

BRIEF

THE WAR AT SEA

RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE
SERIES NO. 6

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The ramifications of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine extend beyond the suffering and disenfranchisement of Ukrainian citizens, the loss of Ukrainian territory, and the destruction of its economic potential. The conflict, Russia's naval blockade, and the sanctions imposed on Russia have further acerbated global manufacturing, food, and energy supply chains, raising inflation and weakening the food and energy security of many other nations already coping with COVID-related difficulties.¹ As on the land and in the air, nearly three months into the conflict Russia does not appear to have achieved all its maritime aims and has suffered some setbacks on the Black Sea. The dramatic sinking of the Black Sea Fleet flagship, the *Moskva*, the successful targeting of other Russian naval assets, and the absence of an amphibious landing in the Odesa region are amongst the successes of Ukraine's maritime response. There are naval lessons here for the Baltic states and other nations with small navies, learned the hard way by Ukraine as it fights for its sovereignty.

The Black Sea is a semi-enclosed sea. Russia does not control its approaches. The Montreux Convention sets out special rules for vessels entering the Black Sea through Turkey via the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Strait.² These rules (some related to tonnage, others to how long vessels can be present) limit access to the Black Sea of non-Black Sea nations' naval combatant vessels and give Turkey rights to further restrict access in the event of conflict. Turkey did this on 28 February.³ As a result, the ability of Russia to reinforce its Black Sea Fleet with naval assets from its other larger fleets has been limited, but so has the availability of non-Black Sea nations' naval forces to assist Ukraine. Perhaps in anticipation of this action by Turkey, Russia

increased its naval presence in the Black Sea before the invasion under the pretence of exercises, as it did to amass its land and air forces on the Ukrainian land border.

RUSSIA ON THE BLACK SEA

Since its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has treated the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov as a 'Russian Lake' where it behaves and acts as it wishes.⁴ Its actions have included maritime hybrid warfare and 'lawfare' – interpreting international laws and agreements as it wishes and exploiting these legal systems to suit its own ends.⁵ Examples include the forced theft and relocation of Ukrainian oil platforms,

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the building of the Kerch Strait Bridge to impede Ukrainian vessels, the forceful detention of Ukrainian navy and merchant ships, and the harassment of NATO vessels conducting lawful transits of international waters. Diplomatic and legal efforts to counter this behaviour have been ineffectual.

Since 2014, Russia had doubled its offensive naval capability in the region.⁶ Before the start of the conflict, its Black Sea Fleet consisted of six *Kilo* class diesel submarines, six larger surface combatants (one cruiser – the *Moskva*, and five frigates), 36 patrol and coastal combatants, ten mine warfare and mine countermeasure vessels, and ten amphibious landing ships and landing crafts.⁷ The fleet is supported by missile systems, naval aviation and naval infantry elements from Russia's Southern Military District. The additional

Russian naval assets on exercises in the Black Sea that augmented its capability at the start of the conflict included six amphibious ships (and their associated sailors, soldiers, and equipment) from the Baltic Sea and Northern Fleets.⁸

The type of vessels available and their activities to date indicate Russia's likely wartime aims for its naval forces. First amongst these was establishing sea control (ensuring unhindered naval operations) to prevent interference with its other maritime objectives, which included blockading Ukraine and neutralising its small navy.⁹ Russia's amphibious capabilities were intended to augment its land forces in attacking and holding eastern and southern Ukraine, and to support a maritime logistical bridge to forces in the south (via Crimea) and east (via the Sea of Azov).¹⁰ Lastly, their naval forces, including submarines, were to be a source of naval missile fires throughout Ukraine.¹¹

Except for an amphibious landing to capture Odesa, these aims seem to have been mostly met. Russia's comparatively strong naval posture, control of the Sea of Azov and the northern Black Sea off Odesa, amphibious capabilities, and logistical support in the Black Sea and particularly in the Sea of Azov, have undoubtedly contributed to the relative success of its land campaign in the Kherson, and portions of the Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine throughout the conflict.¹² The blockade of Ukraine, not formally announced as required by international law and

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custom, has also been successful.¹³ Russia has attacked merchant shipping (including sinking one Estonian cargo ship, possibly illegally used as a minesweeper or missile shield) to enforce it.¹⁴ The Black Sea Fleet has, however, contributed only a small fraction of the over one thousand missile strikes throughout Ukraine.¹⁵

UKRAINE LOOKING SEAWARD

Some credit for preventing an amphibious attack on Odesa should go to Ukraine's naval defence posture and defensive maritime activities. The

2014 illegal annexation of Crimea reduced the size of Ukraine's navy, its access to the Black Sea, and its ability to ensure the maritime security of its eastern flank on the Sea of Azov.¹⁶ Before the war, Ukraine was working towards implementing its first post-2014 naval strategy, which would, by means of a 'mosquito fleet' of small patrol boats and anti-ship systems (artillery, missiles), increase maritime situational awareness and deny seaborne threats access to its coastal waters.¹⁷ Increasing the size and capabilities of its naval forces and coastal defences was a pre-war priority, but progress had been slow.¹⁸ It did, however, successfully modify the Russian mobile cruise missile systems in its inventory to produce the 300 km-range Neptune anti-ship missile system to augment its coastal artillery.¹⁹

At the start of the conflict, Ukraine's naval forces consisted of one frigate, twelve patrol and coastal craft (including one corvette), one mine warfare vessel, one amphibious landing ship, one amphibious landing craft, and eight logistic and support vessels.²⁰ The frigate was undergoing maintenance in port and Ukraine scuttled it on the first day of the conflict to prevent it from being captured by Russia.²¹ Due to the relative size differential vis-à-vis Russia, Ukraine's probable strategic naval aims for the conflict were to prevent an amphibious assault on Odesa, to destroy as many Russian naval vessels as possible to minimise their impact on the land campaign, and to break the blockade to support its economy and allow seaborne humanitarian and military aid.

In addition to sinking the *Moskva* with the indigenously developed Neptune anti-ship missiles, Ukraine has had some success destroying other Russian vessels.²² Reports, some not confirmed, indicate Ukraine has successfully targeted as many as 13 Russian vessels, sinking or damaging frigates, amphibious ships, and patrol vessels at sea and in port using

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missiles or uninhabited aerial vehicles.²³ The loss of the air defence and command functions associated with the *Moskva* and the damage to

other ships that carry land-attack missiles has eroded Russia's ability to maintain sea control and reduced its naval-based strike capabilities, and may have limited its amphibious options to capture additional territory in the vicinity of Odesa.²⁴ As part of its defence of Odesa, Ukraine also appears to have successfully deployed sea mines via tugboats to limit Russian naval and amphibious approaches there.²⁵

NAVAL ASSISTANCE NEEDED

The conflict has highlighted the importance of using available and innovative means to maintain maritime situational awareness to collect targeting data, as well as the role of intelligence from allies and partners on the location of vessels at sea.²⁶ Uninhabited air, surface and underwater vehicles can assist in building the necessary awareness, and can be used as weapons.²⁷ Ukraine's use of armed drones at sea suggests that more guerrilla-type unconventional naval warfare, such as improvised explosive devices or other anti-ship ordnance delivered by small craft, may also be a means to offset a lack of shore based anti-ship missiles.²⁸ Assisting Ukraine with these capabilities and more anti-ship missiles, such as the harpoons donated by Denmark, would help Ukraine further erode the Black Sea Fleet's blockade and Russia's ability to assist land forces in gaining additional territory or consolidating the gains it has made.²⁹

What Ukraine really needs is direct naval assistance

What Ukraine really needs to maintain or increase the effects of its maritime campaign, and to break the blockade, is direct naval assistance. This, however, could potentially risk the escalation of the conflict to one with NATO since the other Black Sea nations with appropriate naval forces (Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey) are members.

TAKEAWAYS FOR THE BALTIC STATES

The Baltic states should continue to strengthen their maritime resilience to an unprovoked Russian attack in conventional and unconventional ways. Robust maritime situational awareness, anti-ship weapon systems, uninhabited vehicles, and mine laying capabilities could all be used to thwart Russian

gains before Allied naval assets and other assistance arrives. The Baltic states should aim to convince the US and its other NATO and EU allies to support the procurement (via donation, compensation, or other means) of the systems that it needs.³⁰

Illegal and threatening naval or maritime activity must be detected to be prevented, and violations must be addressed by law enforcement agencies and legal and diplomatic means. However, improved maritime situational awareness cannot be achieved by the Baltic states alone. Efforts to remove any impediments or inefficiencies to maritime intelligence sharing in the region, and frequent to continuous at-sea deployments of regional and Allied naval vessels to patrol and exercise in the eastern Baltic Sea should be a NATO and EU priority.

Cooperative efforts are also needed to identify and counter maritime hybrid threats. Regional states, along with the broader international community, need to work together to ensure that Russia's past, current, and future hybrid and lawfare activities, maritime or otherwise, are properly documented and shared so that appropriate legal and diplomatic action can be taken. Enforcing maritime laws on the Baltic Sea will prevent criminals, whether nation states or not, from thinking and acting as if the Baltic is their lake, and not Europe's.

Importantly, having these capabilities and increased Baltic Sea maritime cooperation in place today will also have a deterrent effect. In the end, efforts to prevent conflict before it starts will be less costly in treasure or blood for everyone than bringing capabilities to fight on the Baltic Sea and Baltic soil. Ukraine and the Baltic states (and their Allies) do not want conflict with Russia, but they are willing to fight for their sovereignty if attacked.

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