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The Black Sea

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NAVAL WARFARE SCENARIOS FOR 2020

Andrii Klymenko

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for Black Sea Strategic Studies

Russian activities during the last few years aimed to control and limit navigation in the Black Sea as well as the Kerch incident of 2018 provide researchers with substantial data to predict possible developments for 2020. In this article, the author analyses the worst-case scenario and proposes a set of preventive actions. In 2020, obstacles to the freedom of navigation in the Azov and the Black seas posed by Russia will be a continuation of strategy to deploy military capabilities in Crimea beyond the peninsula. The freedom of navigation is the one of the guiding principles of the civilised world, which is why engaging the world community in countering these threats gives hope for positive results in 2020.

The security situation in the Black Sea has been rapidly changing, systemically transforming it into a “Russian lake”. Over the last months of 2019 and during January–February of 2020, such trends were ongoing and deteriorating, namely:

- further enhancement of Russian military grouping in occupied Crimea, which is used as geostrategic, military, military-industrial, service, and logistic base for projecting Russian expansion on the Black Sea, in Syria, and the Middle East, as well as North Africa;
- occupation and militarisation of the Ukrainian shelf in the southwestern part of the Black Sea between the occupied Crimean peninsula and the coast of Odesa region;
- increased blocking of large areas of the Black Sea under a pretext of naval exercises;

- transformation of the Black Sea into a “no-rules area” by the spread of practice of shipping in the direction of occupied Crimea by unregistered vessels with intentionally disabled AIS transmitters¹;
- further artificial impediment to freedom of navigation in the Kerch Strait in the direction of Ukrainian Azov Sea ports – Mariupil and Berdyansk.

The aim of the article is to predict the worst-case scenario of developments in the Black Sea in 2020 and to propose a set of preventive actions. Prediction of the situation regarding maritime risks in the Azov and the Black seas connected with possible Russian actions is based on the experience of 2014–2019 not only in the Ukrainian–Russian but also in the macro-regional context – the Black Sea–Mediterranean. The facts that the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 destabilised a long-preserved geopolitical

1 AIS Automatic Identification System serving to identify vessels, according to the Convention SOLAS 74/88, it is binding.

fault line from Gibraltar to Mariupol, and the occupation of Crimea in 2014 shifted this fault line are taken as a premise.

Such tectonic shifts do not come to a halt by themselves. Moreover, as it is thought in Russia, “Putin’s political machine has been barely gaining momentum and setting itself up for a long, difficult and interesting work. Reaching its full capacity is far ahead. Thus, Russia will remain Putin’s state years later”²

In 2020, obstacles to the freedom of navigation in the Azov and the Black seas posed by Russia will be a continuation of strategy to deploy military capabilities in Crimea beyond the peninsula. In short, it can be described as the projection of military threat and imperial expansion not only towards Ukraine but also towards Southeastern Europe, South Caucasus, Turkey, the “Syrian knot” in the Middle East, and North Africa.

The reason of this power projection is to create chaos controlled by Moscow wherever possible, not only in Ukraine, Moldova, and the Caucasus, but also in the EU and NATO states, in the Balkans and the Mediterranean in particular. We observe manifestations and consequences of such processes more often. The problem of freedom of navigation in the Azov Sea and the Kerch Strait that “suddenly” emerged in April–May 2018 is regarded exactly in such context.


Based on this experience, it is possible to simulate scenarios and make predictions for 2020 regarding possible Russian actions that will influence safety of navigation in the Black and the Azov seas and reaction from Ukraine and the world. According to our prediction, in 2020, blocking (under various pretexts) the vessel traffic in the Kerch Strait

will continue and will be used by Russia to provide secrecy for military traffic to Crimea.

However, our main prediction concerns freedom of navigation in the Black Sea rather than the situation in the Azov Sea. We are all but certain that the “Azov crisis” was an “exercise”. In 2020, further actions of Russia to impede navigation in the direction of Ukrainian ports not only in the Azov Sea but also in the Black Sea are expected.

Transferring the “Azov Experience” to the Black Sea

Azov maritime export/import from/to Ukrainian ports is only a small part (5%) compared to export from ports of Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson. The main Ukrainian export-import routes are located in the Black Sea and lead to/from the Bosphorus. It should be noted that recommended shipping routes from the Bosphorus to Ukrainian ports lie through a narrow gap between the Zmiinyi (Snake) Island and the Odesa gas field on the Ukrainian shelf occupied by Russia. This “bottleneck” is only 13.5 miles (25 km) wide.

 ***In 2020, obstacles to the freedom of navigation in the Azov and the Black seas posed by Russia will be a continuation of strategy to deploy military capabilities in Crimea beyond the peninsula***

In the Black Sea – near the recommended shipping routes from Odesa to the Bosphorus, from Odesa to Batumi and Turkish Black Sea ports – oil platforms are located on Ukrainian continental shelf, seized by Russia at the time

2 В. Сурков, *Долгое государство Путина (V. Surkov, Putin’s Long State)*, «Независимая газета», 11 February 2019, [http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2019-02-11/5_7503_surkov.html].

of Crimea's occupation. While previously auxiliary ships of the Russian Federation patrolled the areas of Odesa, Golitsynskiy, Arkhangelskiy, and Shtormovoy oil fields, since 1 June 2018 guarding of the seized Ukrainian derricks on the occupied shelf has been officially delegated to the 41st missile ship brigade of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. It should be noted that these are battleships with significant strike capability.

That is why it makes sense to predict a scenario in which Russia starts to detain for inspection ships heading to or from Chornomorsk, Odesa, Mykolaiv, and Kherson ports using the "Azov technique".



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The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation may report an alleged subversive group being on such a vessel and aiming to bomb, for instance, a drilling platform on the occupied Odesa oil field (which Russia considers to be its own as the whole Ukrainian shelf). If such a situation occurs, it will have a significant impact on marine traffic in this area. It may not happen if the preventive measures are taken, but such a scenario should be "on the table".

Sea Areas Closure under the Pretext of Exercises: Technique of Economic Warfare

Another prediction, which is also based on the monitoring and analysis of the Russian "Black Sea experiments" of the 2019 dynamics, is as follows: One of the methods to impede navigation in the Black Sea by Russia in 2020

will be increasing the practice of closing for navigation western areas of the sea for Russian live-fire exercises (real or fake).

For example, on 1–12 July 2019, during Ukrainian–American naval exercises Sea Breeze 2019, Russia blocked one of the areas for exercises in the Black Sea – from Ukrainian Zmiinyi Island near Odesa coast to the Tarhankut Cape in Crimea – namely the area of the occupied shelf with gas fields. It was done by means of issuing by Russia of an international warning about danger to navigation. Since 24 July 2019, Russia has blocked five areas in the Black Sea, including those in maritime economic zones of Bulgaria and Romania, and almost entire eastern part of the Black Sea from Sochi to Turkey in order to impede the Georgian–American exercises, Agile Spirit 2019.

The total surface of the Black Sea areas blocked by the Russian navy in June 2019 exceeded 120,000 km², which is more than ¼ of the Black Sea surface. The aim of these actions is to create the "normal" perception of the Black Sea as the Russian sphere of influence. Since the first days of 2020, we have observed a similar situation, even with substantial developments.

Thus, on 9 January 2020, Russia conducted unprecedented joint missile-firing exercises of the Black Sea and the Northern fleets with launches from water, air, and coast. The exercises were held in one of the blocked areas, in the south and southwest of occupied Crimea. Around 40 ships, a submarine, more than 40 planes and helicopters of various types took part in the exercises.

On 1 February 2020, Russia disseminated an international maritime warning about danger in the NAVTEX system – NAVAREA III 134/20 – about conducting artillery missile firing in the area of Karkinit Bay of the Black Sea between occupied Crimea and the coast of Kherson region. The Russian military could not help knowing that this area had been

already closed since 1 December 2019 by the same warning from the Ukrainian Naval Forces – NAVAREA III 1374/19 – and thus created an extremely dangerous situation of “overlapping” areas of live fire exercises by the Ukrainian Naval Forces and the Russian Black Sea Fleet. A similar situation of “overlapping” has recurred several times.

When to Wait and How to Prevent Maritime Threats in 2020

The period from May 2020, during or after the celebration of the 75th anniversary of victory over fascism, until October–November 2020, during or after the military exercises “Caucasus-2020”, should be considered as particularly dangerous.

In September–October 2020, the Southern Military District of the Russian Federation will take part in a large-scale strategic Command Post Exercises “Caucasus-2020”. Around 100 battleships and auxiliary ships (as it can be predicted, not only from the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla) will participate. The main aim of the exercises is to improve the joint forces’ large-scale military operation on the southern and southwestern theatre of operations.

It is undoubted that the joint military exercises of the Russian Black Sea and Northern fleets hint to another peculiarity of 2020 – improvement of interaction between various fleets’ headquarters and joint force groupings has started. Such a practice has been actively deployed in the Russian army following the results of Syrian experience.

In the prediction we cannot overlook the possibility of an active operation on the Ukrainian coast of the Black Sea, the Azov

Sea, and Danube (including a landing operation) conducted by Russia, as well as a combined operation from occupied Crimea in the direction of Kakhovka, where the main North Crimean Canal gateway is located (for unblocking water supply to Crimean peninsula).



It is undoubted that the joint military exercises of the Russian Black Sea and Northern fleets hint to another peculiarity of 2020 – improvement of interaction between various fleets’ headquarters and joint force groupings has started.

Regarding the amphibious assault trainings, they are constantly conducted mainly in the military training area of Opuk in occupied Crimea. According to results of the research, it was found that during 2014–2019 no less than 99 military exercises, manoeuvres, and trainings were conducted in this military training area³.

Ukrainian authorities will have to address the USA and NATO to continue and enhance patrolling the Black Sea by the permanent groups of the NATO Naval Command and the US 6th Fleet until Ukraine manages to significantly strengthen its naval forces. As will be recalled, since March 2014 ships of non-Black Sea NATO states have been patrolling the Black Sea.

In 2014–2019, NATO not only realised the Black Sea threat but also found the sources to significantly increase its presence in the region in 2019. However, NATO naval

3 *Дикі тюльпани під російськими бомбами. Як знищують Опуцький заповідник в Криму (Wild Tulips under Russian Bombs: How Opuk Nature Reserve Is Being Destroyed in Crimea)*, “Black Sea News”, 25 January 2020 [<https://www.blackseanews.net/read/159924>].

presence in the Black Sea will depend on the situation in the neighbouring regions – in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and North Africa.

If developments in the Black Sea follow the scenario outlined above, the use of experience, which has worked in the Azov Sea since October 2018, may be needed on the main maritime routes in the Black Sea. Detention of merchant vessels on the move in the sea ceased when Ukrainian naval forces launched the practice of escorting merchant vessels on the way from Mariupol to Kerch⁴.

In 2020, Ukraine may have to escort merchant shipping or patrol international maritime routes in the Black Sea and invite NATO states' ships. It will be relevant to launch a special naval format, "freedom of navigation maintenance operations" in the Black Sea.

In 2020, Ukraine will continue to strengthen its naval capabilities. Amid the real threats to the freedom of navigation in the Azov and the Black seas that were finally comprehended in 2018–2019 abroad as well, Ukraine is likely to work out its naval policy.

An encouraging sign that Russian strategists have seemed to ignore is the fact that the freedom of navigation is one of the guiding principles of the civilised world. It stands alongside the freedom of trade and human rights. That is why engaging the world community in countering these threats gives hope for positive results in 2020.

Andrii Klymenko, head of the Monitoring Group of the Institute for Black Sea Strategic Studies, chief editor at www.blackseanews.net.

⁴ *Економічна війна в Азовському морі. Статистика та наслідки блокування українських портів з травня 2018 по січень 2020 (Economic War in the Azov Sea. Statistics and Consequences of Ukrainian Ports' Blocking since May 2018 to January 2020), "Black Sea News", 10 February 2020 [<https://www.blackseanews.net/read/160567>].*

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