

The Russian attack on Ukrainian ships in the Black Sea: the military aspects

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On 24 November, a group of ships of the Ukrainian Navy, composed of two armoured artillery boats, the *Berdyansk* and the *Nikopol* (newly-constructed Giurza M-type units, which have been in service since 2016 and 2018 respectively) and the tugboat *Yana Kapu* (in service since 1974), left Odessa under instructions to join the vessels which have been stationed in Mariupol since September (namely the twin artillery boats, the *Kremenchug* and the *Lubny*; the command ship *Donbas*; and the tugboat *Koreyets*). The ships were supposed to head south from Crimea and enter the Azov Sea via the Kerch Strait. According to Ukraine, the Russian authorities had been notified in advance of the ships' course.

On the morning of the 25th, the Ukrainian ships were approached by units from the Crimea division of the Coast Guard of the FSB's Border Service: the patrol ship *Don*, and patrol boats of the *Mangust* and *Sobol* types, backed up by a ship from the Black Sea Fleet of the Russian Navy, the ASW corvette *Suzdalets* (in service since 1983). According to the Russian version, the Ukrainian ships had violated the territorial waters of the Russian Federation. However, the Ukrainian ships had inarguably failed to enter the 12-mile limit of the Crimean shore, which Russia has claimed as its territorial waters since its annexation of the peninsula. This is demonstrated by the fact that the location of the point where the violation allegedly took place is not specified in the account presented by the FSB (although in its reports concerning the subsequent events the FSB does give specific coordinates).

North of the Crimean peninsula, between Sudak and Feodosia, two Russian ships (including an armoured patrol vessel, the *Izumrud*, which joined the Russian group) headed on a collision course with the Ukrainian tugboat, the *Yana Kapu*. The Russian patrol ship, the *Don*, breached the hull of the Ukrainian ship. Despite this, the Ukrainian group continued on their way, reaching an area north-east of the entrance to the Kerch Strait, and waited for the fairway under the bridge to be cleared. In the meantime, Russian media reported an alleged collision between a Ukrainian ship and a tanker, which as a result had blocked the passage through the strait at the height of the bridge linking Crimea and Russia. In fact, however, the tanker had been deliberately placed across the fairway, after which Russia officially closed the Kerch Strait to all traffic, causing an ever-growing build-up of ships at the entrance.

In the early afternoon, Su-25 attack aircraft and Ka-52 helicopters from the Black Sea Fleet appeared above the Ukrainian group. According to incomplete reports, a pair of Ka-52 helicopters, equipped with advanced electronic warfare systems, flew over the Ukrainian ships and attempted to take control of the onboard fire control systems of the Ukrainian

artillery boats. There is no information on how effective the Russian actions were, although throughout the entire incident the Ukrainian ships did not open fire on the Russian units, even though their 30mm cannon would have given the Ukrainian boats an advantage in any potential clash with the Russian border guard ships.

In the evening, the Russians took action to force the Ukrainian group to submit to the jurisdiction of the Border Service of the Russian FSB. The blockade of Ukrainian ships at the entrance to the Kerch Strait was reinforced by further patrol units from the Russian border service. Then, the Russian units opened fire, and the artillery boat *Berdyansk* was the most severely damaged, hit in the superstructure with a 30mm missile from the Russian patrol vessel *Izumrud*. By 10pm local time, the FSB Border Service had boarded the *Yana Kapu* tugboat (from their ship, the *Don*) as well as the *Berdyansk* (from the *Izumrud*). The cutter *Nikopol* was taken under the control of forces from the Black Sea Fleet: the Ka-52 helicopters and the ASW corvette *Suzdalets*. The Ukrainian warships were then directed to Kerch and detained there with their crews. As a result of the incident, 23 Ukrainian seamen were detained (according to the Russian side the figure was 24, including two military counterintelligence officers from the Ukrainian Security Service, whose presence should be considered as unexceptional), six of whom were injured as a result of the shelling and boarding (the Russian side reported that three Ukrainian seamen had been hospitalised). The Ukrainian sailors were arrested for a two-month period. Several officers were clearly forced to testify on camera, in order to confirm that the incident had occurred as a result of Ukrainian provocation.

Commentary

- The deployment of the latest ships in the Azov Sea would give Ukraine an advantage over Russia in this area, as the latter's forces mainly consist of patrol boats from the Coast Guard of the FSB's Border Service which have no permanent weaponry. However, it is still unclear whether there is any point from a military perspective in assembling a group of ships within this relatively small body of water, which could be sufficiently controlled by land and air in the case of a standard armed clash. This is also probably why the Russian Navy did not create its own group in the Azov Sea, only sending three old artillery boats to Kerch (in June 2018). It should be assumed that the Ukrainian naval group in the Azov Sea was primarily intended to demonstrate the sovereignty of Ukraine in this area, to emphasise its lack of consent to the annexation of Crimea, and to obstruct Russia's navigation on the routes through the Kerch Strait to Berdyansk, and above all to Mariupol.
- The course of the incident allows us to assume that the Russian side was preparing to use force in the event that the Ukrainian navy further increased its presence in the Azov Sea. This is indicated by the fact that a whole group of patrol units was sent to meet the Ukrainian group, with additional reinforcement from a ship from the Black Sea Fleet. In particular, however, the situation after the collision off the southern coast of Crimea – the introduction of a tanker to block the Kerch Strait, the suggestion that the incident was the direct fault of the Ukrainians, the blockade of the Ukrainian ships, and then their boarding by special forces and the involvement of aircraft in the area of the incident (including Ka-52 helicopters, which are used in electronic warfare) – allows us to assume that the Russian actions were deliberate, calculated in the first place to force the Ukrainian team

to give up its plan to relocate to Mariupol, and possibly to provoke an armed reaction by the Ukrainian side.

- The Ukrainian artillery boats – relatively small units, well suited for operation in the Azov Sea – need not have been sent to Mariupol by sea. In September the first two ships initially reached Berdyansk via land, and were only then sent to Mariupol on the Azov Sea. This means that they could be evacuated if the basin is blockaded by Russia. This could not be done for the seagoing ships of the Ukrainian navy remaining in Mariupol, the command ship *Donbas* and the tugboat *Koreyets*, which came through the Kerch Strait in September this year. The loss of the ships detained by the Russians in Kerch, and of the group which could possibly be blocked in the Azov Sea, would be a serious blow for the Ukrainian navy, which was already significantly shrunk after the loss of Crimea and most of the peninsula-based ships. In the Azov Sea, there are four of the six newest Giurza-M artillery boats in the Ukrainian fleet (including the two detained by the Russians), two of the six tugboats (one of which has been detained by the Russians) and the only command ship.
- Russia has treated the incident as a pretext to demonstrate its militarisation of Crimea, which Moscow sees as essential to protect itself against the threats it allegedly faces. Additional batteries of the S-400 air defence systems and Bal coastal defence missile systems have been transferred onto the peninsula. However, the deployment of more systems of this type must not be seen as a sudden or coerced action. It is a part of the process of equipping the newly formed units, which has been ongoing since 2015 and is expected to end in 2020. The 22nd Armed Corps, which makes up the majority of Russia's armed forces in Crimea, was formed in February 2017 and is intended to serve as a structure comparable to the 11th Armed Corps in the Kaliningrad region, and as such it will also be equipped with Iskander missiles.