

US foreign policy

US seizes Russian tanker in Atlantic

Interception follows failed attempt to capture vessel as it headed to Venezuela last month



A member of the US Coast Guard observing the Venezuela-linked oil tanker *Marinera* on Wednesday © @US_EUCOM/X/PA

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The US has seized a Russian oil tanker after a weeks-long pursuit across the Atlantic Ocean, in the Trump administration's latest high-stakes demonstration of the American military's power and reach.

The US military's European Command on Wednesday said it had boarded the *Marinera*, which was previously known as the *Bella 1*, over alleged sanctions violations.

“The vessel was seized in the north Atlantic pursuant to a warrant issued by a US federal court” after being tracked by a US coastguard ship, the [statement on X](#) added.

The US also said it had intercepted a “dark fleet” ship, the M/T Sophia, in the Caribbean. According to Kpler, the data and analytics company, the vessel was carrying Venezuelan oil and had been identified making four trips from the country in 2025.

“The blockade of sanctioned and illicit Venezuelan oil remains in FULL EFFECT — anywhere in the world,” US defence secretary Pete Hegseth said on X.



An image broadcast on Russian state television on Wednesday purportedly showing a US helicopter attempting to intercept the *Marinera* © RT

The seizure of the *Marinera*, which was assisted by the UK, marks an escalation in President Donald Trump’s gambit to reshape the global oil market and comes days after the [US captured Nicolás Maduro](#) and said it would take control of the world’s largest oil reserves in Venezuela.

US energy secretary Chris Wright on Wednesday said Washington would seek to [control Venezuelan oil sales “indefinitely”](#).

The moves represent a challenge to the hegemony of Opec+ over global oil markets. The US is not only the world's largest crude producer but is also trying to control hundreds of billions of barrels of additional reserves.

They also raise tensions with Moscow, which demanded that the US treat Russian citizens on board the *Marinera* "humanely and decently", and allow their return home, according to state news agency Tass.

Andrei Klishas, a senior Russian lawmaker, denounced the tanker's seizure as "brazen piracy . . . violating norms of international law".

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the crew were "subject to prosecution for any applicable violation of federal law" and would be "brought to the United States for prosecution if necessary".

Leavitt insisted Trump had "very open, honest and good relationships" with both Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping, adding: "I believe that those personal relationships are going to continue."

But she defended the decision to seize the *Marinera* and enforce the US blockade on Venezuelan oil, saying the president was "going to enforce our policy that is best for the United States of America", including "enforcing the embargo against all dark fleet vessels that are illegally transporting oil".

US seizes Marinera oil tanker in the north Atlantic



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Source: MarineTraffic • Latest location at 2.08pm GMT

While Washington has stressed the importance of the Venezuelan blockade to its interception of the Marinera, the tanker had been sanctioned for alleged violations relating to Iran.

The vessel was empty when it was seized by US forces. The US had sought to interdict the Marinera in December when it was heading towards Venezuela, where it likely would have picked up oil. An attempt was made to board the tanker as it approached the Caribbean, prompting it to flee east across the Atlantic.

At the time it was operating under a false Guyanese flag, but has since been sold to a Russian company and reflagged as Russian.

The Marinera on Wednesday broadcast positioning data showing it making a sudden turn at 11.26am GMT while it was 325km from Iceland.

The Marinera broadcast positioning data that showed it making a sudden turn at 11.26am GMT on Wednesday while 325km from Iceland © Hakon Rimmereid/Reuters

Aircraft position data also showed three US Air Force Pilatus U-28 Draco aircraft, used in support of special forces operations, heading north from Wick in northern Scotland.

An RAF P-8 Poseidon aircraft, which can be used for anti-submarine warfare and surveillance, headed to the area from RAF Lossiemouth, also in northern Scotland.

UK defence secretary John Healey said Britain supported the US operation against the Marinera so as to enforce Iran sanctions and “tackle the global security threat posed by expanding shadowy maritime activity”.

“This is a sanctioned, stateless vessel which carries a long history of nefarious activity and shares close links with both Iran and Russia,” he told the House of Commons.

The UK Ministry of Defence said Britain had provided “operational support, including basing” and air surveillance support in the operation, following a request from the US for assistance.

UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer spoke with Trump on Wednesday evening about the seizure of the *Marinera*, according to Downing Street, as well as Ukraine and the recent US operation in Venezuela to capture Maduro.

The *Marinera* had been overflowed by a European Space Agency Sentinel-1 satellite, which takes radar images, on Tuesday. Images from the pass confirmed a vessel roughly the size of a US Coast Guard cutter was about 1.75 nautical miles behind the tanker.

Reports earlier on Wednesday said Moscow was sending a submarine and potentially other naval vessels to try to help escort the *Marinera* back to Russia.

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The US also seized the *Sophia* tanker in the Caribbean on Wednesday © Kirstil Noem/X

Meanwhile, the US military’s Southern Command said it had “apprehended a stateless, sanctioned dark fleet motor tanker without incident”, the *Sophia*, in a pre-dawn operation in the Caribbean Sea.

“The Department of War is unwavering in its mission to crush illicit activity in the western hemisphere,” it [added](#) on X.

The ship has been stateless since January 2025, according to the International Maritime Organization. The 22-year-old tanker has not broadcast a position for six months, according to MarineTraffic.

Additional reporting by Lauren Fedor in Washington

Cartography by Steven Bernard

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