetrator was now known, “thanks to an investigating journalist” who had determined “not only that the United States did it, but how they did it, with the involvement of their NATO ally Norway.”

Two weeks ago, journalist Seymour Hersh published a [lengthy article](#) on Substack — an online subscription platform for independent journalists and bloggers — alleging that U.S. Navy divers, operating under cover of a NATO exercise with Norway in the Baltic Sea early last summer, placed explosives on the two pipelines. Three months later, Hersh wrote, President Biden gave the order to blow them up, in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Hersh won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for uncovering the My Lai Massacre by U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, and he is credited with other explosive investigative work over the years, although much of his more recent output has been widely criticized. His Nord Stream allegation was based on a single anonymous source he described as someone “with direct knowledge of operational planning.” No other media outlet has corroborated his account.

The story, categorically denied by the Biden administration, was quickly picked up and spread by Russian media.

“The depth of information he has is astounding,” Nebenzya said of Hersh.

Presentations in support of Russia’s calls for a U.N. investigation were offered during the meeting by economist and Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs and retired CIA officer and political activist Raymond McGovern.

Sachs, who has faulted NATO enlargement as a cause of the war and called for it to be resolved by U.S.-Russia negotiations, said that the White House had labeled Hersh’s allegations “completely and utterly false, but did not offer any information contradicting it” or an “alternative explanation.” Senior U.S. officials, he said, “made statements before and after” the explosions “that showed U.S. animus toward the pipelines.”

McGovern, a former senior CIA analyst who worked on arms control during the Cold War, said, “I associate myself completely with Sachs’ comments.” He also noted that NATO had expanded its membership in Eastern Europe “despite the promise not to.”

Nebenzya said that the countries investigating the Nord Stream sabotage have not kept Russia informed of their inquiries and that they had rebuffed Moscow’s offers to participate. He derided the investigative efforts as “not only not transparent ... but seek to simply cover tracks and stand behind their American brothers.”

No vote was taken at Tuesday's meeting, although Russia circulated a draft resolution calling on the United Nations to establish a commission "composed of impartial and internationally respected, experienced jurists" to conduct "comprehensive, transparent and impartial international investigation of all aspects of the act of sabotage ... including identification of its perpetrators, sponsors, organizers and accomplices."

Most of the nonpermanent council members from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East called for the existing investigations — rather than a new U.N. inquiry — to continue.

But as has frequently happened during Ukraine-related council meetings over the past year, lines were drawn by the five permanent members, with Russia and China on one side and the United States, Britain and France on the other.

John Kelley, political counselor to the American U.N. mission, told the council that rather than entertain "completely false" allegations, "we wish [Russia] would apply urgency ... to myriad reports of violations of international human rights law caused by its invading forces."