



Rising Russian-Ukrainian Tensions in the Sea of Azov

OE Watch Commentary: The accompanying excerpted article from *Izvestiya* explains some of the background of simmering tensions between Russia and Ukraine regarding the Sea of Azov. Obviously, these tensions primarily stem from Russia's annexation of the Crimea, specifically in regard to concerns over Russia's construction of the \$3.7 billion Crimean Bridge project that spans the Kerch Strait and the ongoing detention of vessels by both sides. The accompanying excerpted articles from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* discuss the increasing militarization of the Sea of Azov, and the possibility that a conflict could be sparked by militants of the unrecognized Donetsk People's Republic (DNR). Of particular note, all three articles mention potential escalation and belief that the U.S./NATO could be drawn into a potential conflict. **End OE Watch Commentary (Bartles)**

“The Azov Sea has become the new arena for confrontation between Ukraine and Russia.”

Source: Anton Lavrov, “«Соболя» против «Гюрзы»: Военный эксперт Антон Лавров — о борьбе за контроль над Азовским морем (‘Sobol’ Versus ‘Gurza’: Military Expert Anton Lavrov on the Fight for Control of the Azov Sea),” *Izvestiya*, 29 June 2018. <https://iz.ru/758636/anton-lavrov/sobolia-protiv-giurzy>

The Azov Sea has become the new arena for confrontation between Ukraine and Russia. In March, Ukrainian border guards detained the Russian trawler ‘Nord’ there. In May, the most abhorrent politicians and public figures in Kyiv reacted to the opening of the Crimean Bridge with their latest threats of sabotage...Russia and Ukraine exchanged ostentatious border service and air force exercises with live fire. On this pretext, Ukraine has closed the use of large stretches of the coastal waters in its border zone until the autumn. The “temperature” in this shallow inland sea belonging to the two states has perceptibly risen. It seems that it is about to turn into the hottest spot on the border between Russia and Ukraine.

Of course, the likelihood of a direct confrontation between fleets there is not great. Ukraine simply does not have one there. But any impediments to civilian shipping may be painful for Russia. The overwhelming majority of vessels entering the Azov Sea are heading for Russian ports. Just a few years ago, a very important international maritime trade route off the coast of Somalia was jeopardized by local residents in ordinary fishing boats. And it proved to be difficult to defend oneself against such a threat, even with the involvement of the world's leading navies. If it so wishes, the Ukrainian state is capable of causing even more trouble...after the construction of the Crimean bridge started, the Azov Sea definitively turned into a field on which there are only two players. It is possible, in theory, to imagine active or passive support for Ukraine from NATO somewhere near Odesa. But no third party will be able to interfere in what is happening in the Azov Sea any longer...

The buildup of Russian forces in the Azov Sea and the demonstrative tightening of the inspection regime for vessels coming from Ukrainian ports has already had an effect. The provocation on Ukraine's part has stopped. The detention of the Russian ship was clearly an isolated incident, carried out in the traditional Ukrainian way, without an evaluation of the long-term consequences of their step. Having realized that it has no chances in a confrontation in the Azov Sea, Ukraine is now trying to somehow play down the incident. This is a positive sign, indicating that things are unlikely to go as far as a real conflict.

However, the fundamental conflicts here are going nowhere. The need to protect shipping, and the dispute over the state borders and the fishing stocks in the Azov Sea, will remain for the long term and they will be sore point in relations between the countries for a long time to come. So, it should not be expected that Russia will now return to its initial position. Ukraine's ill-considered provocation has led to the fact that the Russian military presence here will only increase.

Source: Andrey Riskin, “На Украине предложили усилить военное присутствие Киева в Азовском море (Is Ukraine Prepared to Fight in the Sea of Azov?),” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 3 September 2018. <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2018/09/03/11986597.shtml>

Maksym Burbak, leader of the People's Front faction in the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada, has declared, RIA Novosti reports, the need to boost the country's military presence in the Sea of Azov. The point is that the Ukrainians believe that Russia is allegedly barring the way to vessels traveling to Ukrainian ports, which is resulting in losses since the vessels are standing idle. “A buildup of our military presence and a stiffening of economic sanctions should be the response to the country's maritime blockade,” Burbak said...

The grounds for reinforcing positions in the Sea of Azov are simple, Kyiv claims that Russia is impeding shipping, inspecting each vessel making for Ukrainian ports. The Ukrainians, which is not surprising, were immediately supported here by the US State Department, which demanded that Russia stop being a “nightmare” for international shipping in the Sea of Azov. The department also added that Russia “has detained hundreds of commercial vessels,” which were attempting to reach Ukrainian ports. The State Department believes that these actions are an example of the “Russian campaign to destabilize Ukraine.”

Kyiv's authorities are for the time being only proposing insane scenarios of a solution of the problem. They will propose to escort all Ukrainian vessels by warships, not, it is true, indicating where to get them from. Then they will recall the “wolfpack” tactics, which will allegedly prevent “Russian aggression” in the region. Then they will propose to mine the Sea of Azov.

Even thoughts about it being necessary to simply sit down at the negotiating table with Moscow and to end the provocations involving the seizure of Russian vessels do not arise among Ukrainian politicians, apparently. There is only hope placed in America. And of what this hope consists is clear...the US State Department Ukraine representative, said recently in a Guardian interview that “we can talk with Ukraine, as we would with any other country, about what it needs (to strengthen the army – NG). I believe it could be a question of the Navy.... I think we would also need to consider the question of air defense as well.”

And it is not, of course, a question of Ukraine not having a fleet, it is only one of the navy being on its last legs. It is simply that everything will be as it always is: America allocates the money, someone in Kyiv happily siphons it off, and this is the end of it. And, as always, Moscow is to blame for everything.

(continued)



Continued: Rising Russian-Ukrainian Tensions in the Sea of Azov

Source: Mikhail Sergeev, “Холодная война в Азовском море превращается в горячую (The Cold War in the Sea of Azov Is Becoming a Hot One),” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 9 September 2018. http://www.ng.ru/economics/2018-09-09/1_7306_azov.html

The escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian confrontation in the Sea of Azov is leading with US participation to the threat of a military clash. Kyiv spoke of the redeployment to Azov “for protection of its ports” of armored gunboats, which have already been spotted in the port of Berdians’k. The authorities of the unrecognized Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) are warning of a likely penetration of Ukrainian forces into the area of the port of Mariupol’. American experts are calling for the commitment of US forces to “unblock” the Kerch Strait. Russian cargo traffic via the Sea of Azov would also suffer were a conflict to begin.

Russia and Ukraine have thus far avoided armed clashes in the Sea of Azov, which is a highly sensitive zone of opposition both for Kyiv and for Moscow. But the situation could change following the reinforcement of the Ukrainian Navy in the Sea of Azov with the clear diplomatic support of the United States. At the end of last week the Gyurza-M, the first Ukrainian armored patrol boat, which was delivered to the sea on a vehicular trailer, was offloaded in the port of the Ukrainian Berdians’k.

The General Staff and the Command of the Ukrainian Navy, which the Ukrainian Military Portal cites, says that three small artillery boats will very shortly be delivered to Azov. Before the end of 2018 the Ukrainian forces are planning to build a full-fledged Ukrainian naval base and also to deploy a division of patrol boats. The National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine has made the decision to reinforce the military presence in the Sea of Azov and to provide elements of coastal defense with the latest precision missile weapons, RIA Novosti points out.

The 2003 treaty on the legal status of the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, which declares them inland waters of Russia and Ukraine, is in effect between Moscow and Kyiv at this time. Now, though, Kyiv wants to renounce this treaty, draw a border, and liquidate the status of Azov as inland waters...

Today the waters of the Sea of Azov could become part of a military theater in the event of Kyiv’s conflict with the unrecognized Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR)...

Meanwhile, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the Sea of Azov could become grounds for direct American intervention...American experts are proposing that US Navy forces be committed to the Sea of Azov...



A map showing the location of the Black Sea and some of the large or prominent ports around it.

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