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The Wet Flank of the Russia-Ukraine War – Lessons for Modern Naval Warfare?

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The Wet Flank of the Russia-Ukraine War – Lessons for Modern Naval Warfare?¹

1 Introduction

Russia's brutal, illegal and devastating war against Ukraine is the largest armed conflict to break out in Europe since 1945. The conflict has important maritime and naval components, though neither of the warring parties is a sea power in a narrow or traditional sense.² Moreover, the conflict will ultimately be decided ashore. Nevertheless, military theorists and practitioners analyzing the conflict will be well-advised to study the wet flank of the war – i.e. to include military/naval as well as wider maritime security and defense aspects – along three distinct lines of enquiry:

1. Which aspects of the naval and maritime confrontations of the war in Ukraine can serve to illuminate naval theory, both classic and evolving?
2. Given some of the dynamics of this conflict – from Cold War-era cruisers displacing ~11,500t to commercial off-the-shelf maritime drones equipped with sensors and explosives to inflict maximum damage on the enemy – what is the relationship of “old war” and “new war” in the naval clashes that have taken place so far? What are the roles of sea-borne trade and maritime infrastructure in this war?
3. Imagining the time after hostilities are over, will Ukraine, the West, and Russia have learned any lessons from the war at sea? What would such lessons imply for doctrine, tactics, force structure, and maritime strategy?

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of these aspects at length and in the great depth that would be desirable – and given the ongoing dynamics inherent to

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1 A version of this paper was presented at the side event to the Kiel International Seapower Symposium (KISS) 2024. An earlier, extended version of the essay was published in German by Sebastian Bruns and Heinz Dieter Jopp entitled “Die nasse Flanke des Russland-Ukraine-Kriegs – Lektionen für die moderne Seekriegsführung und die Marine”, SIRIUS 8:1, 2024. The author is grateful for the constructive comments and peer review of this paper – and acknowledges that all mistakes remain his alone.

2 Lambert 2018.

the war itself, which at the time of writing is still raging³ – the following points hope to further inform the debate.

2 It's War!

As early as 24 February 2022, on the day Russia began its full-scale attack on Ukraine, a symbolic clash took place at sea. The Russian cruiser *Moskva*, a Cold War veteran which ironically played a major role in the Soviet Union/United States peace summit off Malta in December 1989,⁴ issued the blunt order to surrender to a small Ukrainian garrison on the strategically important Snake Island. The rocky Ukrainian territory lies off the Danube Delta and the coast of Romania, a NATO member. The defenders' iconic response – “Russian warship, go fuck yourself!” – has become a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and resilience: Although the Ukrainian defense succumbed to Russian overmatch, the island was eventually recaptured.

From the outset of the war, Russia organized a de facto blockade of the Black Sea for commercial traffic, causing serious disruptions to commercial shipping. Turkey closed the Bosphorus to naval forces on February 28, 2022.⁵ This measure was taken with reference to the Montreux Convention of 1936, which offers Ankara extensive opportunities to limit and control maritime traffic in the Dardanelles strait, the Sea of Marmara, and the Bosphorus strait. The closure affects all non-riparian states involved, and thus includes ships of the U.S. Navy, the British Royal Navy, and NATO's Standing Maritime Groups that entered the Black Sea quite regularly in the late and post-Cold War era.⁶ However, Turkey's invoking of the Montreux Convention turned out to be particularly disadvantageous for Russia, a riparian state of the Black Sea. It was now denied the opportunity to move more ships to and from the Black Sea Fleet, one of five nominal fleets that Russia maintains.⁷ Compared to its Ukrainian counterpart, the Russian Navy was far superior, especially since Moscow had taken precautions to undermine the remaining Ukrainian fleet from 2014 onwards. For instance, Sevastopol, the shared Ukrainian/Russian naval base on Crimea, was taken by Russian forces early, resulting in Ukrainian assets being either taken over, forced out, or disabled. When Russia escalated the war with brute force in 2022, Ukraine only retained a skeleton navy centered on a frigate and a few handfuls of smaller ships and auxiliaries. Ultimately, it was only logical that the frigate *Hetman Sahaidachny (U130/F130)*, commissioned in 1993 and flagship of the remaining Ukrainian naval forces, was scuttled along with other smaller boats in early March 2022 to ensure it would not fall into the hands of advancing Russian units.

³ Foggo 2024.

⁴ Shifrinson 2013; Martin 2022.

⁵ Mongilio 2022.

⁶ See Dur 2022, for reflections on late Cold War US naval operations in the Black Sea.

⁷ The others being the Baltic, Northern, Pacific, and Caspian Sea fleets. Given Russia's somewhat disadvantageous geographic outlet, the ability to regroup forces by transferring warships from one fleet to another while also maintaining a projection and, in the case of the bastions of the Northern and Pacific fleets, deterrent capability is paramount for Moscow's naval strategy.

3 Turning the Tide

In the Ukrainian plains, the initial advance of Russian troops, planned by Vladimir Putin and his regime as a decapitation strike and communicated as the “Three-Day War”, soon stalled and was eventually repelled, with public and military attention remaining focused on places and events on land – Bucha, Zaporizhzhya, Kyiv, and Odesa, to name a few. A Russian amphibious assault on the port city of Odesa never did materialize. Then, at the end of March 2022, Ukraine managed to land its first effective hit on the *Saratov*, an Alligator-class landing ship.⁸ Presumably hit by an anti-ship missile, the warship sank while moored in the port of Berdyansk. Two Ropuchas, veterans of the Soviet-era Red Banner Fleet, were damaged and sank under their own keel.

Finally, on April 13, 2022, the *Moskva* made another and ultimately final appearance. Ukraine succeeded in hitting the cruiser with the help of Neptune anti-ship missiles. The Black Sea Fleet flagship, named after Russia’s capital, was by far the largest warship in the Black Sea. Russian forces were unable to save the ship and salvage it. It sank a day later. Negligence in the defensive capabilities of the missile cruiser, which was commissioned in 1982, may have played a role in the loss, as did insufficient flooding control and firefighting measures by what appears to have been a completely inadequately trained crew. Ravaging corruption in the Russian military, which might have funneled money for equipment and training elsewhere, could also have contributed to the loss. Four decades after the Falklands War, until now one of the key data points for naval analysts worldwide,⁹ it is clearer than ever that missiles pose a serious threat to high-value units.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the maritime situation developed in a way that many had not anticipated. On July 27, 2022, the *Black Sea Grain Initiative*, brokered by Turkish President Recep Erdogan, came into force. Under the initiative, Russia and Ukraine agreed to keep a maritime corridor open that would enable the safe transit of merchant ships to export Ukrainian grain. The condition was that merchant ships bound for Ukraine would have to undergo intensive checks for arms deliveries in the Bosphorus. In scenarios vaguely reminiscent of the 1987/88 “tanker war” in the Persian Gulf, civilian freighters groped their way south through shipping lanes at the risk of encountering drifting mines. Subsequently, the so-called grain deal was repeatedly called into question and ultimately terminated by Russia in the summer of 2023. While the threat to shipping through floating mines, missiles or drones has not gone away, Ukraine’s advances on the battlefield have contributed to a degree of command of the sea that has allowed Kyiv to continue its exports, thus providing fresh money for its economy and grain for markets dependent on it.¹¹

In the second half of 2022, Ukrainian armed forces carried out further offensive actions, including the first of several attacks on the Russian naval headquarters in Sevastopol in occupied Crimea. On September 26, 2022, the attacks on the *Nord Stream*

⁸ NN 2023.

⁹ Department of the Navy 1983; Bruns 2017.

¹⁰ A lesson that is being re-learned in another ongoing naval conflict in the Red Sea where Houthis are attacking international commercial and military shipping with anti-ship missiles of all kinds.

¹¹ It is worth mentioning that it was the People’s Republic of China which benefited most from the safe passage of Ukrainian grain bulkers, because China is dependent on that grain to feed its population – while Beijing covertly and openly sides with Russia in the war. See Donnellon-May/Hongzhou 2023.

1 and 2 Baltic Sea pipelines, which are generally understood in the context of the war on Europe's eastern flank, shattered the illusion of secure maritime energy infrastructure and some quiet hopes in Berlin for German-Russian reconciliation. Finally, on October 29, Ukraine launched a large-scale attack on Russia's naval assets in Sevastopol with uncrewed surface vessels (USV). Images of the attack, pixelated as they were, went around the world and signaled significant progress in the field of unmanned maritime systems. Russia subsequently withdrew its ships to safer positions farther to the east because it had to expect further attacks and losses. Since then, its naval headquarters in Sevastopol has been the repeated target of Ukrainian attacks, with considerable loss of life among the Russian naval leadership.¹²

In Kyiv's understanding of maritime strategy, the bridge over the Kerch Strait, which Russia had built after 2014 and which was the subject of sabotage attempts from the end of 2022, is also a legitimate potential target. In October 2022, an act of sabotage was performed, which severely damaged both the railway span and the road bridge. Another attack followed in August 2023. The obstruction of rail and road traffic forced the Russian Navy to use its increasingly scarce shipping space to transport goods across the Sea of Azov. But even the landing ships used for this purpose were not safe from attacks. For example, the *RFS Olenegorsky Gornyyak* was hit by a drone while crossing the Sea of Azov between Crimea and the Russian Federation. A Russian tanker sailing in ballast was also hit in a second attack.¹³ Both ships were badly damaged and will have to be written off.

Whereas the political and strategic focus of the warring parties as well as the international political attention and media coverage remained centered on land in 2023 and 2024, the developments at sea revealed further events worth mentioning. By the summer of 2024, the losses of the Russian Black Sea Fleet amounted to at least 15 ships, according to open-source intelligence.

At least 15 Russian warships have been sunk or severely damaged in the war [since 2022], news reports and Ukrainian intelligence say. The attacks have come from cruise missiles, which the Russian Navy should have expected, and from advanced highly maneuverable sea drones.¹⁴

In the first three months of 2024 alone¹⁵, and even if one is to be mindful of the “fog of war” that engulfs the coverage of such events (most sources are Ukrainian and no imagery is available), Russia lost three major surface combatants. On February 1, Ukraine claimed to have sunk the Russian Tarantul-III-class missile corvette *Ivanovets* with naval drones.¹⁶ Just two weeks later, the *Tsezar Kunikov*, another ageing Soviet-era amphibious landing ship, met her fate through naval drones, too.¹⁷ Even more remarkable amidst this carnage is the loss of the Russian corvette *Sergey Kotov*, one of the most modern warships of Putin's force. The 94m long ship had only been commissioned in

¹² Fisher/Shevchenko 2023.

¹³ Barkey 2023.

¹⁴ Grady 2024.

¹⁵ The open-source encyclopedia Wikipedia has a longer and more substantial listing of all Russian and Ukrainian ship losses (navies, border guards, etc.) since 2014: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ship_losses_during_the_Russo-Ukrainian_War, last accessed on: 06-09-2024.

¹⁶ NN 2024a.

¹⁷ NN 2024b.

July 2022 and was sunk less than two years thereafter near the Kerch Bridge by “Magura V5” uncrewed surface vessels.¹⁸ Important infrastructure was not spared either, as demonstrated by the attack on the naval base of Sevastopol on May 19, 2024. The assault by a combination of advanced ATACAMS missiles and one-way drones destroyed the light corvette *Tsiklon*. Notably, the ship – less than one year in service – was one of the four Kalibr-carrying warships that remained at the disposal of the Black Sea Fleet.¹⁹

These events illuminate some of the facets of the future – some may even say, the present – of war at sea. Uncrewed vehicles in combination with advanced anti-ship missiles provide versatility, reach, and impact to navies – even without the classic means of naval warfare. In addition, GPS jamming and electronic warfare activities have become a mainstay in the Northern Black Sea region, lending themselves to be a further nuisance for both military and commercial shipping in the area.²⁰ Trade shipping and loading posts continue to be a target for Russian and Ukrainian interventions, though current numbers are difficult to come by in the public domain.²¹

4 Strategic Implications

Ukrainian naval tactics have forced the Russian Black Sea Fleet onto the defensive. Russia moved some of its remaining combat-capable units from the Sevastopol area further east to get out of the range of Ukrainian cruise missiles and naval drones. The closure of the Turkish straits puts additional strain on the Russian naval presence, as damaged vessels are not allowed to leave the Black Sea and reinforcements from the Mediterranean are not allowed to head north. Thus, the Slava-class cruisers and their escort ships, which had been operating temporarily in the eastern Mediterranean, have had to steam back to the Northern Fleet (with its home base in the Russian North Sea) or to the Pacific Fleet in Vladivostok. However, Russian cargo ships have repeatedly managed to pass through the Bosphorus with cargo declared as civilian.

As a consequence of these developments, Russia has increasingly focused on three methods of maritime warfare:

- *Naval mines*: Since the beginning of the escalation in spring 2022, there have been several sightings of sea mines in the Black Sea, the origin of which could not always be determined, but which caused a stir. On September 8, 2022, the Romanian minesweeper *Lieutenant Dimitrie Nicolescu* was damaged by a floating mine. On August 14, 2023, a Russian sea mine apparently laid in July drifted into Costinesti, Romania, and damaged a pier when it exploded. Bucharest’s naval forces have since increased their mine detection efforts, but a capability gap is becoming apparent. Modern MCM boats and sensors are rare; NATO’s *Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group (SNMCMG) 2* no longer operates in the Black Sea because the Bosphorus is closed to warships. Russian mine barriers have also been placed in the Dnieper, apparently

¹⁸ Vlasova/Lendon 2024.

¹⁹ NN 2024c.

²⁰ NATO Shipping Centre 2022.

²¹ For reference, see Risk Intelligence, “Northern Black Sea and Russia Ports Threat Assessment Port operations and security overview”, last updated 29 August 2024.

to disrupt Ukrainian riverine combat operations. However, so far, the mining threat has been contained well enough.²²

- *Disruption of commercial shipping and loading in ports:* According to the British Foreign Office (as of October 4, 2023), Russian cruise missiles and drones have destroyed almost 300,000 tons of wheat. 130 port facilities (warehouses, piers, cranes, access roads, etc.) in Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Reni were destroyed. Upon termination of the grain deal, Russian forces in a high-profile move stopped a freighter sailing under the flag of Palau in order to search it. Furthermore, there have been indications that Russia will increasingly use sea mines, which would change the cost-benefit calculation for commercial shipping in the region.
- *Engaging targets ashore:* Russia is attacking targets on Ukrainian territory from surface ships and submarines using cruise missiles. In addition, unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) are being used against Ukrainian targets. The threat posed by Russia's extensive amphibious capabilities to the coast around the Ukrainian port city of Odesa has, however, diminished to a certain extent following a number of decisive hits and the resulting deployment of the fleet to the east.

Ukraine, in turn, is concentrating its efforts in the following directions:

- *Focus on critical infrastructure:* The recapture of the aforementioned Snake Island in July 2022 was not only a success in propaganda terms, but also meant the recovery of a centrally located group of rocks. In 2023, Ukraine focused on recovering critical infrastructure – the landings on the *Boyko Towers* oil and gas drilling platforms in August and September are worth recalling.
- *Massive use of naval drones and cruise missiles:* As already mentioned, Ukraine has lost most of its means of naval warfare – and has apparently made a virtue out of necessity. The combination of reconnaissance, target acquisition and strikes has, to put it somewhat crudely, led to Russia's navy being hit hard by a country that no longer has a real navy. This could even be interpreted as an evolution of the "Fleet-in-Being" concept that reigned German Imperial naval thinking at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In the 21st century, Ukraine is seeking not only to weaken the Russians' operational capabilities but also to create powerful symbols. The sinking of the cruiser *Moskva* is worth mentioning here, as are the grainy video clips as part of Ukrainian efforts to influence public opinion. The fact that Russian warships were hit in their docks (another central part of critical infrastructure) also suggests that the unequal fight with maritime methods currently offers advantages for Kyiv through the rigorous use of intelligence and focused capabilities.

²² Clearly, however, along with war in Europe, mine warfare has returned. This carries important implications for the Baltic Sea and NATO navies. Whereas Belgium and the Netherlands are currently commissioning new large MCM vessels, the regeneration of such assets in other major nations such as Germany stalls, whereas the U.S. Navy is on the verge of phasing out most of its mine warfare capabilities altogether. For a potentially large mine-clearing operation after the cessation of hostilities in the Black Sea, this suggests some trouble ahead.

While this entire matter is very much a moving target (no pun intended), some key lessons do emerge. At the time of writing, the situation in the maritime theatre remains dynamic enough for analysts to do both: study and try to understand implications for naval warfare AND point out that many lessons from past conflicts – from the Falklands Sound in 1982 to the Red Sea in 2024 – still apply.²³ For Ukraine, the war can hardly be won at sea, but it can certainly be lost. For Russia, there are wider implications – with the army and the air force decimated in the bloody land battles, the navy might emerge as relatively unscathed and thus eventually create the most dominant headache for Ukrainian and Western planners. For both parties, the maritime theatre also plays a significant role in terms of strategic identity construction, which needs to be taken into account as well.

It has become clear in this essay that naval theory is being modified through the events in the Black Sea. Such confined bodies of water are somewhat overlooked in the blue-water, high seas theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Alfred Tirpitz, or Samuel Huntington. The writings of strategists such as Julian Corbett appear more useful in this respect – although specialists should ask whether in light of modern warfare and the experiences in the Black Sea a new hybrid theory might be evolving. There are many lessons for doctrine, tactics, force structure, and maritime strategy that need to be studied not just by the warring parties but also by NATO allies. They will be multi-faceted and cover the entire spectrum of conflict. They will also once again connect tactics and operations to policy and strategy; hence it is imperative that operators and military and civilian strategists identify and learn these lessons together.

The challenge of mirror-imaging is real, and the events of the Black Sea cannot and should not be transferred 1:1 onto similar theatres such as the Baltic Sea. However, as long as Russia remains a spoiler in the international system, its actions will provide tasks that trickle down at Europe's flank as well – right onto the task list of the German Navy. To this end, Germany should establish a study cell at its Kiel-based Center of Excellence for Operations in Confined and Shallow Waters (COE CSW) where military and civilian specialists, with the help of the international community of interest, could turn the lessons from Ukraine into NATO's advantage at sea. It should draw on the expertise and experience of the Black Sea littoral states to explore implications for Western navies, academia, and policy-makers.

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²³ There has been a significant uptick of studies, symposia, and lessons identified reports in recent months. For European and Transatlantic perspectives, see inter alia Huminski 2024; Katsman 2024; Rishko 2024. It should be taken for granted that Russia, China, and others are also studying events in the Black Sea closely.

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